

Approaches to Academic Literacy

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This article organises approaches to academic literacy skills into three ‘camps’ so as to provide a ground for reflecting on the styles and emphases of our academic literacy support here at Batchelor. It is based on a taxonomy devised by Mary Lea and Brian Street (Jones, Turner & Street 1999) for a British higher education context, but fits well with the history of shifts of approach in US to Basic Writers and Freshman Composition (Halasek & Highberg, 2001), and also with the history of shifts in Australian approaches to study skills and tertiary preparation courses.

It is not intended to imply that the Dialogic approach should simply replace the two earlier approaches. Rather, later approaches must encompass and surpass preceding approaches. Thus, the Skills approach needs recontextualisation in an academic discipline to become an Initiation approach, but the academic discipline itself then needs to be recontextualised within wider sociopolitical framing to become a Dialogic approach.

Table 1: Comparison of the three approaches in terms of their Theory and Practice

	Skills (decontextualised) approach	Initiation (one way) approach	Dialogic (both ways) approach
THEORY	<p>Skills: Academic literacy means learning how to do the literacy tasks involved in academic study</p> <p>The basics: Students learn language, literacy, numeracy & study skills that transfer to their other studies</p> <p>Generic: Students learn decontextualised, generic skills (study skills, note-taking, library skills, analytical skills, essay & report writing, summarising skills)</p> <p>Literacy: Students need to know standard English & standard academic genres</p> <p>Learning means: <i>Learn the basic general rules</i></p>	<p>Apprenticeship: Academic literacy means joining an academic community & learning its ways of knowing & communicating what it knows</p> <p>Literacies: Different disciplines demand different literacies & different genres (eg scientific reports, humanities essays)</p> <p>Contrast: Academic ways of knowing are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - opposite to everyday culturally based ways of understanding & knowing - follow standardised rational procedures, not like the casual intuitive thinking, arguing & talking of everyday life - rely on argument, evidence, experiment, theories, concepts, & authoritative paradigms <p>Learning means: <i>Become a player in the game</i></p>	<p>Dialogic: Academic literacy means bringing your cultural ways of knowing into a reasoned dialogue with academic ways of knowing</p> <p>Ideological: Looks for how teachers or courses claim that academic ways are beyond all culture yet unwittingly privilege their own language, culture, beliefs as the only valid ways to be academic</p> <p>Critical: Looks for how academic ways construct indigenous, women, children, races as semi-human ‘Others’ to be studied, governed & trained</p> <p>Power/knowledge: Looks beyond the academic domain to how it is institutionalised to support colonialism, racism & social injustice</p> <p>Balance: Tries to weave Indigenous & non-Indigenous ways of thinking & knowing together in a balanced way in their academic work</p> <p>Emergent: Tries to find new both-ways genres of academic literacy and ways to reading & writing academic texts that enable different ways of knowing to co-exist in the same text</p> <p>Decolonization: Joins with others in making the mainstream academic institutions & disciplines change so they value & include Indigenous epistemologies (ways of knowing) & Indigenous ontologies (ways of being human)</p> <p>Learning means: <i>Learn how to negotiate new rules for the game</i></p>
PRACTICE	<p>Mistakes: Mark student mistakes & help eliminate them</p> <p>Rules: Find rules, patterns or procedures for students to learn & follow</p> <p>‘How to’ Guides: Point students to: dictionaries, thesauri, grammar books, style guides, How to Study books, Library training, memory techniques</p> <p>Explicit pedagogy: Describe academic reading & writing tasks (genres) clearly & teach them explicitly</p> <p>Metalanguage: Use stable technical terms to describe language features eg Traditional Grammar, SFL or rhetorical text patterns</p>	<p>Apprentice: Help students ‘take up’ the persona of the discipline area, & not fall back on non-academic ways of knowing, thinking & writing</p> <p>Contrast: Highlight the difference between academic ways of being & knowing and everyday non-academic cultural life by using such binaries as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - logos versus mythos (ancient Greek philosophers) - spoken language versus written language (Halliday) - oral culture versus literate culture (Olson, Ong) - non-standard dialects versus standard English (Malcolm) - informal registers versus formal registers - restricted code versus elaborated code (Bernstein) - narrative versus exposition (Bruner) - BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) versus CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) (Cummings) 	<p>Dialogic: Do not present knowledge as something that is finished or finalised. (eg Freire’s banking education)</p> <p>Constructivist: Present knowledge as always needs to be renewed & reconstructed here & now for this special context with this group of people</p> <p>Deconstructive: Let students see how the academic disciplines inherit a tradition that is monocultural, masculinist, racist & Eurocentric (& now also, English language-centric)</p> <p>Subjugated knowledges: Locate marginalised approaches within mainstream academic disciplines to provide a footing for students to develop their identities & ways of knowing</p> <p>Exemplary Indigenous intellectuals: Expose students to Indigenous or non-mainstream intellectuals & professionals who have not assimilated or repressed their cultural difference. These intellectuals & academics will often be known as ‘organic’, ‘public’, ‘post-colonial’, ‘post-modern’, ‘post-structural’, ‘post-metaphysical’, ‘post-European’ & so on to signal the way they are at odds with their mainstream institutional location. Students can follow in the footsteps of these Indigenous intellectuals as trail blazers</p> <p>Indigenous languages & literacies: Encourage students to express their understandings in a range of media including Indigenous languages & traditional non-written literacies</p> <p>Cultural knowledge: value the experience, understanding & knowledge that students bring & find a prominent place for them in their demonstrations of knowledge & competence</p> <p>Balance: Where possible, use curriculum resources & texts written by Indigenous authors, particularly texts that critically engage with their field of knowledge from explicitly Indigenous perspectives</p>

This second table deals with the same information as Table 1, but lays it out on a different grid and in a more summary form.

Table 2: Comparison of different aspects of the three approaches

	Skills approach	Initiation approach	Dialogic approach
Goal	generic skills	initiation into an academic discipline	reconstructive reflection on cultural issues in academic discourse
Focus	do the academic task	interpret what to do	negotiate the politico-cultural meanings of the task
primary metaphor	'learn the rules'	'play the game'	'change the game'
View of academic literacy learning	Academic <i>skills</i> learnt separately from engagement with academic content	Academic <i>expertise</i> learnt through engagement with academic content	Academic <i>understanding</i> learnt through engagement in sociocultural politics in academic 'contact zones'
Pedagogic relationship between staff & students	<i>Skill instruction:</i> Expert versus Novice Native speaker versus ESL Skilled versus unskilled	<i>Initiation:</i> Insider versus outsider Informant versus newcomer	<i>Cultural dialogue:</i> an evolving process of interpreting one other's interpretations
student 'deficit'	ignorance	cultural mismatch	cultural resistance
Where is the problem	mistakes by student student ignorance of rules & grammar	misunderstanding by student student is not initiated into academic culture	difference/dispute among staff & students concerning the cultural assumptions & implications of academic culture
Solution	<i>Change the student:</i> - error analysis - skill development - language development	<i>Change the curriculum:</i> - systematic apprenticeship into the epistemological practices of the academic/professional community that determine the academic literacies of that field	<i>Change the larger socio-context:</i> - reflect on existing literacy conventions & expectations - explore & negotiate new culturally fair & fruitful conventions & genres
Improper uses of the approach	rote learning, merely going through the motions just to get 'a piece of paper'	assimilationist denial by teachers of cultural reality of student lives	'politically correct' avoidance of engaging or actually doing serious academic work or meeting academic standards
Typical context frame	<i>A workbook</i> eg student & tutor working through a workbook	<i>A discipline</i> eg a cohort of students progressing through a 3-year Course or curriculum	<i>Transdisciplinary practice</i> BIITE as a both ways learning community eg conferences, publications, practices

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