Why the International Student Experience matters: Exploring the relationships between international students' psychosocial acculturation and academic literacy development

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It may seem at first glance that the International Student Experience is at best peripherally relevant to the concerns surrounding formal academic literacy development. Some may understandably argue that that international students' non-academic experiences broadly fall beyond the remit of English for Academic Purposes course provision. If student welfare departments, student unions and counselling services already exist in supportive capacities to deal with such issues, then there may appear to be little reason for the involvement or intervention of academic departments. Beyond standard pastoral care students do not expect practitioners to take an active interest in their everyday lives, and said practitioners are rarely (if ever) contractually obliged to do so. From a purely practical standpoint, then, the ISE has apparently relatively little to do with formal teaching and learning as they are currently understood.

However, while the relationships might often be indirect and intangible, there may well be very real links between the ISE and academic literacy development. Anthropological and sociocultural approaches to literacies have shown that the development of the technical and rhetorical skills associated with being academically literate in fact depend on fundamental cultural notions of personal and social identity (Reder, 1994; Leki, 2007). It is quite possible that these notions both affect and are affected by international students' experiences and perceptions of living in the country whose academic written style they are endeavouring to emulate, and in whose academic discourse communities they are aspiring to participate. In short, before students are able to write 'well' according to the norms established by their host academic community, they need to be able to be 'on the same cultural wavelength' as that same community. This is where the International Student Experience has a potentially significant role to play. Just as students need to 'come to terms' with their new academic environment, with all of its alien idiosyncrasies and quirks; so too must they make sense of their new wider sociocultural environment. It is logical to wonder if the latter might have some bearing on the former.

When viewed as discourse communities, schools and other academic environments are not culturally neutral places. Shirley Brice Heath, in her seminal case-study 'Ways with Words' (1983), investigated the ways in which middle- and working-class children's social and cultural background prepare them for school life in the 1970s south-eastern United States. She found that working class communities had culturally-learned assumptions about communication and language use which were markedly different from those of the (middle class) classroom, and that these disparities put working-class children at a comparative disadvantage from literally the first day of their education. The implication from this and other studies is that cultural background has a profound effect on attitude, behaviour and performance in school; and that cultural difference between that of the students' home communities and that of their academic environment can potentially be highly disenabling.

One of the implications that Heath highlights is the need for teachers and teaching institutions to be as fully aware as possible of students' cultural backgrounds and 'where they are coming from' in terms of sociocultural identity and communicative practices.

This necessity extends to EAP course provision. Students do not enter the classroom as epistemic *tabulae rasae*, ready to objectively and equally absorb linguistic diktats from their instructors. Rather, the extent to which learners are able to learn, use and apply literacy conventions depends significantly upon underlying cultural & psychosocial factors which determine their potential 'compatibility' with the academic discourses in question. Allusions could be made here towards Vygotskian (1978) Z*ones of Proximal Development*; learners have their own cultures and cultural views as 'starting points' from which any further development progresses. As Pachecho & Gutierrez (2009) note, a student's home culture is not simply 'another variable' when considering educative processes; it is central to any and all notions of learning and cognitive development.

In a similar vein, educational theory has long held that literacy development, instead of being a strictly technical endeavour, is inextricably linked to broader sociocultural themes and issues (Duff, 2010). Literacies are viewed as culturally idiosyncratic phenomena in that they 'belong' to specific sociocultural sub-groups. Indeed, as Lankshear & Knobel (2004: 8) argue, an understanding of the social and cultural background contexts surrounding literacies and literacy practices is a necessary pre-requisite for participation in said literacy communities; literacies are "…bound up with social, institutional and cultural relationships, and can only be understood when they are situated within their social, cultural and historical contexts". It can be concluded so far that just as teachers need an awareness of their students' cultural backgrounds & identities, so too do students need a reciprocal understanding of the academic cultures which host and maintain the targeted academic literacy practices.

This social positioning aspect of literacy development leads to the conception of academic literacies as being written 'dialects' used by specific discourse communities for specific purposes. Accurate and appropriate usages of academic registers & genres do a lot more than simply *convey information*, they indicate group membership and knowledge of how to 'play the game' (Casanave, 2002). Indeed, a considerable degree of academic professionalism and legitimacy is assessed - consciously or otherwise - by readers' perceptions of an author's technical and stylistic competence. Just as speakers might indicate socioeconomic status, gender, or geographic origin by the way they speak, so too do authors imply and infer allegiance to academic communities by the way they write. By using specifically sanctioned rhetorical knowledge-sharing patterns and techniques, writers enable themselves both to indicate cultural membership of and to meaningfully participate in specific discourse communities.

Furthermore, as Lea & Street (1998) argue, linguistic & stylistic features of academic discourses are manifestations of underlying cultural epistemological and ontological beliefs and assumptions held by the respective academic communities. Students do not simply learn to *communicate thought*; they are in fact obliged to learn *which forms of thought are those which are to be communicated*. As Johns (1997:61) notes, one of the most challenging aspects of academic writing is that written texts must "display a vision of reality shared by members of the particular discourse community to which the text is being addressed". Evidently, academic literacy development includes a normative ontological component: namely, that in order to be a successful writer, one must share a similar worldview with that of one's audience.

The academic sub-cultures which use academic literacies are themselves both parts and products of wider cultural values, assumptions and identities. Studies of contrastive rhetoric (see Connor, 1997) have shown that the features of being academically literate (and the criteria by which said literacy is assessed) vary considerably according to the ethnic, national and linguistic groups in question. Such variances are not simply matters of random linguistic/stylistic mutation. Different cultures structure and use literacies in different ways because they have, at their heart, profoundly different ways of defining and framing such epistemological and ontological concepts as identity, belief, affiliation, argument, validity, and so on… Truly becoming literate in a society, including developing a capacity for academic literacies, involves an understanding of that society's cultural psychology at the most fundamental level. In order to be able to understand and develop a culture's literacy practices, therefore, it is necessary for the individual to be open and to amenable to the culture in question.

Literacy development, consequently, necessarily involves a strong element of acculturation. While it may be tempting, however, to view this process as a journey 'from' students' cultural backgrounds and practices 'towards' those of their host academic communities, there is a danger here of implying a sense of cultural and epistemological *replacement* (*of* the home *for* the host). A more suitable description may be to view the process as one of *refocusing*. The individual's original cultural beliefs and identity are not erased, ignored nor forgotten; rather, a new parallel social and academic identity is created alongside the existing one. As Collins & Blot (2003: 105) observe: "selections from a multiplicity of language variants enable people to inhabit a multiplicity of overlapping identities", students are ideally able to simultaneously maintain and nurture social and academic identities from more than one cultural source. However, the further a learner's 'home' culture is from that the 'host' culture which surrounds them, then the longer and more problematic the acculturative process is likely to be (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This suggests that the creation of a new social/academic identity does not occur 'from scratch'; students' existing home cultures and values are used as starting points for future parallel sociocultural developments.

Therefore, students' capacities for engagement in academic discourse communities can be seen as the tip of an iceberg whose submerged section represents a wealth of psychological and sociocultural factors and issues. The psychosocial acculturative experiences and strategies of international students living and studying in native English-speaking countries such as the UK help to form the foundation for academic literacy development, as students' academic identities (and corresponding literacy development) grow out of wider sociocultural notions of cultural identification and membership. In addressing the question of how to encourage academic literacy development, therefore, implications arise which far exceed the remit of existing formal pedagogic practices and assumptions.

From a practical standpoint, however, said implications for practitioners and institutions remain unclear; there are no clear pedagogic imperatives or strategies which immediately emerge. Rather, it is necessary for the industry as a whole to adopt a broader paradigm when considering the range and nature of provisions that its members offer. Literacy development is not a purely linguistic phenomenon; accordingly, theoretical disciplines such as sociology, psychology and anthropology must be recognised as having a crucial role to play in informing institutional strategy and course design. This involves nothing less than a fundamental reframing of the objectives and purposes of Academic Literacy development. Institution should be encouraged to engage in research (utilising models such as Berry's Acculturation Model, 1997; and Bourdieu's Social Field Theory, 1986, for instance) with the

aim of revealing detailed portraits of their students' lives and experiences while living in L1 sociocultural and sociolinguistic environments. The fruits of said research can be used as starting points for consideration as to where learners stand in regards to their identities as cultural migrants and initiate members of academic communities. From there, institutions will be better informed as to future directions for holistically strategic educational policy.

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