Academic Writing: The Key to Student Retention?

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that writing is central to teaching and learning in post-secondary contexts. Writing is also, almost certainly, a key to student success and retention. The response of universities around the world has been to establish Writing Centres and these have played a pivotal role in helping students succeed. However, as is argued in this paper, there should be a broader responsibility to develop student writing. Academic writing is fraught with hidden rules and implicit discursive practices that are often discipline specific. Far from being a discrete and separate 'skill', writing is part of a complex network of social practices conducted within different academic discourses. This insight is crucial because it is a prerequisite for making meaningful pedagogic recommendations. Academic writing requires an understanding of shifting and competing discourse requirements, how the 'self' is bound up in writing, how authority is constructed, how language is shaped and shapes, how some ways of writing are privileged and others not, and what is valued in this context. The paper unpacks several ways in which the requirements of academic writing can be made more explicit.

Introduction

New students in university contexts soon find out that writing is a currency they must acquire to succeed. Those who are able to write 'well' find their path through academia is less burdensome and more enjoyable. Those who do not, find themselves limited, struggling on the margins and losing confidence in their ability to complete their program requirements. Writing is one of the foundations of academic engagement. Students need to write to learn, to take notes and to study. They also need to write to think, to process their ideas and to integrate new ones. They need to write because this is how they are assessed. Yet, academic writing is seldom explicitly taught. Instead, students are expected to engage in what must seem like "a set of secret handshakes and esoteric codes" (Sommers, 2008, p. 153). Post-secondary teaching is often so focused on content and subject matter that writing needs are hidden. In this approach, which is heavy on content and light on writing, writing becomes the mechanism for the transmission of subject knowledge, rather than something that is integral to the writer developing expertise in that area.

Admissions protocols, instructors and even students themselves often assume that they know how to write when they are accepted into a first year program. They are right in

the sense that many wrote well in high-school, or if they are mature students, in the workplace. They had learned to write in those contexts. It is also assumed that if students do not know how to write in the post-secondary milieu, they will pick it up as they go along. In homogenous student populations with small class sizes, students might acquire the academic writing socialization they need. But with mounting student numbers, large classes, increasing diversity, and growing complexity in participation (on-line, blended, part-time), this does not appear to be happening (Coffin, et al., 2003).

There is an extensive literature on writing in post-secondary contexts globally (Carroll, 2002; Coffin, et al., 2003; Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006). In this literature, it is widely acknowledged that writing is key to learning in post-secondary contexts. It is recognized that from 1st year, students struggle with writing across the disciplines, that they find writing assignments daunting and they often do not understand the writing requirements they are asked to undertake (Fukuzawa & Boyd, 2008). In the literature, it is also widely accepted that since writing is the main form of assessment, it is critical to student success and retention (Fukuzawa & Boyd, 2008; Paszkowski & Haag, 2008; Pritchard & Thomas, 2010).

Theoretically, there are different approaches to writing. This paper promotes the argument that students need explicit writing instruction from an academic literacies perspective. In other words, they need to know *how* to write but they also need to know the complex role writing plays in academic discourses. To illustrate this argument, I will use a composite writing rubric. Writing rubrics are assessment tools that are widely used in post-secondary assessment because they allow assessors to have a standard assessment approach to multiple and varied writing assignments. While writing rubrics may seem straightforward and accessible, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate the implicit complexity facing students as they try to complete a writing task according to the assessment criteria. For each criterion, I will deconstruct what students implicitly need to know, understand and apply in order to meet the writing requirements. Faculty can frequently identify poor student writing but often cannot specify the problem or articulate what needs to be done. By deconstructing a writing rubric, the hidden rules and implicit discursive practices will surface as an accessible language for further dialogue.

The first part of the paper explains the different theoretical approaches to writing and outlines an academic literacies perspective. The sections that follow deconstruct a writing rubric and examine the literacies required of students, the consequences of 'failing' at writing and possible interventions. The perspective that writing is part of a complex network of social practices conducted within different academic discourses is crucial because it is a prerequisite for making meaningful pedagogic recommendations in post-secondary contexts.

Perspectives on Writing

While it is common to talk about what constitutes 'bad' academic writing and to agree that students need to learn how to write 'well', Lea & Street (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Street, 1999; Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 1984; 1995) have argued that

these terms are not helpful. Instead, they conceptualize writing in academic contexts as *approaches* to student writing, which effectively constitute writing epistemologies. They identify three different approaches to writing: 1) a skills approach; 2) a process approach or academic socialization; and 3) an academic literacies approach.

According to the *skills approach*, writing is cognitive and dependent entirely on the individual. If the individual cannot write as required, it is because she or he has not learned the cognitive skills they need. The focus is on acquiring the surface features of language and forms of writing. This perspective assumes that students can learn the generic skill of writing and then transfer their learning successfully to wide and varied contexts and audiences. According to this approach, the student is in deficit and general non-specific once-off courses or workshops on writing should solve the problem.

The *process* or academic socialization approach acknowledges that writing is not a generic skill but is tied to the process of learning how to write in academic contexts. Disciplines have particular ways of thinking and writing and according to this approach students need to become acculturated into these specific discourses. In order to write well, students need to understand the genres and the language used in those discourses. Once students understand the hidden requirements of the discourse, they are able to reproduce it unproblematically. Writing is seen as a process of acquiring the discipline or discourse, both of which are relatively stable. From this perspective, it is the instructor who is deficit for not demystifying academic writing for the students.

The third approach, *academic literacies*, takes a literacy perspective. Literacy in its broadest sense is about acquiring the epistemologies necessary for socialization in a particular discourse. Academic literacy encompasses a number of literacies: critical literacy, reading, writing, information literacy, visual literacy, graphic literacy and so on. Academic literacy/ies is epistemological because it is about developing an identity as a student, scholar and writer. It's about learning to write as an educator, scientist, or engineer (Coffin, et al., 2003). It is about making meaning and negotiating authority in this space. The context or discourse is situated, nuanced, complex, and constantly shifting. A writer has to be able to interpret power relations among individuals and within the institution, and navigate multiple social identities. The complexity of academic writing explains why a student can take a course on writing or be given a writing template and still fail to produce the writing required. It is also why a student can write successfully for one instructor and when that same writing style is reproduced for another instructor, the student finds that it is wrong. Many students have 'hit and miss' experiences with writing with no way of knowing what they are doing wrong or right. What this perspective stresses is that students need access to university epistemologies and that writing is a way of becoming a discourse member.

From an academic literacies perspective, writing is not a student or instructor problem but a challenge for all members of the academic community and one that needs to be addressed continuously and on multiple levels. Writing is something that students acquire over time and with practice (Sommers, 2008). It is not simply a set of skills but

is rather deeply embedded in society beyond the discipline. In the university, broader power relations 'construct the author' in classed, gendered and racialized ways' (Burke, 2008, p. 200).

These three approaches overlap but they differ in their epistemological approach to writing. Conceptualizing writing according to these three approaches allows us to see how our perspective on writing will determine the interventions and curriculum development needed.

An Academic Literacies Approach

Writing is difficult because each time a student sits down to write a paragraph s/he will make multiple decisions in a matter of minutes. In terms of the *mechanics* of writing, these decisions involve what content to include, what ideas s/he has on that content, the logic of those ideas, the relevance of that content, what audience to write for, what the purpose of writing is, what to select, how to sequence and structure the writing, what words to use, what tone, what voice, what styles, what evidence to use, what style to reference, what academic conventions to follow, how to organize the paragraphs, how to transition between paragraphs, how to make the text coherent, how to write sentences, how to choose words, how to spell, how to punctuate, how to format the document (Badenhorst, 2007).

Layered on this, students also encounter *discourse* related difficulties and they need to think about the context in which they are writing, the social conditions, power issues such as gender or race which will affect their perception of authority, intertextuality and their ability to draw meanings from multiple texts both present and absent, what identity they are shaping, presenting, needing for this text, what voice (or lack of voice) is needed, how they are positioned by the text (as novice, authority), how will they position themselves in the text (distant third person, close personal 'I'), and what discursive issues need to be negotiated here (what counts as knowledge, assessment) (Badenhorst, 2008).

Since the student is a whole person and not a compartmentalized student-writer only, there is a further round of decisions that happens when s/he sits down to write. These are the *emotional* issues: the critical eye through which the author views him/herself, the criticism incorporated from others, the anxiety held about writing, fears of failure and success, the burden of not meeting expectations from self and others, the exposure of writing something in black and white and seemingly carved in stone, the fear of being ridiculed, of being found out to be an imposter, the inability to persevere, the paralyzing feeling of being stuck and unable to write, the helplessness and disempowerment of failing and not knowing what to do about it (Badenhorst, 2010).

Writing does not happen in a straight forward linear fashion, it involves rounds of thinking, writing and revising in a fairly chaotic non-linear fashion. Students develop self-efficacy in writing through continuous practice, writing on topics they find relevant, and through observing authentic models.

What Students are Required to Produce in their Writing

For the purpose of this paper, I want to present student writing requirements from the perspective of what students are asked to produce and what they need to understand in order to fulfill those requirements from an academic literacies perspective. I have used writing rubrics as a platform to examine this. Writing rubrics are qualitative mechanisms to standardize writing assessment and are widely used to assess writing (Wilson, 2006).

I have compiled a composite writing rubric from rubrics collected from an extensive online search of university and college writing rubrics, and key texts on rubric assessment in post-secondary education. All the writing rubrics were similar with minor differences in style and organization. Some contained less complex requirements while others were quite specific about the complexity required. I opted to include the more complex conditions. The assembled rubric is displayed below as Figure 1.

Figure 1: Composite Writing Rubric

Criterion	Exemplary	Competent	Unacceptable
Focus (thesis), purpose and argument	Clear original thesis/argument, focused and specific, purpose is clear, logical development of thesis as appropriate to assignment purpose, acknowledges complexity, sustained analysis. Ideas are critically developed. Conclusions are consistent with reasoning.	Well-developed thesis, adequate understanding of assigned topic.	Weak thesis, unclear, too broad or only indirectly supported.
Idea development and evidence	Consistent evidence, originality and depth of ideas, main points are defined and supported with evidence, support is valid. Ideas are developed logically and reasonably. Number and types of sources appropriate and integrated in writing. Sources are assessed critically, includes counter-arguments. Writer able to make connections between sources and his/her own writing. Does not overuse quotes.	Ideas are sufficiently supported, support is valid and logical.	Ideas are only indirectly supported, support isn't sufficient but loosely related to main ideas.
Organization and structure	Writing is organized, logical and sequenced appropriate to assignment, paragraphs are well developed, one idea per paragraph with support and smooth transitions between paragraphs. Writing progresses clearly from beginning to end. Good introduction and conclusion. Writing is coherent.	Competent organization, competent paragraph structure, lacking in effective transitions.	Paragraphs not organized around a thesis, paragraphs too complicated or stand-alones, transitions weak.

Audience, tone, style	Clear idea of audience related to purpose of assignment, tone and point-of-view appropriate to the audience. Writing engages reader. Writer's voice is revealed.	Awareness of an audience, tone and point-of-view satisfactory.	Inconsistent or little sense of audience, tone and point-of-view not consistent.
Sentence structure, vocabulary, grammar	Clear, concise sentences. Each sentence powerfully structured, rich, well-chosen, variety of sentence styles and length. Writer skillfully communicates meaning to readers.	Effective and varied sentences, errors due to lack of proofreading, grammar errors, colloquialisms.	Repetitive sentence patterns, errors in grammar and non-standard use of language.
Mechanics, conventions, presentation	Almost without errors of punctuation, spelling, etc, appropriate format and presentation. Standard referencing in text and in reference list.	Occasional errors of punctuation, spelling, etc, some formatting errors, errors mostly from carelessness.	Many errors of punctuation, spelling, etc, and in formatting or formatting inconsistent.

(Source: Internet search of available college and university writing rubrics; Quinlan, 2006; Price & O'Donovan, 2006)

I will focus on the *exemplary* column and examine – from an academic literacies approach – what students would need to know and do in order to meet this requirement. In the paragraphs below, each *exemplary* category will be unpacked with this lens.

Focus (thesis), Purpose and Argument

Exemplary rubric requirement: *Clear original thesis/argument, focused and specific, purpose is clear, logical development of thesis as appropriate to assignment purpose, acknowledges complexity, sustained analysis. Ideas are critically developed. Conclusions are consistent with reasoning.*

In order to develop a 'clear original thesis/argument, focused and specific', students will need to know what counts as original knowledge in the discipline, what questions are important and relevant (Lakoff, 1990). They will need to know how to extract one thread, one focus, one purpose from the morass of ideas, knowledge and information available. The focus or thesis needs to be appropriate to the content and to the discipline. They will need to understand that academic writing always contains an argument and that arguments can be quite complex. Students often come from school contexts thinking that academic writing is about 'facts'. In some disciplines where arguments are more deeply embedded, academic writing does appear to be fact-like. In many of the sciences, for example. In the social sciences, arguments are often more explicit and apparent.

Students will need to know the different between ways of arguing and which would be appropriate to the discipline. Even for those students who do recognize the importance of argument, they may have difficulty articulating that argument in writing (Elander, et al., 2006). Inductive reasoning, for example, is an argument that begins with observation

and arrives at a conclusion based on available evidence (I think therefore I am). A supposition argument begins with an assumption (suppose Darwin's theory of evolution is true) and then through inductive reasoning and evidence, the supposition is proven or disproved. Hypotheses are supposition arguments. Deductive arguments begin with a claim (alcohol destroys brain cells) and through reasoning, the claim is supported and when reliable becomes more certain and less of a probability (so alcohol should be illegal). Causal arguments draw direct links between claim and reason or evidence. All of these arguments are drawn from the natural sciences and are a way of simplifying the complexity of the natural world. The idea is that through simplification, we build increments of knowledge brick by brick that ultimately would make up the wall of science. Not all arguments in academia follow the natural sciences. In the social sciences, qualitative arguments tend to embrace complexity rather than reduce the argument to its simplest form. A main claim is made but is discussed within a context of counter arguments. The counter arguments may represent several voices and not just an oppositional argument. Ambiguity and uncertainty are often welcomed in qualitative arguments (Badenhorst, 2008). Consequently students will need to know that it is a qualitative argument that is being assessed in this assignment. 'Sustained analysis' requires that students need to know that arguments and their analysis differ from discipline to discipline (Elander, et al., 2006). Arguments in philosophy are very different from arguments in history. How the analysis is presented and what counts as evidence will depend on the discipline. That conclusions are consistent with reasoning makes much more sense if one understands what type of reasoning is being employed.

Originality in academic contexts is often less about newness and innovation and more about acknowledging previous research in new ways (Creme, 2003). Students would need to know that all research, in academic contexts, builds on previous research and that originality depends on what counts as original in that discipline. Students would also need to know what constitutes critical thinking and how to write this while at the same time adhering to published authorities and not expressing their own opinions explicitly.

Idea Development and Evidence

Exemplary rubric requirement: *Consistent evidence, originality and depth of ideas, main points are defined and supported with evidence, support is valid. Ideas are developed logically and reasonably. Number and types of sources appropriate and integrated in writing. Sources are assessed critically, includes counter-arguments. Writer able to make connections between sources and his/her own writing. Does not overuse quotes.*

What counts as evidence in an academic context is again complex and discursive. If a student makes a claim and the evidence is unconvincing to the reader then this writing is more like opinion. If a student is convincing with the evidence then the argument becomes more truth-like for the reader (Badenhorst, 2008). In academia, there are only two types of evidence that count: 1) primary evidence (raw data); and 2) secondary

published research which gets its authority from the peer review process. Both primary and secondary research obtains authority from where it is positioned in the discourse. In a discipline dominated by a particular discourse, say the scientific method, what counts as evidence will be very different than a discourse dominated by post-structural feminism (Lakoff, 1990). In the same way, the secondary sources carry different weights. Evidence from research published in top journals in the field will be more truthful than a paper published in an obscure journal. Research published in 2011 will be more truthful than that published in 1965. Since discourses are often contradictory, the article published in 1965 could be a decisive influential article which is still regarded as an authority (Badenhorst, 2007). How do students know this when they look for sources for their assignments unless they have been explicitly walked through the minefield of what counts as evidence in their disciplines?

Added to this are layers of academic reading literacy and critical literacy. Students need to be able to extract an argument and the key message from a text, identify the evidence, and judge whether that evidence and argument is valid often in relation to other arguments and evidence (Elander, et al., 2006). They have to extract relevant information from the text as well as their critique of it and weave that into the argument they have developed. They also need to incorporate counter arguments without undermining their own argument and without refuting the counter arguments in a direct way. For example a student cannot write 'I disagree with Jones' argument' but would rather be required to write 'Jones argues X but Johnson argues Y' while making a point which furthers their argument (Badenhorst, 2007).

'Good' academic writing also involves *intertextuality*. Intertextuality is the way a text relates to all the texts that surround it (Brazerman, 2004). We use other texts for information, as a source of social context, as a source of evidence, and as evidence of epistemological beliefs or paradigm. Intertextuality is evident through direct quotations, citing sources or using phrases that can be linked to specific places, people, contexts or texts (Brazerman, 2004). A paper has intertextual reach when there is a complex interweaving of original texts with the current one and meaning is dependent on the reader making connections between the current text and the referred texts through the myriad convolutions of time, space, culture and context. Intertextual reach is dependent on the writer developing relationships between the source texts in a critical and scholarly way. In addition, each time we use words from one text in another, we recontextualize them. This means we give them new meaning in the new context. Sometimes recontextualized words are close to the original, at other times, we may add a critical slant before the reference or reposition the words while maintaining the meaning (Brazerman, 2004). Recontextualization is subtle and is often shaped by the discipline. In other words, what gets referred to, who gets cited, what is implied and inferred is dependent on the discipline. Without explicit instruction, how would students know this? Through this assessment criteria, the instructor is implicitly looking for intertextual reach.

Organization and Structure

Exemplary rubric requirement: *Writing is organized, logical and sequenced appropriate to assignment, paragraphs are well developed, one idea per paragraph with support and smooth transitions between paragraphs. Writing progresses clearly from beginning to end. Good introduction and conclusion. Writing is coherent.*

On the surface, the organization and structure of writing seems a simple task. In academic contexts, this involves an understanding of academic genres of writing as well as what makes a piece of writing coherent. Genres are "localized, textured sites of invention' (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 114) where those who write situate themselves before they write and as they write. In other words, genres are templates or examples of different forms of writing in any context. They are generic forms used to explain the norms and conventions for organizing writing in ways that are socially agreed upon by members of that discourse. Since discourses are not monolithic, there are often subtle differences in genres and they change over time and across disciplines (Wrigglesworth & McKeever, 2010). As Bawarshi (2003) suggests, genres are not discrete but make up a series of overlapping and interacting sets. The genre of an essay, for example, while it is still an essay, will be different in the natural sciences, in Women's Studies and in philosophy. In addition, even within a discipline there may be great variation in terms of what instructor/assessor's belief constitutes an essay (Brannon, et al., 2008; Elander, et al., 2006). Students encounter layers of genres in academic contexts. While they may understand the genre of an essay, they may not understand the different genres of argument they will need for the essay to be successfully communicated.

Writing coherently on a superficial level is about having a key message that runs through the piece of writing, smooth transitions between paragraphs and a logical flow to the overall document. On a deeper level, coherence is also about *what* goes into the paper. What needs to be included in terms of content/subject matter, assessment requirements (showing that you've read assigned texts), and discipline/discourse specific needs (concepts, ways of defining concepts, ways of posing arguments). Coherence also involves making decisions about *how* to tell that story. Where is the beginning, where is the end? How will the middle bits fit in? Sequencing is crucial to the coherence of a piece of writing and is about ordering the material. It's deciding what comes before what.

To help understand what goes into sequencing it is useful to use Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills (Krathwohl, 2002). In writing, this taxonomy is particularly fitting. Bloom's taxonomy locates three lower order thinking skills: knowledge, comprehension and application; and three higher order thinking skills: analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The key about the taxonomy is that one cannot engage a thinking skill without first satisfying the one before it on the taxonomy. For example, one can not comprehend without knowledge. In writing, sequencing follows a similar pattern. The writer needs to provide information and descriptions to give the reader *knowledge*. The reader cannot

comprehend without explanation. Examples show *application* of the topic. *Analysis* means taking the topic apart, *synthesis* means pulling it back together but with insight and new knowledge, *evaluation* is a critical eye on the value of the entire process. This sequencing – even in its most basic form – *description* then *analysis* - is rarely taught to students to apply to their writing (Badenhorst, 2007; 2008) but it plays an enormous role in creating a coherent document. Again, all of these decisions may have discourse/discipline requirements. For example, in science papers the *how* is usually standard. In the arts or humanities there may be a wider range of options.

Audience, Tone, Style

Exemplary rubric requirement: *Clear idea of audience related to purpose of assignment, tone and point-of-view appropriate to the audience. Writing engages reader. Writer's voice is revealed.*

When students write assignments, their audience is a constructed audience: their instructor/assessor. The instructor/assessor's purpose for reading the student's writing is not voluntary or out of interest, it is for the specific purpose of assessment. Many students find the whole idea of writing for an audience perplexing in academic contexts (Greene & Orr, 2007). Often students will say 'I didn't know I had to put that in, I thought the instructor already knew that.' Writing for an audience whose sole purpose is assessment is very different from writing for an authentic audience. The assessor is looking to see that the student has included what was covered in the course. Has the student engaged with all the course material? Can the student explain or apply the key concepts? Even though the assessor knows those concepts well the student writer still has to explain them.

In terms of style and tone, writing is about apprenticeship into the discourse and what is 'normal' for that discipline. Writing that does not follow conventions of style is considered 'abnormal'. What is considered 'normal' often changes from instructor to instructor and from subject to subject. While there may be similarities, there are also many differences and students are rarely taught to look for these nuances. For example, some disciplines will encourage students to use the personal 'I' while others will insist on the third-person distant author (Hyland, 2002a). In some disciplines there are limits to originality and student writers are bounded by what is allowed within their discipline. Some disciplines allow a wide range of voices and approaches to writing style, while others are much more rigid and room for writing innovation is marginal. Lakoff (1990) distinguishes between vertical and horizontal communication in a hierarchy. There are different ways of speaking and writing depending on where one is located – vertically and horizontally - in the discourse and to whom one is communicating.

Tone and style is also about authority in the text and ultimately it is about identity. Authority in a text is the extent to which the writer writes as a 'knower' versus a

'consumer' of knowledge. For students, this is a delicate balance. Because they are positioned as newcomers – consumers - in the discourse, they are very rarely 'knowers'. Their role is to mimic authorities rather than to challenge them in any meaningful way (Lakoff, 1990). To fundamentally challenge an authority would be to claim a new position in the discourse and for undergraduate students, who have not completed their apprenticeship, this would probably result in being penalized by negative assessment. Graduate students are allowed more leeway to challenge authorities. Authority is also about how writers present themselves in the text (even without the use of 'I'). Projecting an identity, a voice, that is questioning, scholarly, confident, and knowledgeable is how writers get credibility in academic contexts. Putting one's self in the text is a way of promoting a 'competent scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one's ideas' (Hyland, 2002b, p. 1110). This is very hard for students to do, even if they know that this is what they have to do and it takes years of engagement in practice and discursive activities to acquire these identities (Creme, 2003; Sommers, 2008).

Sentence Structure, Vocabulary and Grammar

Exemplary rubric requirement: *Clear, concise sentences. Each sentence powerfully structured, rich, well-chosen, variety of sentence styles and length. Writer skillfully communicates meaning to readers.*

On the surface sentence structure, vocabulary and grammar seem straightforward and simple as a language issue. Yet, when the surface is scraped away, we find that the nature of scholarship is embedded in sentence structure, vocabulary and grammar (Lakoff, 1990). As Lakoff (1990, p. 148) argues, "within disciplines, we develop special languages". The very words we choose and the sentences we construct are subtly shaped by layers: first, by the university context; second, by the discipline within which we write; and third by the content.

Attention to detail, precision, accuracy and consistency are some of the attributes of scholarly writing and they are apparent in sentence structure, vocabulary and grammar. Precision means that each sentence is as exact as it can be in meaning as well as structure. Accuracy is faithfully representing a truth and not misrepresenting anything from sources to language used. Consistency involves following a specified set of decisions regarding terminology, formatting, fonts and other design elements. Attention to detail is what students have to do to achieve precision, accuracy and consistency. A lack of attention to detail sends the message to the instructor/assessor that the writer lacks credibility as a scholar/writer.

While aiming for precision and accuracy, students also need to know that academic writing tends to be nuanced and complex. Modalities and hedging are used as opposed to declarative statements and certainties: "Hedging is an expression of tentativeness and possibility and it is central to academic writing where the need to present unproven

propositions with caution and precision is essential" (Hyland, 2006, p. 433). For example, academic writers use *rarely* instead of *never*, *often* instead of *always*. Yet, these same modalities are used to convey certainties in research results and conclusions (Elander, et al., 2006). How are students to navigate these waters without explicit instruction? Even with explicit instruction, extensive mentoring, feedback and immersion in the discourse is necessary to incorporate the subtleties of hedging (Hyland, 2006).

Another seemingly simply but complex issue is the use of passive or active verbs. The passive verb is seen as the language of science. Passives appear to make the text appear neutral and objective because the actor in the sentence is anonymous (*A meeting was called*). Writing in the passive is traditionally the scientific way of writing research (Badenhorst, 2007). Increasingly, in some disciplines, students are being asked to write using more active verbs (*the manager called the meeting*) but the implication of this is that the writing by nature becomes more personal and subjective for which the writer may be penalized. Students often receive mixed messages about writing style. They are told to write clearly but are given articles to read that are dense and unclear. They are told to write with voice but then are penalized if it is too personal. They are told to be original but rewarded for conforming.

Mechanics, Conventions, Presentation

Exemplary rubric requirement: *Almost without errors of punctuation, spelling, etc, appropriate format and presentation. Standard referencing in text and in reference list.*

Even for the mechanics of a paper, the conventions and the presentation there are underlying discourse issues. Referencing, for example, while seemly about punctuation and format, is really about evidence and the writer's credibility as a scholar. If the referencing conventions are incorrect, it's not just an editorial issue, the writer's credibility is called into question. It means that the writer is not precise, accurate or consistent and therefore not scholarly. The same applies to formatting, layout and the general presentation of the writing.

Consequences of 'Failing' at Writing

Unpacking the rubric from an academic literacies approach uncovers the complexity of academic writing and the network of social practices in which writing is embedded. It also highlights why students struggle with writing. What are the consequences of this struggle? As Pajares (2003) argues, writing is as much of an emotional activity as it is a cognitive one. For many students, a consequence of the struggle is their writing self-efficacy drops (Pajares, 2003). They retreat from the task with mounting anxiety and self doubt. They begin to exhibit procrastination and work avoidance behaviours or they complete the task with a minimum of effort. Students' confidence in their writing ability

influences their motivations as well as their writing outcomes (Archer, et al, 1999). As anxiety increases and fear of negative assessment, students may turn to plagiarism as a solution to their problems. With increasing alienation, they may disengage and drop-out of their programs. Rather than seeing writing as a problem, we blame poor performance on lack of 'ability' and 'intelligence'.

Interventions

From a skills approach to writing, short one-off generic workshops or courses on writing should be sufficient. From an academic literacies perspective, there is room for these types of courses but they cannot constitute a pedagogy of writing. Epistemologically, it is important to move away from a skills approach because it portrays a deficit model of student writing (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006).

From an academic socialization approach, a pedagogy of writing would involve sustained longer courses on writing genres and the establishment of Writing Centres to socialize students into academic ways of writing. From an academic literacies perspective, the problem with genre-specific courses is that they represent static snapshot of a complex, dynamic process. Students needs to learn *about* genres – how they develop and change in situ - not just how to follow the genre (Fulford, 2009; Wardle, 2009). While Writing Centres are crucial they cannot carry the burden alone but need to be part of a broader program.

An academic literacies pedagogy of writing would include short workshops on writing, longer sustained courses on genre, and Writing Centres, all of which would focus on the literacies required in academic contexts. In addition, since writing is a social practice, writing instruction would be imbedded in subject areas (Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011; Greene & Orr, 2007). Students would have access to explicit writing instruction across their programs and even into graduate work as their writing requirements changed. A layered approach, where students have exposure to a range of genres, audiences and writing in a subject area are all key to meaningful writing (Ivanic, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Greene & Orr, 2007). A writing pedagogy that is embedded in content produces critical thinking and deep learning and students who understand the complexity of what is required of them produce writing with more complex structures (Elander, et al., 2006). Over time, these writers will develop a voice, an identity, a 'self', an authority in writing far beyond technical skills (Fulford, 2009). Writing is one of the ways in which students have access to the university. Burke (2008) argues "the conceptualization of writing as a skill and technique conceals the ontological and epistemological dimensions of writing" (p. 208). We want students to be critical, thoughtful learners who complete their programs. We want to retain those struggling learners and change their experience to one of empowerment. We want a writing pedagogy not to show students how to conform but so that they can exercise their voice. We want to focus attention on the idea that to be literate is to undertake a dialogue with multiple languages, discourses, and texts in a

critical way. Literacy, therefore, is a "rupturing practice that engages questions regarding who writes for what audience, in what institutional setting, and with what purpose in mind" (Giroux, 1992, p. 2).

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