

## Ethnographies of Academic writing in a global context: the politics OF style

Day Seminar, held at The Open University, Friday July 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, and online discussion forum - July 10<sup>th</sup>- July 24<sup>th</sup>: co-coordinated by Theresa Lillis  
Summary by Theresa Lillis, Lynn Coleman and Jackie Tuck

### Overview

Sixty six people participated in this seminar - in either the one day face to face seminar or the online postgraduate discussion forum- from some 30 institutions and 8 national contexts. The aim of the seminar was to bring together researchers who are using ethnography as a key methodology/epistemology for exploring academic writing and literacy practices in a global context. Specific questions the seminar set out to explore were:

- How can ethnography contribute to understandings about what's involved and at stake in academic text production in a global context?
- How can ethnography contribute to understandings about the significance attached to 'style' in academic text production and evaluation?
- What range of analytic tools are researchers using to explore the nature of academic writing, including 'style'?
- How can current work in Linguistic Ethnography (which has to date tended to focus on *spoken interaction*) contribute to research, analysis and theory on academic writing in a global context?



## Notes from the day seminar

In order to engage with these questions, the day seminar was organized around 6 whole group presentations, 12 small group presentations, a report on the parallel virtual discussion and a facilitated concluding plenary (see programme details below). The presentations and contributions reflected different specific interests and research foci (including student writing at different levels in HE, classroom interaction, translingual studies, professional academic writing in a range of national contexts, identity and risk in writing, critical discussion of the ‘case study’



as a method), as well as a range of paradigms (most evident in the extent to which written text or practices around text making were foregrounded and the analytic tools used) and the ideological positions on the questions raised (notably around access versus transformation). Whilst there was consensus on the need for ethnography in order to explore academic writing, including the politics of style, there was less agreement on the following: what counts as ‘style’? what counts as ‘ethnography’ (e.g. in approaches where a textual-linguistic lens is considered central), what tools do we have to get at what’s going on? Constant Leung most vividly illustrated the limitations of available analytic tools to do justice to the complex phenomena being studied - illustrated in his and Brian Street’s research on teaching/learning interactions in HE.



The *politics* in the seminar title and raised in the opening presentation by Theresa Lillis, for the most part figured implicitly in discussions throughout the day, too implicitly or backgrounded for some participants, and leading to questions about the extent to which research was simply describing dominant conventions (e.g. in terms of language - English - and semiotic resources, genres) rather than seeking to problematise these as the only semiotic resources valid for scholarly labour (an issue most clearly evident in Robin Goodfellow’s his discussion of academic blogging). There was a strong reflexive dimension overall to the seminar, captured particularly strongly by Lucia Thesen’s contribution from South Africa on the politics of place, putting the geopolitics of our own production practices (as academics) firmly on the agenda. This

reflexivity was also strongly in evidence in Lynn Coleman and Jackie Tuck’s critical account of the practices of the virtual forum involving postgraduates, being held in parallel to the one day seminar.

The one day seminar was packed tightly - and everyone kept to time! - offering its own range of scholastic styles - here I mention just a few from the whole group sessions; John Flowerdew's welcome innovation in 'notes from the underground' to tell the 'shocking' stories about Hong Kong scholars' text production practices; Ana Moreno's metacommentary of her own trajectory towards ethnography, alongside her quantitative findings of the differences in Spanish and English medium book reviews; the (as always) hugely enthusiastic chairing of the final session by Roz Ivanič and her warm invitation to all to contribute; the thoughtful and forwarding looking critical comments by Janet Maybin; these last contributions accompanied by the much needed 'voices from practice' - translation/editing and teaching - from Karen Shashok and her work in AuthorAid and Ursula Wingate's clear articulation of the need to bring research and educational practice closer together.



No doubt, with more time, we could have worked together to more sharply (co)articulate some of the many hanging threads and niggling issues. But I hope that people brought together under the seminar's theme - in both the face to face seminar and/or the virtual discussion - will continue to share views, doubts and enthusiasm and help forge a greater understanding in this area.

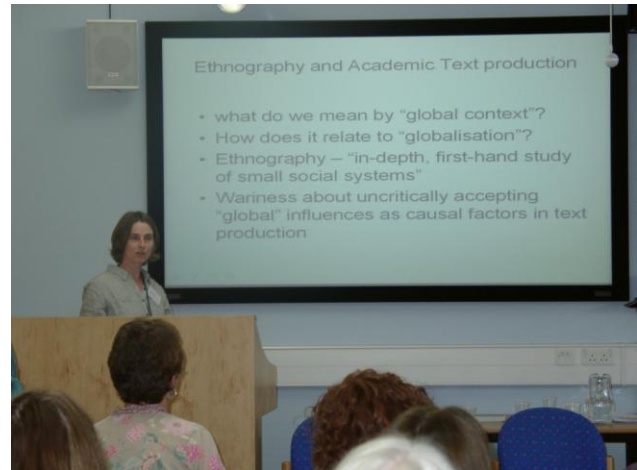


## The online seminar

Several key themes were evident in the discussion:

### *Goals of the field of academic literacies?*

- A key concern raised here is whether the field has a normative or transformative agenda.
- A rather strong expression suggested that an aim of the academic literacies research was to challenge, transform and negotiate privileged practices, rather than merely exploring and reporting such practices.
- Concern was raised about the lack of discussion at the face-to-face seminar about the politics associated with style and choice, which should be in the forefront of a transformative agenda.
- There was a sense for some that a choice between the whether the field was maintaining a transformative or normative agenda should be made, rather than an acknowledgement that different researchers/practitioners use an academic literacies lens for different purpose.



### **How *practice* is dealt with in the field of academic literacies**

- There was an attempt to define and pin-down the function that the notion of 'practices' serves within academic literacies research and the implications of this.
- While some were happier to accept the polysemous nature of 'practices', there were doubts about whether it was fully explicated in the field.
- It was further suggested that it might be useful to draw on other theories of practices (from the social sciences or philosophy) to bolster the academic literacies or NLS understandings. It was also noted however that within such theoretical fields, the notion of practice is regarded in a rather normative and conservative light. Fields suggested as being generative of broader theorisation around practices were those of Communities of Practice and the work of Bourdieu (though it was noted that Bourdieu's theories could be almost deterministic), Gee, Canagarajah, Marx [praxis] Freire.



- What was seen as important was the need to uncover the ideological and power dimensions inherent in practices along with how these might be revealed. Questions were raised about what types of tools, theories, methods and methodologies might be useful in this regard.

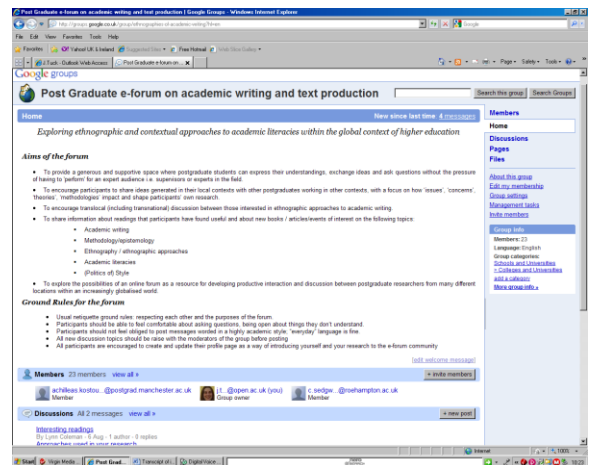
### ***Researcher – practitioner tensions in academic literacies research***

- The arguments articulated by various participants in the discussion, while not overtly described as such, seem to be constructed by an underlying tension manifested through the researcher/practitioner role positioning. There seemed to be a questioning of what the purpose of research was – with the role position of either practitioner or researcher influencing the assumed answer e.g. so practitioners implying that the aim of research was to find ways of changing or challenging privileged practices.
- For many of the participants a stronger practitioner focus seems to be directing their questions around the need for research that matches their political and transformative stance. They further question how academic literacies could or should feed directly into practitioner and by implication political and transformation related concerns.
- There was however some acknowledgement of the complexities associated with the writing development process that in practice can preclude the linear adoption of pedagogic strategies that advocate that students challenge writing conventions and styles – i.e. student own perceived needs to conform to the conventional writing practices of their disciplinary contexts especially if their chief concern is to avoid a marginal or “Other” ascribed identity within the academy.

### **Note:**

**The online forum is still active!**

**The initial fortnight online forum was designed around the day seminar *Ethnographies of Academic Writing in a Global Context* organized by Theresa Lillis on 16 July 2010 at the Open University. However, to make the forum work over the longer term and continue the fruitful discussions amongst post graduate students a new “re-launched” forum has been initiated. The new forum is called the *Post graduate e-forum on academic writing and text production: Exploring ethnographic and contextual approaches to academic literacies within the global context of higher education.***



**Post graduate students working in the broad areas of academic writing, text production, literacies and ethnography are encouraged to participate in the re-launched online forum by sending an e-mail to the current forum moderators Lynn Coleman and Jackie Tuck [l.coleman@open.ac.uk](mailto:l.coleman@open.ac.uk)/ [j.tuck@open.ac.uk](mailto:j.tuck@open.ac.uk)**

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| <b>Time</b> | <b>Session and speakers</b>  |   |  |  |
|-------------|--|---|--|--|
| 9.15- 9.45  | COFFEE AND REGISTRATION  |   |  |  |
| 9.45-10.15  | Introduction and research background to questions of the day   |   |  | Theresa Lillis   |
| 10.15-10.45 | Writing for publication in English: plagiarism, some notes from the underground, and some reflections on stigma  |   |  | John Flowerdew   |
| 10.45-11.15 | Insights into the politics of style from a context-sensitive cross-cultural perspective: expressing critical comments in English and Spanish academic book reviews   |   |  | Ana Moreno   |
| 11.15-11.45 | The English language and literacy demands experienced by students at school and university   |   |  | Constant Leung and Brian Street  |
| 11.45-1.00  | <b>Small group presentations and discussions</b>   |   |  |  |
|             | <b>Group 1</b>   | <b>Group 2</b>  | <b>Group 3</b>   | <b>Group 4</b>   |
|             | <b>Chair:</b><br>Mary Lea  | <b>Chair:</b><br>Barbara Mayor  | <b>Chair:</b><br>Philip Seargeant  | <b>Chair:</b><br>Ann Hewings   |
|             | <b>Presenters:</b><br>Paul Smith<br><i>The role of the case study within an ethnographic methodology</i><br><br>Maria Leedham & Lina Adinolfi<br><i>Combining methods to analyse the relationship between language and attainment among Open University students</i> | <b>Presenters:</b><br>Sally Baker<br><i>Writing at the transition</i><br><br>Yuan Li Tiffany Chiu<br><i>An exploration of Admission Texts</i><br><br>Priti Chopra<br><i>Moving beyond access: widening participation in transnational higher education through intercultural learning</i> | <b>Presenters:</b><br>Pilar Mur Dueñas<br><i>Spanish scholars' struggle to get their research published internationally in English: A case study</i><br><br>Nancy Eik-Nes<br><i>Dialoging and style shifting</i><br><br>Karen Shashok<br><i>The contribution of communication professionals to research on</i> | <b>Presenters:</b><br>Carole Sedgwick<br><i>A qualitative study of literacy practices on postgraduate English language majors at two universities, in Hungary and Italy</i><br><br>Mary Scott<br><i>From 'errors of style' to multimodal semiosis: Reading student writing differently</i> |

|            |  |  |  |  |
|------------|--|--|--|--|
|            | Andrea Milde<br><i>Spoken interaction as a focus for research in academic writing</i>  |  | <i>academic writing for publication</i>        | Ann McGee & Colleen McKenna<br><i>Understanding the Masters experience (through writing): text, contexts, practices (UMEX)</i> |
| 1.00-1.45  | LUNCH  |  |  |  |
| 1.45- 2.20 | Academic literacies, risk and the politics of place  |  | Lucia Thesen (via conferencing from Cape Town) |  |
| 2.20- 2.50 | Academic Blogging - the rise of the Digital Scholar  |  | Robin Goodfellow                               |  |
| 2.50- 3.10 | Report from the postgraduate virtual seminar   |  | Lynn Coleman and Jackie Tuck                   |  |
| 3.10-4.15  | Tea and panel reflections. Chair: Roz Ivanič.<br>Karen Shashok ( <i>relevance to translators/authors' editors/Scientific publishing</i> );<br>Ursula Wingate ( <i>relevance to teaching/learning/educational development</i> );<br>Janet Maybin ( <i>thoughts on methodology/ethnography/linguistic ethnography</i> );<br>Roz Ivanič ( <i>thoughts on style, identity, access and participation</i> ). |  |  |  |
| 4.15-4.30  | Proposal for publication. Close  |  |  |  |