

Constructing a Discourse Position - Quoting, Referencing and Attribution in Academic Writing: a preliminary report

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Abstract

Becoming proficient in academic writing can be theorised as entry/apprenticeship in the ways with words of a discourse community. It follows from this perspective that the writing conventions which students learn will be specific in many ways to their discipline area/discourse community. As Bartholomae puts it, "The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialised discourse"(Bartholomae 1985: 134).

One set of conventions that students must acquire are those for quoting and referring to the work of others, primarily published academic sources. Acquiring these conventions can be seen as one of the ways that the student learns to take up a discourse position in text. This paper will report on a study of quoting and referring practices in three undergraduate discipline areas: information studies, humanities and nursing. Through a variety of methods (discourse analytic and critical ethnographic) the study investigates the role of quoting and referring practices as student writers learn to construct an appropriate discourse position within the text.

Introduction

This paper is a work-in-progress report on a research project currently being carried out with internal research funding at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). The researchers are members of the Centre for Language and Literacy in the Faculty of Education and of the ELSSA (English Language and Study Skills Assistance) Centre at UTS. In this paper, we will begin by sketching the background and context of the research, outlining key research questions and the methods of investigation we have adopted. Then, we will explore some of the issues concerned with the theoretical model we are developing with reference to the analysis of a small segment of the data. Finally we will draw out some implications and future directions in our data gathering and analysis.

We were interested in investigating how students incorporate the words and ideas of others into their written assignments. In particular we were interested in investigating this issue from a number of complementary perspectives: looking at academic writing as text, at the processes of text production, but also at academic writing as social practice, in particular the embedding of writing practices in particular disciplinary formations. We saw the issue of incorporating the words and ideas of others (wordings and meanings in the Hallidayan formulation) as being one of the most complex and yet fundamental features of academic writing, one which has received, until recently,

relatively little research attention, in Australia or elsewhere. From the perspective of academic writing as text, a number of researchers (Thompson & Yiyun 1991, Pickard 1994) have examined issues such as the incidence and functions of reporting verbs in academic writing, others, such as Cherry (1990) and Bazerman (1989) have examined the issues involved in incorporating the words and ideas of others in academic writing in the processes of text production, others (Bazerman, 1988, Ivanic 1993, 1994, Pennycook 1993) explore aspects of academic writing as social practice.

In addition to the theoretical issues raised, there were practical issues related to the teaching of academic writing in the university which engaged our interest in the topic. Academics setting and assessing assignments want students to be able to produce essays which

integrate the materials of the courses they teach and produce well referenced, well supported arguments. Yet they have few tools readily at hand to theorise just what it is that they are asking students to do.

The absence of agreed knowledge about this matter is illustrated by the large range in understandings we have encountered in discussing questions of referencing and attribution with academics. These range from on the one hand a quite wide-spread lack of interest and concern for what is perceived as merely a matter of the mechanics of referencing, and hence a simple skill that can be imparted by someone like a study skills adviser, (on a kind of deficit model). On the other hand and at the opposite extreme we have encountered high levels of concern about these mechanics and problems of plagiarism.

Accompanying this are views articulated with widely varying degrees of theoretical sophistication about so-called 'originality' in student work and notions of students 'own voice', their 'own argument', their 'own opinion', taking up a position in the text. These concepts sit in an uneasy relationship with the requirement in an academic essay to engage the words and ideas of others, the published scholars in a field and to engage in critical analysis. We saw that there was a need to explore the relations between these different and potentially conflicting requirements: to read, discuss, quote, attribute and reference the texts of others and, in doing so, to author a 'new' text drawing in different ways on established discourse conventions, and create an acceptable subject position in discourse. Complicating this still further were our perceptions deriving from our professional experiences, that these issues took on different forms and had different salience within different disciplines.

Methodology

Our first question was: what literature could we assemble which offered ways of exploring what happened in a text when other texts and fragments were incorporated? This led us to collecting the empirical research in the field but also to exploring theoretical and analytic models for understanding what 'attributing' might actually mean. This work includes Bakhtin (1986) with his notions such as 'voicing' and to

the work of critical linguists such as Norman Fairclough (1988, 1992) who has elaborated the Bakhtinian approach to discourse with his particular formulations of the notions of 'intertextuality' and 'inter-discursivity'.

Our second set of questions concerned the issue of disciplinary differences in academic writing practices. We were mindful also of something we wanted to call institutional culture, which included the specificity of UTS as a particular kind of university, with a particular mission, encompassing education for the professions, where many long-established areas of professional practice are facing issues of recent 'disciplinisation' and often working in multi-disciplinary ways. These issues often focus on questions of scholarly research and writing, and we have found a particular concern of questions of referencing and attributing. In fact these concerns appear almost to be a hallmark of the new disciplines, while the lack of interest in these questions has come from more established disciplines such as the humanities.

We chose three fields: gender studies in Humanities, Information Studies and Nursing. These were fields where particular academics expressed interest and concern about referencing and attribution in student writing. So we do not make claims for the representativeness in any quantitatively reliable way. Rather, we wanted to explore in depth the specific disciplinary concerns of these three fields, in order to map practices of attribution and referencing as they constituted the particular discourse practices of that community.

Method

We have a principal co-operating academic contact in each of the three

subjects, who is a co-ordinator for that subject. One complete set of assignments for that subject was collected, together with the study guide and reading materials. The assignments had been marked as we were concerned to relate the marker's assessments and comments with our own textual analyses of the student assignments. In each subject we selected three assignments for in-depth analysis. We are not so much concerned with being systematic in terms of selecting typical or representative texts. Rather, we are plumbing the texts to find ways to describe different practices of incorporation of secondary material. We are at present in the process of following up the analyses of our initial data set with interviews with the subject co-ordinator and the other markers who are all tutors in the subject, in order to elicit their views on the assignments, including general criteria for assessment, and specific criteria concerning referencing and attribution. One point of interest has been to compare the different markers in terms of the different feedback they gave students, specifically with respect to questions of referencing and attribution. As a consequence, we are also considering having the assignments double marked. Another point of interest is in getting the academics to reflect on their own writing practices as a way of developing a 'thick description' of writing practices within the discipline. As a further

stage in the data collection, students are being interviewed about their assignment and their academic writing practices more generally. The focus is on how they went about the process of writing the assignment and their understandings of the requirements of the task, specifically with respect to attribution.

Data analysis

In this part of the paper we are going to look at excerpts from two highly valued texts in the Humanities subject, Gender, Culture and Power, and discuss the position the writers are taking up in relation to the sources and theories they are drawing on. (Our criterion for highly valued in this context being that the assignment was assessed as Credit or above on a Fail, Pass, Credit, Distinction scale.) This analysis makes use of the notion of intertextuality as it is outlined by Norman Fairclough (Fairclough 1992). Fairclough notes that the term intertextuality was coined by Kristeva in the late 1960s in her accounts of the work of Bakhtin (cf Kristeva 1986). Although Bakhtin does not use the term himself, the development of an intertextual approach to texts was a major theme in his work. For Bakhtin, all utterances, both spoken and written, are constituted by snatches of others' utterances. He writes 'our speech is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness and varying degrees of "our-own-ness", varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and reaccentuate' (Bakhtin 1986:89).

Thus utterances or texts are inherently intertextual - that is they are constituted by elements of other texts. These other texts may be explicitly marked, for example in an academic essay, through citation, or may not be traceable because they have been so thoroughly integrated into a text. When a text explicitly marks the presence of another text or texts through citation, Fairclough (1992) uses the term manifest intertextuality. Manifest intertextuality may involve a direct quote, a grammatically embedded quote, or a paraphrase. When the text or texts are so integrated that no trail of their 'origin' is left, Fairclough uses the term constitutive intertextuality. Of course, within a theory that says that all texts are constituted intertextually, there can be no origin. That is, in Fairclough's terms, while all texts are constitutively intertextual, some are manifestly intertextual. In academic writing, students must learn to manage the relationships between these.

In this analysis we are trying to plot instances of intertextuality on

a continuum from manifest at one extreme to completely integrated at the other. In analysing students' writing it is easy to identify examples of manifest intertextuality but it is more difficult to track the constitutive intertextuality, particularly as an outsider to a field. That is, you need considerable insider knowledge of the literature in a field to recognise the echoes of the ideas and wordings of other writers which have been integrated into a text.

The question of insider knowledge required to read effectively this constitutive intertextuality raises interesting methodological questions both for the researcher who is a disciplinary outsider and the teacher of academic writing at university level, who may also be required to come to terms with disciplinary knowledge in a hurry and with little prior information. We hope to explore these questions as the research progresses.

In the texts we are going to look at in this paper, both highly evaluated by the markers, writers skilfully interweave the words, ideas, theories and positions of other writers creating a dense and complex texture. This makes it a more difficult task analytically to differentiate between something which may lay claim to being a student's 'own voice' and the voices of others. The successful writer seems to be incorporating or trying on (to use a metaphor derived from Ivanic & Roach 199?) different voices, while at the same time assembling and maintaining a distinctive authorial voice which evaluates and comments. creating distinctive subject position(s) in discourse. Within the terms we have set up here, we have to ask what is the constitution of this student's writing voice?

We are now going to consider the two texts which demonstrate interesting differences in the ways that they incorporate source material.

The writer of text one, Barbara, adopts a traditional academic strategy. She puts forward a strong argument and takes up an authoritative position in relation to the theories she discusses and contrasts. In doing so she creates a very smooth, homogeneous text in which she seems to have erased the traces of her sources except where she explicitly cites them.

Her text presents an analysis of socialist/Marxist feminism in which she argues the limitations of this approach by contrasting it with radical feminism. In her introduction she states:

- This essay examines the compatibility of the two - by this she means the theory of feminism and the theory of socialism - with a focus on an early second wave influential socialist feminist, Juliet Mitchell, and views the strengths of the theory along with its obvious limitations. Thus from the outset Barbara takes an authoritative position in relation to her material. She develops an agonistic relationship to the work of others, pitting one theory against another to argue her position. This paragraph is typical of her text:

Radical feminists did not see economic class as the centre of their lives. Rather, they perceived history as patriarchy, where the struggles have been those between the sexes. Where the determining relations of Marxism are those of production, in radical feminism they are those of reproduction. They believe that women's oppression commences not with private property but with a psychological power struggle that men win.⁵ Thus they position themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum to Marxist feminism. Kate Millett, an early influential radical feminist, centred the argument around the concept of patriarchy, identified as the institutionalised rule of women by men that is historically, not biologically, created. ⁶

5. Mitchell, Juliet. *Women's Estate*, Pelican, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1971, p94.
6. Curthoys, *For and Against Feminism*, Allen and Unwin: Sydney, 1988, p 84

This very competent paragraph illustrates academic practice within a particular adversarial tradition (cf Bazerman 1994 on the agonistic nature of academic discourse within the sciences). It could be argued that she is participating in a masculinist form of textual practice within a patriarchal academic tradition. Barbara positions herself as an objective analyst who contrasts the views of radical feminists and Marxist feminists. In the third sentence, for example, she shows a degree of control of highly discursive writing, summarising one theory and juxtaposing it against the other one. The final sentence in the paragraph contains a standard attributed definition 'Kate Millett, an early influential radical feminist, centred the argument around the concept of patriarchy, identified as the institutionalised rule of women by men, that is historically, not biologically created'. We read this as evidence of this degree of control of a form of intertextuality which is manifest and yet grammatically integrated into a logical argument.

The writer of text two, Valerie, on the other hand, creates a more complex and mosaic-like heterogeneous text in which she brings together and experiments with different discourses and genres - ranging from the narrative, to the exposition and to a range of literary genres including an allusion to the who dunnit. Thus the text she creates is a hybrid. Her work has more in common with feminist and postmodernist discourse practices and textual forms, which revalue the personal and allow for generic diversity.

Valerie's text has a very different quality. She presents an analysis of the main assumptions, ideas and arguments of Gay Liberation theory. This paragraph comes from page 5 of her text:

This fear is particularly interesting in that it came from a group of people who almost revered lesbians as the living, breathing proof that women were able to love each other, rather than be in competition over men and therefore, rivals. Many straight women, at the time, were creating theory, or redefining existing theory, that examined patriarchy, the domination of men over women, and the way that historical process had set women up in opposition to each other.

Another way of saying that men would divide the women and conquer them. The first sentence seems to draw on journalistic rather than conventionally academic discourse conventions, for example "people who almost revered lesbians as the living, breathing proof that women were able to love each other". She too defines patriarchy but, whereas Barbara's definition is an example of manifest intertextuality - with a footnote to her source - Valerie's seems to be constitutive - she integrates the definition into a clause through apposition thereby making some sort of claim to it - that this is not a citation but a

definition produced by her. Immediately after this she makes a noticeable mode shift from the nominalised forms of the definition '...the domination of men over women' to the more congruent and spoken 'men would divide the women and conquer them', maybe as a way of reiterating, thereby amplifying and endorsing the definition, linguistically producing a degree of investment in the proposition. What is interesting about this example, though, is that five paragraphs later, we discover that Valerie has actually appropriated Burgmann's definition of patriarchy because she directly quotes and references it. The women's movement confronted patriarchy, the domination of men over women.

We are thus able to track Valerie's intertextual reference back to its source

We began by talking about problems of tracing intertextuality in terms of a reader's position as a relative insider or outsider to a field. There is a further set of issues concerned with the writer/reader relationship in student academic writing. These issues have specifically to do with the dual nature of the writing task, where the student has to strike an appropriate balance between a private

one-to-one correspondence and the performance of a more public scholarly dialogue.

Whereas Barbara positions herself as a public analyst, Valerie's text presents an ambivalent position. Is she constructing an insider or an outsider position within Gay Liberation politics? Take for example in sentence two, - 'Many straight women, at the time' - by the choice of the term 'straight', there is a suggestion of an insider position which is on one hand an intertextual reference to a spoken form of identification within a subculture (cf Halliday's notion of 'antilanguage' in Halliday [1978]). On the other hand, this can be read in terms of a complicit shared position with the tutor (evidenced by dialogue the tutor sets up in response to the student's text in the margins).

This data raises interesting questions in terms of academic writing as text, as text production and as social practice in particular disciplines. In terms of academic-writing-as-text, we have interesting differences between the apparent homogeneity and heterogeneity in the texture of Barbara and Valerie's writing. This relates to issues raised by Fairclough (1992: 104) when he writes:

...texts vary a great deal in their degree of heterogeneity, depending on whether their intertextual relations are complex or simple. Texts also differ in the extent to which their heterogeneous elements are integrated, and so in the extent to which their heterogeneity is evident on the surface of the text.

As far as issues of academic-writing-as-text-production are concerned, through our analysis, in particular through interviews with student writers, we hope to develop ways of documenting plotting stages students go through in the process of becoming competent as writers within particular disciplines, in particular how they develop the more

complex accentuations of writer's 'voice' and subject position which we have noted in these highly valued texts.

Further, we are identifying differences within one subject in terms of the positions the students are taking up in dialogue with the work of others. So, we are not just interested in what we are starting to term 'interim literacies', that is, more or less successful approximations to 'proper' forms of citation and attribution. We are also concerned to explore the ways in which students experiment with different forms of discursive practice and what these differences mean within different academic discourse communities.

Finally, in terms of academic writing-as-social-practice, it is intriguing that two such very different texts emerge as highly valued by the markers. What does this say about the disciplinary politics of the discipline within which these students are writing?

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