Understanding student writing in a globalised university – an activity system approach. (FLA 99139)

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Introduction

"The academic world is not what it used to be" is how a recent critic began an analysis of the current state of higher education in Australia. In terms of the student population it certainly is not what it was. As Don Anderson indicates, "In the course of expansion during the later 20th Century Australian university education changed from an elite system to a mass system". It is also rapidly becoming a global system with, for example, the number of overseas students enrolled doubling in just the last three years.

Our increasingly borderless world has led to the necessity to reframe our thinking about many of the aspects that underpin the policy and practice of our social institutions. The students at educational institutions are more and more representative of a wide variety of national, cultural, social and educational pasts. In Australia our university population typically now contains a wide variety of students representative of a very multicultural society and a large number of overseas student sojourners. The more diverse student group currently in our tertiary institutions and especially the increasing number of overseas students provide a
challenge to academia with its history of catering for the elite and its practice of conventions that exclude and regulate. Essay writing tasks are central to this new battleground. A notion of a sophisticated genre of academic essay writing requiring especial skills and considerable immersion in the discourses of a particular academic community had become established in the faculties of our universities. Increasingly with an expanded and more diverse student population the ideals of this academic essay are not being met.

Lecturers have presumed to read and assess student essays with an assumption of an ideal and note the lack of adherence to the skills, conventions and discourse of this elite community. Now the politics of universities and its stated or unstated pressures to have particular pass rates and not to fail overseas students provide lecturers with a disturbing dilemma.

There is threatened, a power shift in the consideration of student essays. Until recently academics, in the position of the power in the student-lecturer relationship, have been able to construct a notion of the ideal academic writing of their own liking and pass or fail students according to this with impunity. The current pressure to pass students, whether or not their work meets the lecturer’s pass or fail ideas shifts the power relationship to favour more the students and focuses attention on the writing of these students.

The Research

Writing tasks are a central aspect of the Australian university system. This is especially so at post-graduate level where there has been a proliferation of coursework degrees that generally demand that students write, and are assessed by lengthy essays. The research that forms the basis for this paper is of one Business Administration class at Master’s level. Ethnographic research methodology was used with the case studies of twelve students broadly representative of the diversity in the class, and with their lecturers. It followed the group through the lectures, the setting of an essay for assessment, the students writing of the essay, its marking by the lecturers and the students’ reactions. It recorded the various histories of these twelve students and their essays, where completed, and the essays in the light of the main ways that writing has been theorised.

An MBA subject was chosen for this research because the student profile of that group was broadly representative of a new kind of population in Australian universities. There is no easy classification of students into groups such as overseas or local, or NESB background, or even things like mature age or part-time. What was within the MBA is increasingly typical of universities. It was not a community of students - a community implies some kind of sharing. A better metaphor is a zone of contact. A group of individuals moved into this zone. They brought with them a wide range of life experiences. They had worked in a variety of jobs, lived through an assortment of events, of personal and societal histories and developed a multitude of critical understandings - these they brought to the class. The notion of a university as moulding young minds did not apply to this group. This group was relatively secure in their ideas and approaches. They brought knowledge and experience developed outside of the university and they did not sit easily within the framework of an institution where transmission of knowledge is the dominant model and where curriculum is set and assessed by the institution.

Within the group of students was "Sariga", a young woman of Thai origin who had completed a degree in Thailand, worked in an overseas embassy there for several years before coming to Australia. At the time of the research she was in her second year in
Australia, having completed during her first year a Graduate Diploma in Marketing as well as undertaking part in some courses in academic writing.

Sariga presented in class and in interviews as a confident and capable person. She reported as having gained very good results in her Thai degree and was valued by her employer. She spoke fluent English and described her English writing as good. She expressed some anxiety about meeting the particular requirements of an academic essay in an Australian university. She described the academic writing courses as "not very helpful" but had pursued this direction by reading several writing guides on her own initiative. She demonstrated some meta-cognition of academic writing by describing some of the features of academic essay writing in Australian universities.

Apart from her eighteen months in Australia, all of Sariga’s education had been conducted in Thai and she had learnt English as a second language. Prior to this time, she had not completed any extended essays in any language. The MBA unit that Sariga was studying required her to complete a 3000-word essay and to gain a mark of at least 50% as a part requirement to pass the subject.

Sariga completed her essay under considerable time pressures because of her heavy academic workload and the strain of living independently in an unfamiliar environment. Unlike most of the Anglo-Australian students in the class she had no one else read and comment on a draft of her essay. She recoiled from this idea, "Oh no, I would never do that". Her understanding of the rules of plagiarism and the need to present her own work prevented her from gaining this direct assistance.

Sariga’s completed essay was notable for two features. It contained only a small minority of sentences that followed conventional English grammar. With careful reading Sariga’s meaning was generally clear but it was very difficult to read. Secondly, in the words of the lecturer who marked it, "It did not make one single argument." Rather it was a series of points that did not follow a coherently developed argument that is the basis of good essays in an Australian setting.

Sariga’s essay was initially graded as an 8 out of 20 by the lecturer - fail for Sariga in this subject. At the time the essays were being returned to the students this was altered to a pass mark of 10. In a subsequent interview the lecturer commented on this at length. She felt justified in increasing the mark because, even though the essay was difficult to read, she could understand it. She indicated that the faculty, "tried very hard to pass overseas students". She expressed a considerable degree of concern for the personal welfare of overseas students who failed. She spoke of the process of consultation which had been followed in the past when students had been failed and said of Sariga’s essay, "It probably would have been passed in the end anyway, so I decided to put it up".

There were issues relevant both to Sariga’s production of the essay and especially to the subsequent grading of this essay that went beyond the text of what was written. Sariga is a representative of what has been called the "new voices" in academia. What is needed a framework where consideration of the MBA essay writing took account of these new voices and the issues raised by them.

**A basis for understanding writing**

Writing at any level is a complex process and it has been theorised in a number of ways. A commonly held conceptualisation of student writing is to see writing as a skill that is gained,
presumably during schooling, and then applied to a new situation during tertiary study with different content and perhaps an extended vocabulary. However as argues, when literacy is so narrowly defined, literacy difficulties are labelled as ‘writing problems’ and leads to an unhelpful model of healing the unhealthy which ignores most of the significant issues.

Another way of thinking about writing is that belonging to the process movement. describes it as "the idea that each student has a writer within" (p.86) and argues that writing process is an exploratory act in which writers discover their meaning. It was a notion that grew out of the work of people such as , and . This idea of writing gained such popular support during the 1970s and into the eighties that was able to say that it, "has been enshrined in a kind of orthodoxy" (p.77). These days have long past and largely for good reason. The battleground of process versus genre understandings of writing is well recorded .

Genre models provide a potentially more generative framework for the understanding of academic writing. Genre has been the focus of many studies in the past twenty years and has become a common way in which writing is discussed in many contexts including that of academic writing. One writer calls it, "a concept that has found its time". It has been the subject of conferences, books and great debate and therein lies some of the difficulty in using the term to highlight the issues surrounding academic writing. The term clearly has taken on a vibrant, living existence, growing and altering with time. Even to supporters of the usefulness of the concept, reference is made to the genre concept having, "the positive potential to mean many things to many people". As a general term, "genre" is too slippery in meaning to be useful. Furthermore it generally focuses principally on the text of the writing and less on the social context despite the links that a number of writers have made between genre and a wider context. (See, for example, .

In recent years much of the theory relating to writing has stressed its inherent social character and there has been a strong sociocultural emphasis in literacy studies. As Fairclough (1992) says, "It is commonplace that use of language is socially determined and that language varies according to the social situation it is used in" (p.8). The view that a social practice view of writing is a legitimate and useful way of considering the writing of students in a university setting has been put by a number of writers .

Likewise, consistent with this same general framework a number advocate taking into account what has come to be known as critical literacy perspectives where the interest focuses on the possibilities writing offers for "social change, cultural diversity, economic equity and political enfranchisement". It "necessitates a grasp of how language operates in a social sense".

Each of these approaches has some contribution to make to an understanding of academic writing. This paper advocates that for the data collected from Sariga and others in the MBA research project that an approach based on Russian activity theory has the potential to take some of the best of all these and provide a constructive unit of analysis for the data.

**Essential criteria**

It is possible to list a set of criteria for a framework for the data in this research. These were important elements that were present in the interviews, essays and events that surrounded the essay writing activity in the MBA and which needed to be captured in a theoretical frame. These criteria are not completely mutually exclusive but each has something to contribute.

The analysis needed to account for the activity being:
Multifaceted: It was evident that writing is a complex act and that there were many important elements relevant to the production of the essay.

Multi-voiced: The essays in the research held not just the voice of the writer, Sariga or the other students, but the voice of past teachers and influences; voices from different cultures and different values; writers of references read while preparing the essay and so on.

A sociocultural historic event: The essay writing was not an isolated event. All that had gone on before in the MBA course, for the lecturers and students and was to come after had some relevance.

Situated: The essay writing took place in a particular course, in a particular institution in a particular country run according to certain traditions etc.

Micro linked to macro: Particularly important was to link the local, idiosyncratic situated practice of writing the essay to the macro level of the social institution of the university and its agenda and to the structure of society and expectations held therein.

Dynamic: The reality of the academic essay is not the fixed notion that the common conception would have it. Writing is a formative and dynamic process for both lecturers and students: It is an entity that grows out of the complex relationship between the student and the lecturer.

Involved with issues of power, control and influence: Critical literacy perspectives are an essential part of analysis.

Criteria linked to theory

There is a need to consider the ways in which the actual practices of writing that students use in their university work are linked with the broader institutional and societal factors that are at play. This paper argues that the Russian theory of activity provides a tenable structure to take up this gap.

Activity theory has been described as a "coherent system of internal mental processes and external behaviour and motivation that are combined and directed to achieve conscious goals". With a few exceptions, the direct application of this theory to writing in particular, or literacy in general, has not been considered. To some extent this relates to the limited spread of understanding of this Russian developed theory in Western circles. In recent years books claiming to be the "first" comprehensive account of activity theory have been published in the West. That earlier accounts of activity theory had already been made, (for example, , serves only as an illustration of the limited spread of knowledge of this theory.

Some of the exceptions who have used activity theory in the discussion of writing have been in the work of:

Paul Prior in his account of case studies of students in graduate seminars ,

Cheryl Geisler in her development of an analytical framework that she applies to a study of academic philosophy ,
David Russell in several articles that relate activity theory and genre understandings of writing in academic disciplines.

Charles Bazeman in some of his discussions of his study into writing in the sciences and technologies.

More generally the tenets of Russian psychology that inform activity theory have also provided the basis for theoretical understandings that have underpinned much of the work in social approaches to literacy. Vygotsky’s view that cognitive development is social by nature appears in the work of Roz Ivanic on the position of writer identity in academic writing, in a number of those who discuss the acquisition of writing skills in primary schools, and in the writing of many who discuss relationships between language and culture, (for example. In many instances the ideas from which much of the current understandings of writing as a social act derive from the same intellectual milieu from which activity theory arose.

Origins of Activity Theory.

Activity theory has been traced to the classical German philosophy of Kant to Hegel and to the writings of Marx and Engels but it arises most directly from the cultural-historical school of Russian psychology, Vygotsky and his followers. According to Vygotsky, psychology in the 1920s was unhelpfully dominated by two unsatisfactory orientations, psychoanalysis and behaviourism and so he formulated a new theoretical concept to transcend these: the concept of artefact mediated and object oriented action. A human being, Vygotsky claimed, never reacts directly to the environment. The relationship between the human agent and objects of environment is mediated by cultural means.

Human action has a tripartite structure. This may be represented diagrammatically, adapting figures from, shown below as Figure 1.

Mediation Means (Writing, speaking, etc.)

Subject(s) Object(ive) Outcome

(Individuals, groups, institutions) (Task, goal, purpose)

Figure 1: A representation of Vygotsky’s notion of human behaviour

To this point action was mediated by tools and signs and social relations was not theoretically integrated. This breakthrough was achieved by a follower of Vygotsky, Leont’ev with a classic example of distinguishing action from activity. Leont’ev’s description makes this distinction clear.
A beater, for example, taking part in a primeval collective hunt, was stimulated by a need for food or, perhaps, a need for clothing, which the skin of the dead animal would meet for him. At what, however, was his activity directly aimed? It may have been directed, for example, at frightening a herd of animals and sending them towards other hunters, hiding in ambush. That, properly speaking, is what should be the result of the activity of this man. And the activity of this individual member of the hunt ends with that. The rest is completed by the other members. This result, i.e., the frightening of the game, etc., understandably does not in itself, and may not lead to satisfaction of the beater’s need for food, or the skin of the animal. What the processes of his activity were directed to did not, consequently, coincide with what stimulated them, i.e. did not coincide with the motive of his activity; the two were divided from one another in this instance. Processes, the object and motive of which do not coincide with one another, we shall call "actions." We can say, for example, that the beater’s activity is the hunt, and the frightening of the game his action.

The essential distinction here is distinguishing between the individual action that a subject may take and that of the collective activity of which this is an essential part. It broadens the concept to include another level of stakeholders to the activity each with their role and interest in the outcome.

This lead to the formulation of an expanded model of an activity system. What may be called the second generation of activity theory takes greater account of the social nature of human activity of human endeavour by introducing a new layer to the basic triangular model.

In the model shown in Figure 3, the subject refers to the individual or sub-group whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis. The object refers to the "raw material"
at which the activity as directed and which leads to the outcomes with the help of the physical and symbolic, external and internal mediating instruments, including both signs and tools. The community comprises multiple individuals and/or sub-groups who share the same general object or are involved in the interactive space of the subject and who construct themselves as distinct from other communities. The division of labour refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status. Finally the rules refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system.

Engestrom illustrated the model using the work of a doctor (GP). This is shown in Figure 3.

Medical examination/records/interview/med. tests, etc.

Doctor Patient Recovery?

with health problems

Rules cover length of Nurse, Spec'list, Dr. diagnoses, prescribes, etc.
appt., tests to be used, Receptionist, Xray Receptionist bills, and so on
what fee is charged, etc. team, etc.

Figure 3: Engeström's activity system of the work of a GP.

The doctor works with others, each in their given role, and according to a set of rules and expectations with the tools of a doctor on patients to produce an outcome.

The activity system now starts to take on some of the appearance of a machine - a system of pulleys and belts all working smoothly together to produce an outcome. However human activity is rarely so predictable and criticisms of activity theory as failing to account sufficiently for diversity has led to what is sometimes called the third generation of activity theory where the focus is on looking at the tensions and contradictions that arise within the system and with other nearby competing systems. To illustrate briefly, the given outcome of this system relates to the health outcomes for the patients but another desired outcome is that the GP makes some money, and tensions are introduced between these two outcomes over things like length of appointment, perhaps fee charged and so on.
Activity Theory and Writing in the MBA

How may activity theory be applied to the research into writing in the MBA? An activity system model for writing within the MBA is shown in Figure 4.

reading/researching/listening/discussing/writing drafts, etc.

Student(s) essay graded essay

complete MBA

do "own" work, MBA class, Lecturer lectures, sets essay, grades

write in "correct genre", Lecturer(s) Student listens, absorbs (!) etc.

submit essay by due date Friends, family etc. Friends support, suggest etc.

etc., etc. - lots of these

Figure 4 The activity system of an MBA assessment task.

The figure shows, as a subject, a student researching and writing an essay, the object, which will be graded for their MBA but there is a layer beneath this of the "rules" in which the student must operate and the people with whom she/he relates and "who does what".

There is a distinction between the action of writing an essay which is what the student does and the activity of an assessment task, which then also involves the lecturers, their marking of the essay, MBA and university policy and traditions, societal expectations, family anticipations and so on.

The profile of the Australian university student as presented in this paper has been constructed as a dynamic. It is not simply its diversity which is important but also that that this profile has changed and is ever changing. To take its place in an activity system that is operating with full effectiveness, the other components must also be open to change to account for this dynamism. In the activity of essay writing, the rules applicable, the community surrounding the student writer, the roles held and even the tools used must shift if the essay is going to produce the desired outcomes without tensions and contradictions.

The activity system model gives a framework with which to consider the data in this research into MBA writing. Much of the interest settles in the relationship between the elements of this model and the tensions created. Sariga interpreted the rules of the activity as limiting the help she could get in completing the essay. For the lecturer there was a clear conflict between her role in assessing what was a passable academic standard and the perceived pressure to pass overseas students.
Interesting things occur when there are internal contradictions and tensions and in the educational field these are most important because they provide the motive force of change and development. Policies and practices are established to take account of the tensions and difficulties in the system which occur when new voices such as Sariga’s are heard. This paper argues that these developments are likely to be constructive only if the framework in which they are considered is sufficiently comprehensive to account for all the social, cultural historic and institutional factors at work. Activity theory has the potential to do this. It is a theory transcending its origins. It has become international and multidisciplinary and is being applied to many areas beyond academic writing. Activity theory can be a useful tool in framing human endeavour.

References