

## ***Reading and writing from textbooks in higher education: the danger of other people's words.***

### ***Abstract***

Literacy is often narrowly conceived as an ability to read and write. This study however is founded on a view that literacy has no meaning when disconnected from the cultural contexts of use. In addition, it looks at learning from the learner's perspective and shows how individuals differentially take up with the new and unfamiliar discourses, genres and practices of a particular discipline.

In the disciplinary context of Economics and in the particular research site of an introductory Economics classroom, the textbook assumed a status similar to that of a canonical religious text. Western education expects students to write in their own words after reading received, authoritative accounts of ideas and concepts that are held to be fundamental to a discipline. The paper explores the complexities and dilemmas for students of reading and writing from textbooks and uncovers their unresolved tensions and anxieties concerning plagiarism.

### ***Introduction***

Textbooks are widely used at the introductory level in higher education. In the sciences, business, economics, psychology and even sociology large, glossy textbooks are available to highly competitive, discriminating markets. Modern introductory textbooks are often accompanied by a study guide, a bank of sample examination questions, overhead transparencies and/or power point slides, all of which are designed to persuade the hard pressed university teacher to adopt the textbook. However, the pedagogical consequences of this pervasive technology are not necessarily positive for student engagement and learning. The paper seeks to illustrate how student reading and writing can be problematic when introductory level courses rely heavily on a textbook.

This paper reports on a small part of a much larger study which examined the literacy and learning experiences of a group of first year undergraduates in their encounters with the discipline of economics. Through an analysis of lectures, tutorials, textbooks and reading and writing assignments, the research exposes the complex and often unrecognised language and disciplinary demands and their significance in influencing the students' ultimate academic success.

The following questions guided the research: How do these students construct themselves as students of Economics? How do these students construct the cultural model for success in this instructional and disciplinary culture? How does reading from academic texts become part of the personal resources upon which students draw when completing a piece of writing in an academic discipline? What agency do these students see themselves having in the instructional culture? How are the discourses and genres of the discipline instantiated in the discursive practices of the instructional culture?

### ***Theoretical perspectives***

The study is founded on a view that sees literacy as having no meaning "apart from the particular cultural contexts in which it is used" (Gee: 1994:170) - a view that extends well beyond the traditional notion of literacy as an ability to read and write. . Indeed, the paper argues that academic literacy(ies) cannot be narrowly perceived and defined as a set of general skills which once acquired can be seamlessly transferred from one context to another. We should expect then that reading, writing, speaking and listening, would play significantly different roles in different social contexts, performing different social actions (Brandt, 1990). Similarly, the primary and secondary discourses we have acquired and learned and the discourse communities to which we already belong, impinge significantly on the ways in which we engage with new discourses and discourse communities (Gee, 1996; Swales, 1990; Becher, 1989; Russell, 1991). Who we perceive ourselves to be and the cultural values and models we live by irrevocably constitute literacy embedded in highly contextualised cultural performances. From this perspective student reading and writing is not seen as technical and instrumental or as a transparent medium of representation, it is configured as 'a context-making rather than a context-breaking ability' (Brandt, 1990: 39), a process that is contested (Lea and Street, 2000).

Part of my interest in undertaking the study was to explore the experiences of undergraduates and to document their struggles as they came into contact with the literacy practices of a particular discipline. Until relatively recently at the undergraduate level little attention has been paid to the way the discursive practices of a field are 'embedded in the texture of its disciplinary activity' (Russell, 1992: 24). In effect, we have taken these discursive practices and activities for granted. As an ethnographer then, I was interested in tracking the ways in which the participants in the study also functioned as ethnographers in coming to understand the social, cultural and literacy practices of the discipline with which they were engaging, in this instance economics.

### ***Method, data sources and analysis***

The larger study from which this paper is drawn provides an interpretive ethnography that critically illuminates the literacy practices of an Introductory Economics course. The paper focuses on data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with students over a two-year period at one of Australia's largest universities. Data were gathered from a range of sources that included field notes, lectures and one tutorial group, individual student interviews, group student interviews, individual interviews with teaching staff, attendance at staff meetings, drafts of student assignments, final student assignments, course documents, course textbook, commercial textbook study guide, textbook computer disks, and copies of examination papers.

All lectures and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed before transfer into NUD\*IST, a computer program designed to assist with the analysis of qualitative data. This program was used to develop an inductive analytical approach to examining the richly textured unstructured data.

Thirteen students volunteered for in-depth interviews together with four staff members. Students were interviewed on two occasions with each interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. The staff members were also interviewed twice with each interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Over the two years of the data collection considerable time was spent in informal discussions with academics teaching the course. I have relied on the

words, images, and metaphors of the participants in an effort to capture and interpret the meaning they themselves associate with the experiences of disciplinary acculturation.

### ***Introductory textbooks***

Researchers from various fields and disciplines have increasingly turned their attention to the role that textbooks play in the induction of students into the content, beliefs, values and methodology of their respective disciplines (see Morawski (1992) in Psychology, Love (1991) in Geology, Myers (1992) in Biology, Klamer (1990) in Economics, and Lynch and Bogen (1997) in Sociology). However, while textbooks are central to a discipline, they are rarely, if ever, at its 'cutting edge' (Platt 1996: 33).

Textbooks reify and codify statements as facts. Once these 'facts' are established in the standardised textbook their status as fact is confirmed and uncontested (Harré , 1990). Textbooks then carry forward confirmed bodies of knowledge (Kuhn, 1970), 'second hand' information which causes academics from all disciplines to 'jest about the deceptions and inaccuracies, made for the sake of clarity, simplicity, or profit' Morawski (1992: 162). Even though textbooks advance the production of a disciplinary core curriculum, they also tend to facilitate pedagogical assumptions that construct students as consumers to be filled with disciplinary knowledge, methods and practices. The pedagogical consequences Swales (1993: 224) states as a paradox:

The better textbooks are at transmitting a canon of knowledge  
(one good), the worse they are at fostering critical reading  
(another good).

### ***Introductory Economics textbooks***

Introductory textbooks are central instruments in inculcating students into the methodological principles and tenets on which the discipline of Economics is founded. They manage the discipline's image as a 'science' promoting the notion that the discipline creates economic knowledge through the application of scientific methods, i.e., Economics begins with assumptions and proceeds to build an economic model that is tested, within these parameters, for its predictive value.

Regardless of their authors, introductory Economics textbooks are designed around the ideology, principles and premises of the neoclassical paradigm - a model which proposes that the economic world is made up of self-interested, rational, autonomous agents who exercise choice, engage in contractual exchange in order to maximise a utility or profit function under conditions of scarcity. Thus Economics is characterised as the science of choice - the study of how individuals/societies allocate their scarce resources to satisfy alternative and competing 'human wants'.

According to Heyne (1995), even when an individual academic may have concerns about the usefulness of the content in the introductory text, other pressures from within the disciplinary culture of the academy intrude. There is the assumption that a standard set of topics will be taught in the first year, and that unless these topics are taught, academics risk criticism from their colleagues and students alike for failing to teach material upon which the next level subject is founded. Traditional textbooks are the cornerstone of introductory level Economics curriculum and pedagogy in higher education, providing what Helburn (1986: 28) calls 'a consensual lens and an officially defined interpretation of reality'. Heyne (1995: 150)

explains the quality control cycle that the disciplinary culture of Economics provides for the induction of potential new members into the disciplinary community:

Teachers present what appears in the textbooks, the textbooks offer what the teachers expect, and the teachers expect what has been in the textbooks for as long as they can remember.

The result is a discipline that portrays itself as ideologically and methodologically harmonious. Introductory Economics textbooks offer students a narrative of the patient evolution of the discipline framed by only those 'significant' theorists whose contributions have been taken up into the mainstream.

### **Reading Introductory Economics textbooks**

In higher education critical reading is a ubiquitous requirement of all subjects and disciplines. Yet Swales (1993: 224) has alerted us to the potential reading problems that may accompany textbooks, particularly where it is an objective of the course to ensure that students read critically. Student readers of Economics textbooks are faced with several concurrent problems:

- Economics textbooks are linear in organisation and introduce new terminology, concepts and ideas in a spiral fashion so that each new term or idea is dependent to a large degree on earlier items; rarely do students read these texts in this way. Students' level of knowledge may be too vague so they have to move far back into the text to seek clarification (Hewing, 1990:35)
- Textbooks authors make up dummy-run exercises and examples to fit their models and graphical representations and ignore the 'facts of everyday life' (Bell, 1988: 138). Economic life derived from models which are nominated as having universal validity, objectivity, realism and social acceptability (Milberg, 1988: 53).
- Economic models cannot easily address contemporary social issues and the complexity of economic activity in the real world (Lewis, 1995). 'Students are often 'alienated from the study of economic theory because they feel that the assumptions of economics are unrealistic (and, as a result, that the theory cannot be used for the formation of economic and social policy in which many of them are interested)' (Pappas and Henderson, 1977: iii-iv).
- Questions concerning the role of government, social welfare, unemployment, distribution of resources and income, and the like, are extraneous to the economic models introductory students consider.
- Students at the introductory level are not able to read like 'insiders', as expert players, in the discipline simply because they lack the fund of special information, 'relevant claims' and 'received opinion' with which to make specialised meaning from the texts (Dillon, 1992: 39).
- Anderson et al. (1977) contend that many students can acquire 'a large amount of information and a number of concepts and principles in a piece-meal fashion, without integrating the new learning into existing knowledge structures, and without understanding the *Weltanschauung* of contemporary economics' (p. 378)

Economics is constructed and promoted as a technical and scientific discourse. It is rarely acknowledged, that the 'facts' and 'laws' of Economics are discursive constructions, that economists in essence tell each other 'stories' about the economy derived from different assumptions and resulting in different competing economic models, policy outcomes and interpretations of history (see McCloskey, 1995). Thus the economy is constituted by a set of 'discourses that provide the economic concepts, modes of analysis, statistical estimates,

econometric methods and policy debates that constitute the different analytical understandings of the economy' (Brown, 1993: 70).

## The Data

### *The shock of the textbook*

Early on in the ethnographic fieldwork, my attention was repeatedly drawn to what seemed, from my foreign disciplinary perspective, a peculiar obsession among the lecturing staff with the selection, place and importance of the textbook. In lectures and tutorials, students were exhorted to read the textbook. At the beginning of lectures the assembled students (156 in the first year, and 189 in the second year of the study) would be asked: 'Have you done the reading?' The textbook was positioned as central in preparing for and reviewing topics covered in the lectures. In this cultural and disciplinary context, the textbook took on a level of importance and assumed an authority similar to that exercised by devotional texts in the course of religious observance. More significantly, it is also reminiscent of the use of canonical texts in training novices for religious orders. Despite the wealth of other printed materials made available to students, the textbook emerged as, and remained, the most important, and revered of texts among the teaching staff and, after a very short period of induction, among the students as well.

### *Activity systems constituting Introductory Economics*

Introduction to Economics can be usefully thought of as an activity system that is object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically constituted and re-created by participants in micro-level interactions while deploying certain discursive tools. In this sense, it only comes into being when re-created in micro-level interactions in communities of practice mediated by the artefacts and the 'rules' of the discipline of Economics. Figure 1 graphically displays the way the textbook frames all of the activities and events embodied in the lectures, the tutorials, assignments, and examinations. These activities and events are a gloss on the textbook, requiring the textbook for the interpretation of their meaning and sense making.

### *Figure 1*

TEXTBOOK (Subject Guide; Subject Book)

LECTURES

TUTORIALS

ASSIGNMENTS

EXAMINATIONS

## STUDENT GRADES

### ***Perceptions of the textbook***

The initial and abiding impression of the textbook concerned its size and weight. Despite the weight and the difficulty of carrying around all of the textbooks for four subjects, students quickly realised that, together with its size and weight, the textbook also represented the essential keystone in the overall structure of the course. The following student comments illustrate how they came to see the textbook:

I wouldn't like to try to get through the subject without it, just by attending lectures, because one complements the other basically.

(Pauline, interview 1)

I mean, it's virtually a Bible because everything's based around it. You know, all the lectures are and --- the tutes follow the lectures so --- and then we have to read the [text]book, so everything follows that really . . . everything you do is directed from that book.

(Renee, interview 1)

[Y]ou can probably survive if you don't go to the lectures, as long as you read the text[book].

(Arnold, interview 1)

The Economics textbook [was] mainly important to me, because most of the subject I learn from there.

(Iwan, interview 1)

Both successful and unsuccessful students were equally able to recognise that while other components of the course were useful the textbook was *the text* that had to be mastered.

However, being aware of the importance of the textbook and the role it was meant to play did not ensure that a student would necessarily acquire the resources to pass the course.

While the academic staff wanted their students to become attentive, critical, perceptive readers and writers in their discipline, they also expected students without undue difficulties to read their way into the canon of knowledge, methodology, beliefs and values enshrined in the textbook. The text was so promoted by staff that students perceived it as privileged. From numerous staff comments in lectures and tutorials, students were mostly persuaded to avoid reading other books and were not referred to other readings or articles.

### ***'Have you done the reading?'***

Seen from the students' perspective the refrain 'Have you done the reading?' mediated almost every contact students had with teaching staff. Lectures and tutorials were begun with general requests for students to indicate, by raising their hands, whether they had undertaken the assigned reading before the lecture or tutorial. The expectation that students would 'do the reading' from the textbook was carried forward and reiterated by every member of the teaching staff. Students who had not completed the reading before tutorial groups were on occasions even asked to leave. Comments, commands, inquiries, and 'threats' punctuated teaching events:

Before I go any further: how many people have done their reading? . . .

No skin off our nose if you don't do the reading . . .

(Lecture 2)

All right, now how's the reading going? How many people have not read up to or through chapter 4, please?

(Lecture 4)

Now the rule will be if you have not done the tutorial exercise [derived from a textbook reading], you'll be asked to leave the tutorial.

(Lecture 6)

I can see how many people haven't been into their textbooks, Chapters 7 and 8, because you would already have come across this diagram, so you wouldn't have to be able to, you wouldn't have had to copy it down . . .

(Lecture 8)

Despite the overwhelmingly explicit emphasis on the need for students to independently read the textbook, members of staff exemplified unsophisticated views of reading. This is not

to say that all of the faculty members were insensitive to the problems students faced in reading their way into the textbook. It was a great frustration to the teaching staff that students appeared not to be doing the reading for tutorials and lectures; a matter often raised and discussed informally over lunch and in corridor chat between staff members. I have used the word 'appeared' deliberately in the last sentence, because the evidence I gathered from students indicates that while all of them attempted to 'do the reading', not all of them were effective in the reading they were doing.

***'Use your own words': The danger of other people's words***

The issue of plagiarism is highlighted and emphasised by the lecturing staff and therefore looms large as a spectre of concern for each of these students and for their colleagues in the course, when written assignments are being prepared for submission.

The explicit requirement to use 'your own words' is reiterated in the lectures and the printed subject guides. This criterion is also identified in the assignment questions as an aspect of the assessment in a student's success. The phrase 'in your own words' reveals a tension that existed between learning the words and concepts of others and then somehow making them over so that they seem the students' own. In the university context, this whole process is inter-woven with a requirement to sort and rank students. What students write and how well they write in order to demonstrate their learning is critical to the grade they are awarded and their subsequent progress in the discipline and the university.

While the academics give careful consideration to the setting of assignment and examination questions, they nonetheless anticipate that students will already know how to write before coming into the course. The processes of learning new discourses, learning new content knowledge and being able to express these in 'their own words', as if they are indeed their own, is not seen as problematic, complex or particularly difficult. As the textbook is *the* linguistic and textual model students are encouraged to use when writing assignments and examination answers is the cause of anxiety, indecision and confusion for students. The following are representative of their comments:

I tried to put in as much --- sort of Economics as what I could but since I mean, I haven't really ever done anything before, so I didn't have a really good idea --- what sort of terminology and that sort of stuff to use.

(Linda, interview 2)

I didn't want to make it sound stupid, one has to use the right terms and --- but at the same time you didn't want it to sound like you were copying from the book, so it was really hard because you had to give them both . . . [Y]ou had to make sure it was in your own words but use the right terms.

(Michelle, interview 2)

The ambivalent nature of students' disciplinary alignment is most graphically illustrated in the academy's rules regarding plagiarism. Writing in the academy is infused with notions of originality, creativity, authorship, intellectual inquiry and Western writing practices. For students, the problems of avoiding plagiarism are often more complicated than academic staff acknowledge.

[T]hey make sure you don't forget about it. . . [I]t's a real hassle, because you get confused on what is and what isn't and because they emphasise it so much it kind of scares you, you think: "Ooh, I don't mean to do it but what happens if I do?"

(Michelle, interview 2)

[W]ith a definition they've really - they've obviously looked at it --- very closely and probably for a very long time and come up with the very best definition that they possibly can --- how can you reword it? So, yeah, I sort of - the suggestion from other people was, well --- if you really feel that you can't sort of reword it into something that it maybe needs to be simpler or something --- just in your words, all you can do is write it down as it is and reference it . . . Dangers of plagiarism, yeah, for sure.

(Arnold, interview 1)

There are dilemmas faced by undergraduate students in the disciplines when they are expected to come to terms with a fixed canon of content knowledge and to reproduce that knowledge in their own words students find themselves in a double bind (Pennycook, 1997).

The line is not easily drawn in the sand between 'common property', that is, concepts and ideas that did not require acknowledgment, and those that did require a footnote. Pauline's response to my question: 'How did you avoid plagiarism from the textbook?' echoes the response of other students:

Oh, you get really paranoid about that! Just everybody who's spoken to us has said --- "It's stealing, it's cheating, we don't like cheaters here!" and you think "Ooh" --- but in the Survival Kit, I think it is, it says that a few things are considered common property and they're --- demand and/or supply --- you talk about those but if you're using somebody's words or somebody's idea, I mean that sounds really kind of vague in general but I tried I guess. When I used a definition I said "Economics 1994 tells us that blah, blah" and I think probably in one case I've cited someone who I didn't need to cite but I'd rather do that than to be called a cheater. Yeah and I guess ---

I mean, didn't Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall invent demand and supply equilibrium, so every time we speak should we be citing them . . . Yeah, it's quite hard --- it's scary, because it's so important and you know how important it is but it is sometimes you're reading things and you think: "Where's the line between common property and their ideas or their words come into play?" And it's hard, but here's hoping!

(Pauline, interview 2)

Pauline had just completed the first assignment at the time of this interview and was still awaiting her results. Like many other students, she remained unsure of whether she had acknowledged sufficiently to avoid being called a 'cheater' and whether she had used enough of her own words to meet the requirements of the tasks.

The content, concepts and terminology which students are expected to learn often seem to them so aptly expressed by textbook authors that they have no words of their own in which to register them when they are required to demonstrate their understanding in writing. This seems to be what one faculty staff member is tilting at when he suggests that an over-reliance on the textbook impacts negatively on the quality of student reading and writing:

I think it is very much textbook-based, the learning that they do. There is a very great difficulty in getting students to read very widely and to adopt different approaches. I suppose it is sounding a little bit cynical but the sort of thing that I see a lot of is student work that looks extremely similar to each other...The sorts of models that they follow very much come out of the textbooks. That is the other thing that you get, you don't get much plagiarism but you do get pretty extensive paraphrasing of texts and some lack of discernment too. Because you will often find materials in essays that really have no business being in the answer but they happen to be in the flow of the text at that point. Students over write; their answers tend to be too long, and there tends to be too much material that is too airy, it is probably not really relevant. The question of discernment is perhaps the greatest lack in student skills, at being able to discern what the question actually requires and then limiting yourself to that.

(Bob, interview 1)

Faced with the dilemma of writing from but not copying from an authoritative textbook, some students not surprisingly reported that they adopted the strategy of going to the library to find other introductory textbooks and copying bits and pieces from each. There are many of these textbooks which are unerringly similar. The students then used these to form a pastiche, which they hoped was accurate in terms of content and meaning, without being too close to the text of the course textbook.

As might be expected in the context of the academy, students mostly write in response to prompts from the lecturing staff. Lecture notes, notes from the textbook, notes from the tutorial sessions, assignment questions and examinations are written as part of reading in

order to write. Writing then is undertaken so as to demonstrate reading, alignment with the discourses and content of the subject, and is essential in ranking students.

When it came to writing answers to assignment questions, students felt themselves wedged between a rock and a hard place. How could they express in their own words that which was more effectively expressed in the textbook? Until the first assignment was graded and returned students were left wondering whether they had trespassed beyond the boundaries of 'common property' and whether their own words had been sufficient to demonstrate their alignment with the discourses of Introductory Economics.

### **Conclusion**

Reading and writing at university is always undertaken in the cultural context of a particular discipline or field. Academic literacies can only be located, described and studied in a disciplinary context and students are always being disciplined through participation in and alignment with specific disciplinary and ideological practices (Bazerman, 1994).

Textbooks represent authoritative, received knowledge that students are expected to learn rather than challenge. In Economics, textbooks are central to the pedagogical and epistemological process in that they introduce students to concepts, assumptions and models scaffolding students as they learn to tell and retell the received 'stories' of Economics – opportunity, supply and demand, monopoly and so on.

In positioning the textbook as an authoritative text on which students are expected to rely, the teaching staff unwittingly generated concerns and fears among students when writing in Introductory Economics. The concerns and fears about plagiarism that framed their writing were either confirmed or alleviated when their first assignment was marked and returned.

In the absence of other advice and models students used the textbook and other 'superficial' instructions about constructing texts to assemble texts that met these specifications. However, we have also witnessed the struggles, resistances and dilemmas that students have in coming into contact and sometimes conflict with the values and beliefs of the disciplinary community. Ideologically these communities can be uncompromising in their requirement that participants conform. Learning to read and write Economics is not simply a matter of manipulating diagrams and retelling received knowledge, it is also a matter, as Freedman and Medway (1994:5) argue, of learning the 'social processes by which the world, reality, and facts are made'.

Introductory Economics is located at the outer edge of the activity systems of the disciplinary community of Economics (Russell, 1997). So it is that student writing at this level has more to do with 'doing school' and getting a grade than knowledge making in the discipline. Even so, getting a grade by writing in a way that marks a student out as a sympathetic participant in the discourses of the subject is an essential achievement. The evidence from this study would suggest that introductory textbooks, while designed to induct students into the discipline of Economics, may make learning to read and write Economics more difficult than disciplinary insiders would ever imagine it to be.

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