

PATHWAY TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDY: ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN FOUNDATION STUDIES

Rutledge, J., Blackford, T.

**School of Languages and Intercultural Education, Curtin University of
Technology**

GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia, 6845

This paper examines some of the ways Foundation Studies students acquire the discourse required to be successful in future undergraduate study. The program is taught on campus by Curtin staff and is a precursor to a degree program. Pathways or enabling programs are seen as an effective alternative to traditional entry to university, and provide the university with a larger more diverse student body often with global networks to many communities.

The majority of these programs tend to be targeted to the international market or to equity initiatives. The programs are geared to assist students to meet matriculation requirements and therefore mainstream entry. The literature shows that there is a need to prepare students in these programs for the challenges, both social and academic, that they will encounter as university students.

According to Cantwell, Bourke and Archer (1997) there are many variables that are likely to affect the academic success of students who enter university through enabling programs. The authors quote age, gender, educational and occupational history, family circumstances, ability, self-confidence, achievement goals, and approaches to self-regulation of academic behaviour as some of the main variables that affect a foundation student's performance. The student body of the Foundation Studies program at Curtin is made up of International students from our region

Bull (2000) acknowledges that success and retention in higher education is often dependent upon the pre-requisite skills, knowledge and affective commitment of the commencing student. The author goes on to mention that low levels of basic skills, an inadequate knowledge base and low self-confidence are all factors contributing to the failure and attrition of students in undergraduate programs.

Confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem also seem paramount to new student success. A lack of confidence may cause students to retreat altogether from the task, or put off the task and experience high levels of anxiety and self doubt, which makes it near impossible to produce work that is of the required standard (Cantwell et al., 1997). Archer, Cantwell and Bourke (1999) reported that students need to feel confident and that that they can't be successful if this confidence is not strong, students need an environment that encourages perseverance and keeps anxiety at a manageable level.

Academic writing is a core focus of enabling programs because proficient writers are identified as able students. Often students who have been successful writers in their home country are confronted with failure when they produce their first essays. Our research from the Foundation Studies program at Curtin University has shown that when students lack confidence and are confronted by the discourse requirements they tend to use near copying, demonstrate limited paraphrasing, summarising and referencing skills. For students to be

successful in our system they must acquire the competencies to write successfully within a tertiary discourse.

The requirements can be seen as diverse and yet subject specific and they include:

Writing as a process/drafting

Style/genre

Format/structure

Language issues

Understanding the task

Information literacy

Referencing

Critical responses

Processing Essays

The process model is well suited to the Foundation Studies course because our students are with us for an entire academic year. Process theories consider that writing is a vital tool for learning and communication. Students realise that the teacher can only impart a limited amount and that they must learn to like writing for its own sake and to start taking responsibility for their own learning. Our students are encouraged to consider the processes involved in writing, such as formulating goals and plans, discovering and expressing ideas, assessing their own writing, revising and editing.

The teaching approach requires a framework for frequent conferencing with students on an individual basis. Here guidance can be provided specific to the students' writing needs. It is a humanistic teaching approach that is very different to the students' prior experience of writing. We teach in a democratic fashion where the teacher plays the part of the facilitator and this model can present some elements of tension for our students who have been only familiar with the traditional classroom model where the teacher is the authority figure. This conferencing approach where students are required to reflect and re-edit their work for several drafts has affective as well as cognitive benefits. As part of this responsibility the Foundation Studies considers active learning a crucial part of developing autonomy.

Online

Each week there is two hours of didactic input from the teacher regarding the style and format of the essay required and then there is online processing of the drafts where all aspects of essay are explored. We use a Markin32 program that focuses on the micro skills of writing and some students who have a lot of grammar problems benefit from this program because it defines each error category and provides a statistical readout of kinds of errors made. Besides the micro processing of errors the program also provides macro facilities for lecturers to comment on areas such as organization, planning, syntactic transformation etc. For the most part teachers concentrate on the broader macro skills of critical literacy where content of topic is coherently and logically developed. In the early stages of processing the essays a variety of texts relevant for the processing of the new genre is given to the students

so that they can concentrate on the skills of in-text and end-text referencing. These tasks many students find difficult to do and through the consistent practice of online processing of the different parts of the essay these referencing skills are improved.

We get different kinds of feedback about processing the essay by email. Most lecturers find this electronic marking of essays time-consuming although they believe that it is important that the students become adept in technology through the processing of their writing. Drafts of the different essay parts are edited online. Further investigations into the negative student feedback needs to be made. Lecturers also need to consider if the amount of time spent on online processing is more worthwhile than the less student-centred classroom mode. Blanchfield and other researchers (Blanchfield et al, 2000, pp 205-306) point out that despite many students benefiting from computer conferencing there are however many issues to be addressed concerning its unpopularity. They advise that there should be further research done to find out why there is such antipathy towards it. In a study reported by Michailidis and Rada writing processing through email was not as effective as the face- to- face mode although it served as a function in supporting coordination. (Michaelidis& Rada, 1997, pp 469-483) A criticism made by Crafton of an online writing environment is that students tend to focus on the instrumental nature of language and technology. They see writing as performance and see revision as error correction and the less proficient writers face great difficulty in a techno-centric environment. (Crafton, 1996, pp 317-26) In Kemp's investigation into computer- assisted writing, he found that the medium focused more on the process than the product of writing. He sees the online classroom as a logical outgrowth of the process movement and that this mode can achieve more efficiently than the non-electronic classroom the goals of process writing which means having a more student-centred classroom. The computer according to Owston is an integral part of the students' world. They tend to be more visual learners than previous generations due to the rich stimuli that surround them. They appear to enjoy interacting with this type of technology. (Owston, 1998, p.4) When comparing our student writing over the past 5 years there are marked differences in presentation and quality. Changing the delivery style has assisted students to achieve greater writing autonomy and higher grades. Good.

Writing Styles and Genres

Foundation Studies students progress developmentally from more simple formats and genres to more complex ones. They process short essays in semester one and the wording is increased from an essay of 500-600 to one of 2000-2500. These first semester genres include description, advantages and disadvantages and cause and effect.

A factor of great relevance in semester two is that the students are introduced to the conventions of an academic argumentative essay, a discourse that is valued by the University both at Curtin and internationally. In a study carried out by Crowhurst, (1978, pp1-26), the researcher found the argumentative essay was more syntactically complex than either the descriptive or narrative modes. According to Yeh (1998, pp.49-84) explicit instruction in argumentative form and argument structure sharpens students' judgment regarding the content and organization needed to generate logically connected arguments and improves students' writing of arguments. Like problem essay writing Knudson (1998, pp.1-20) maintains that argumentative writing contains many components and attributes. These include: taking a point of view, trying to convince one's audience, and incorporating or refuting claims. Knudson also claims that there are significant differences by grade level in the number of kinds of statements made in the argument and older students' arguments are more complex, with the addition of different types of statements.

The students' mastery of the forms of academic discourse that are appropriate to a discipline and their developing both the critical and interpretative skills associated with these are of

crucial importance for academic success. The essay can be viewed as a tool for critical and analytical thinking that leads to the production of knowledge. It is hoped that that our continued research on the argumentative genre will help Foundation Studies lecturers and students:

- Distinguish between major and minor issues in argumentation
- Discover new insights into the teaching of argumentation for future pedagogical use.
- Understand better the importance of using references to support their own voice

Format and Structure

Each essay format is being constantly fine-tuned and the present format is formulaic in its requirements. Each part of the essay has strict guidelines and this in turn has implications for students of different learning styles when writing. Some students are creative writers and find having to conform to formulaic guidelines especially regarding the introduction and the conclusion a constraint. Campbell (in Kroll, p.212) points out that research has revealed that more proficient writers plan before writing and work with such global issues as organization, content and audience whereas the less proficient writer do less planning and are little interested in the global problems and instead spend more time on surface-level error corrections.

Style and language differences in writing

The majority of our students are of Chinese origin from our region but recently we are receiving large numbers from Qatar and Botswana. There has not been much research to date on the latter two nationalities yet on the other hand extensive research has been carried out on our Chinese learners. This difference needs to be addressed as this new student cohort comprehends the world in a very different way and therefore organising their written texts to conform to the new academic requirements is very challenging and stressful for learners and teachers.

Kirkpatrick stresses the need for teachers to be aware of the language differences and of how an understanding of these differences influences pedagogy. He draws our attention to how difficult a language can be to learn especially if it is not cognate with one's first language. He refers to research carried out by the Foreign Services Institute where languages cited as not cognate with English were Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Cantonese, and Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin) (Kirkpatrick, 1996, p.2). Kirkpatrick draws our attention to White's study that shows how native speakers of English use different language learning strategies when learning a language cognate with English from the strategies that they use when learning a language that is not cognate. Another factor that Kirkpatrick brings to our attention is how a Chinese learner of English is going to experience greater difficulty in dealing with the English tense system, especially as Modern Standard Chinese does not have a tense system (Kirkpatrick, 1996, p.3). According to Kirkpatrick, students encounter great difficulty when attempting academic bi-literacy, especially when the mastering of academic literacy in their own language presents them with problems. He points out (Kirkpatrick, 1995b pp.43-44) that researchers have identified areas of difficulty resulting from texts in other cultures having different organisational formats. Moreover, students write essays in the second language using the first language's rhetorical pattern. He cites an example from Kaplan (in Kirkpatrick 1995b, p.44) where Chinese students write essays by following the eight legged essay format. Scollon's research has also found evidence of adherence to this form in Taiwanese university students' essays.

According to Chen, the traditional four-part structure can be identified in English essays of Singapore secondary students. (Kirkpatrick, 1995b, p.44). Research conducted by Renshaw

and Volet (in Watkins and Biggs, 1996, pp.85-106), however, shows that at university in Australia, Singaporean students of Chinese origin display a number of very desirable characteristics. These characteristics include demonstrating a strategic adaptability in their attempts to meet the new educational requirements, as well as a wise continuity in maintaining a high academic orientation.

Understanding the task

Our ESL Foundation Studies students display different learning approaches to understanding the requirements of academic writing discourse and the respective features of deep, achieving and surface learning approaches are evident in their work.

Volet and Kee (1993, p.3) assert that international students need to be made aware of the different learning strategies and attitudes that are needed for success at universities.

Efforts have recently been made to develop strategies that are more appropriate for students. While the learning of study skills emphasises means and techniques, the learning strategies promote an awareness of purpose and are more concerned with the ends and with students' relationship with these ends (Hounsell, 1997, p.120). These relationships consider curriculum issues as well as those related to teaching and assessment. If learning-to-learn benefits all students, and this is what the achieving approach aims to do, then learning strategies would seem to be very important. Students also do not easily transfer their learning from a general context to the more specific context that their learning requires (Hounsell, 1997, p. 120). The problem of learning strategies and skills is exacerbated by the fact that the students very often do not cover the meta-cognitive aspects of learning such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their progress (McKeachie et al, 1986, pp. 23-29). As well as having different approaches to learning, Native speakers who are proficient in English have problems with managing their study. For ESL students whose command of English is limited their learning problems are greater.

According to Biggs and Moore:

good learning involves the use of deep approaches to learning by which students engage in appropriate tasks: they use abstract frameworks for conceptualising the task and for illuminating the data, they are meta-cognitive in planning ahead and in monitoring their own progress (Biggs and Moore, 1993, p.312).

Biggs points out that good learning happens when the teaching methods are varied, when there is group work in small classes, when high level cognitive outcomes are expected and when the assessment is classroom based and is conducted in a non-threatening manner (Biggs and Moore, 1993, p.320).

Morgan and Beaty maintain that skill in learning involves students developing confidence, competence and autonomy. (1997, p.236). According to Hounsell "student learning is subject to a dynamic richly complex array of influences which are both direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional".(Hounsell, 1997, p. 120). Therefore when student confidence and autonomy is in evidence it assists them in other areas of study not only the core English units but other units and often in decision making outside the classroom. They begin to understand the system, their place in it, the links to past learning and the demands of this new academic life.

Information Literacy

At Foundation Studies we have put in place library lessons for our students to maximize transfer of their information literacy skills. The skills are taught as functionally as possible and we ask the librarians to focus their lessons on topics that are relevant to our students. Their respective teachers attend all lessons in order to note the varying levels of the students' individual information literacy needs. Through the processing of the students' writing drafts they have the opportunity to practice specific information literacy skills and these skills can be added to incrementally since not all members of any group learn at exactly the same rate or retain equal amounts of what they have learned. In the classroom by being innovative in facilitating students' engagement we follow up on the library didactic input. Students are encouraged for their final essay to look for a wide range of information sources, to show an understanding of the content and to ask questions about the content. The students are encouraged to reflect on their own learning, to assess it and to take responsibility for it. In their final research argumentative essay they choose a topic of their own choice and this ensures added motivation to be more successful in this task.

Who is Information Literate?

'To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the information needed... Ultimately information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand'

(ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy 1989)

Who is Information Literate at Foundation Studies?

At Foundation Studies our culturally diverse students have differing levels of information literacy and in order for them to be able to write essays they have to learn to become more information literate. Doyle (1992) points out that an information literate person is one who:

- recognises that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision making
- recognises the need for information;
- formulates questions based on information needs
- identifies potential sources of information
- develops successful search strategies
- accesses sources of information including computer-based and other technologies
- evaluates information
- organises information for practical application
- integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge
- uses information in critical thinking and problem solving

In Foundation Studies we provide preparatory scaffolding of processing of essays by gradually putting in place information literacy pedagogy. This includes:

1. The SPI manual (The self-paced instruction manual)
2. The CLUE catalogue
3. Searching the Internet

4. Searching the Databases

Each essay requires greater levels of writing complexity. We emphasise in our teaching the importance of reporting verbs and supply our students with textual material for the practice of in-text and end text referencing.

Information literacy impinges significantly on how students use these resources. Many writers acknowledge the importance of information literacy skills in order to avoid plagiarism (Warmkessel, 1998, pp.2-3; Aiken 1998, pp.1-3; Beck 1997, p.2). Less plagiarising is likely when a student can access and evaluate information critically and creatively. As plagiarising displays inappropriate and irresponsible attitudes to university academic discourse practices the information literate student shows social responsibility by practising ethical behaviour in regard to information and information technology. By being empowered with these skills an information literate person is able to recognise when information is needed. He/she has the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the necessary information (Grassian, 1997). Hounsell and Murray (1990, p.23) have reported research carried out where 57% students have claimed that in producing an essay selecting material was the most difficult part; 34% found writing clearly an issue, 26% saw focusing on the question set and presenting an argument as difficult while 21% believed that keeping to a clear framework presented problems.

Some writers (Barnett, 1997, pp.39-54; Michaelson, 1998, p.30) support a model of collaborative work between librarians and teachers. Problems exist when using the Internet regarding the adoption of sound methods for determining the value and authenticity of information. This is because the information is stored in an unstructured way and relevant and irrelevant materials and questionable data are undifferentiated. We have found that an information literate student has the confidence to be able to ask questions and seek out answers from many sources. This translates into having the confidence to tackle varied tasks in and out of the classroom.

Critical Literacy Skills

The WWW offers immediate access to up-to-date raw information on topics from a huge variety of sources. Teachers in Foundation Studies use the WWW as an important source of information in their classes, and furthermore they use it to cultivate critical literacy in their students. Other resource formats are encouraged such as books and journals, videos, radio but increasingly students are finding more up-to-date information on the net. Critical literacy is a prerequisite skill that must be fostered when using information from the Internet. This is a time of great change and our learners are swamped with a wealth of information It is very important for our students to make meaning from the array of multi media, complex visual imagery, music and sound, even virtual worlds that bombards their daily lives. The valuable skill of critical literacy will carry over into their life in their respective communities and they will know how to discriminate between popular and scholarly information. On the Internet, where anyone may publish anything very easily the students will learn to analyse the power of language, reflect on the writer's motives and the purpose of the text, question how texts have been constructed and hopefully sow seeds for taking initiatives for social action when the time is right for them. Critical literacy provides our students with ways of thinking that uncover social inequalities and injustices. It enables them to become agents of social change. Farah points out how

"search engines cannot rank the returned documents for credibility. This is left to the student, with a potential mountain of chaff mixed in with tasty morsels of wheat. In such a diluted ocean of information, the source is not always easy to evaluate, especially according to reputation, because of the vast number of (often anonymous) authors involved. In the

end, it is usually left to the document to speak for itself in terms of its content validity, and ultimate credibility lies in the critical literacy of the reader." (Farah, 1995)

For a true democracy to operate critical literacy is crucial. According to Farah (1995) the critically literate reader will know how to avoid "the pitfalls of specious advertising, pseudo-science, narrowed reality (e.g. Holocaust revisionism, Scientific Creationism, cults),political rhetoric, indoctrination, media bias, double-speak, and twisted statistics."

At Foundation Studies our critical literacy pedagogy provides students with the opportunities to reflect on their own attitudes and values as well as looking at the multiple interpretations of texts. Therefore when they choose the topic of their major argumentative research essay they are better equipped to take a personal stand on the topic that they have chosen. This is one area though when students are under pressure they seem willing to use any resources to complete the task even if they don't understand them and they contradict their point of view. They seem to forgo much of what they are taught and lose confidence in being able to discard information that is not useful or supports their premise.

Integration of Reference Sources

Research carried out on Foundation Studies argumentative research essays in 1997 showed that original explanations, summarizing, paraphrasing, and quotations were underutilized whereas there was extensive near copying and copying of sources particularly those from the WWW. This occurs often due to different cultural assumptions about copying, pressure of time and when students prefer what they read to what they can write themselves.

An issue to consider for teachers is why students are still copying when they should be paraphrasing, summarising and incorporating information in appropriate ways. Campbell (1990, p.224) points out that before 1990, little had been done to research the uses of reading texts in the academic writing of university students. She reiterates that language proficiency affects the use of information from background reading texts in academic writing. Her research showed that syntheses and summaries are identified with the more proficient writers. The more proficient language students demonstrate that they work well with global issues, such as organisation or content and they revise and edit syntactical and lexical problems, whereas the less proficient writers spend more time on the mechanical errors. Kennedy too, noted how reading ability affects the quality of both summaries and synthesis (Campbell , 1990, p.213).

Casazza (1993, p.205) also asserts that teaching students to summarise increases their comprehension of expository text; however, the effects depend on the kinds of material read. Ghosn (1996, p.4) reports on research carried out whereby group-work helped students' paraphrasing and summarising. Ghosn's asserts that ESL students often lack strategies for paraphrasing, which require the development of skills in reading, comprehension, analyses, selection of new structures and vocabulary, and integration into a written product. He asserts that paraphrasing requires skills in reading, comprehension, analysis, selection of new structures and vocabulary, and integration into a written product. Ghosn maintains that paraphrases usually originate in sentences with sophisticated syntax, so the student must first understand difficult text in detail. He suggests that students can be helped with strategies that familiarise them with ways of generating simpler statements, extracting sentence kernels, identifying word groups and answering questions to focus attention on aspects of the text.

According to Dunbar (1992, p.65), the students must also know how to re-write the passage by exploiting synonymy and combining sentences for structural flexibility. He furthermore

maintains that the lack of good use of reporting verbs can also contribute to poor attribution practices. Dunbar (1992, p.67) points out that current theories of language and literacy have not adequately explained the role of reported language in oral and written language and no studies have analysed the function of reported speech language in an educational context. Pickard (1995, pp.89-102) claims that the over-use of the reporting verb "say" is due to the students' limited range of reporting verbs.

Plagiarism

This is a major issue for students and teachers in our program. Many writers believe that students plagiarise because they are unfamiliar with the seriousness of plagiarism (Flanagan, 1994, p.6: Harris, 1997, p.3). Plagiarism can range from the subtle where there is acknowledgement to the author but insufficient modification of the original text to the blatant where large portions of text are copied with no modification and without crediting the original author (Roig, 1997, p.114). Plagiarism in its definitions typically focuses on the failure to acknowledge the original author of the borrowed text. Plagiarism however, can happen even when the borrower acknowledges the author of the original material. Roig requests his readers to "consider the situation where a writer takes a paragraph of text and changes only one or two words such as prepositions or articles, repositions the subject and predicate and includes a reference note or some other indication that the writer is the original author" (Roig 1997, p.114).

Roig believes that such paraphrasing constitutes plagiarism especially if the voice of the original author is still embedded in the rewritten text. Buckingham and Nevile (1997, pp.1-6) have found that in-experienced students' texts are inter-textually confused when compared with those of inexperienced writers and that students would better manage the task of referencing their work if they understood the assumptions that underpin academic referencing and the inter-textual significance of variations in citation language forms. Rogers believes that students rarely plagiarise with malign intent. He suggests that it is more frequently out of ignorance of appropriate techniques of citation and of what benefits can accrue to them through skilful citation. He furthermore points out that the benefits of skilful attribution to the original author are those of believability, trust and appearances of competence on the part of the writer (Rogers, 1996, p.4).

Ashworth finds that the result of attitude studies to plagiarism has indicated that there was a lack of clarity concerning what constitutes plagiarism. The students' attitudes were determined by the influence of such factors as poor supervision, alienation from the institutions, large classes and emphasis on group learning (Ashworth, 1997, p.19).

White (1993, p.44) proposes that plagiarism be handled in universities in a pragmatic way. Universities, by ignoring plagiarism, deny their students the opportunities to express their own originality and potential. He suggests that instead they should be taught to do research work properly by being encouraged to produce their own ideas and being taught to think analytically.

Flanagan (1994, p.6) believes that students are less likely to plagiarize when, during the writing process, they use frequent editing, revision and re-writing. The use of WWW material is another issue and according to Meek (1998, p.18) some students wrongly believe that something published on the WWW belongs to the public domain and can be copied without making the appropriate attributions. Suggestions for minimizing plagiarism made by Harris (1997, p.2) include; changing topics, submitting photocopies of materials from the WWW, choosing a range of resources, for example, books, journals, newspapers and WWW material. resources, for example, books, journals, newspapers and WWW material. Roig and Da Tommaso (1997, p.114) discovered in their research that students who rated high on

procrastination tests also plagiarised at a high level. Plagiarism is a huge issue that we face daily in student writing. It is often very hard when confronting students with this issue in their writing. Working in a team environment does assist us as we can easily call on others to look at student work and get a second opinion. Furthermore we now have access to an online source that can track chunks of text from actual web sites.

Conclusion

Our research from the Foundation Studies program at Curtin University has shown that when student writers lack confidence and are confronted by the discourse requirements they tend to use near copying, demonstrate limited paraphrasing, summarising and referencing skills. To be successful in our system they must acquire the competencies to write successfully within a tertiary discourse. The research shows that the acquisition of competencies and successful completion is linked very strongly to learner confidence, a sense of autonomy and motivation. Confidence building and motivation has obvious connections to teaching styles, delivery, assessments and learner perceptions. We must consciously assist students to achieving some success in writing early in the program to assist the process of increasing self-efficacy and therefore successful completion.

Academic writing is essential as a core focus of enabling programs because proficient writers are identified as able students and success with written texts will as a spin off enhance other areas of study.

Some students may need additional help to continue successfully with their degree program and this could be achieved with the assistance of subsidized tutors on campus. This help needs to be made more readily available to provide both technical and writing assistance for those students where need is evident. To perpetuate student motivation, confidence and autonomy we believe that support mechanisms must be in place on campus this includes not only lecturers and tutors providing integrated study skills, but also writing advisers, IT assistance and helpful library staff. This will help ensure completion of degree programs and possible further study.

Discussion/ further research

When students have to conform their writing to the requirements prescribed there is a subsequent loss of voice and identity. How do we /can we assist students in maintaining a persona and perspective of the world which when they complete the program is not at complete odds with the person who commenced the program?

There is more research to be done on writing across the campus- assisting students to meet particular school requirements.

Conduct focused interviews with staff and students about how they perceive their student's writing – and identify successes and problems. Highlight the extent of didactic writing input in the different schools across campus- see Curtin Business School first year core units.

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