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Making Learning Happen: Students' Development of Academic and Information Literacies

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This book considers who today's higher education students are: what do their voices, actions and behaviours inform us about being a university student? This chapter explores students' experiences as they develop their academic and information literacy skills. Arguably, the need for students to develop these literacies becomes ever greater as the interweaving issues of information quality and digital citizenship create new questions to be considered. While at the same time the increasing cultural, linguistic and social diversity of the student population may result in students requiring additional support when developing the skills required to engage with information and to write effectively at university. Students have suggested to us that working with professional learning development and library staff to make learning happen can be a 'safe' experience—where students seek help within a specialised support unit that is distinct from the subject area at a distance from disciplinary constraints (Barnett, 2018; Gravett & Kinchin, 2018). Moreover, students' voices and behaviours suggest that

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developing academic and information literacy skills can impact on not just their growth in this area, but also on their wider learning identity (Gravett & Kinchin, 2018).

However, within these learning experiences, it is evident that for some students literacy development is not without challenge; increasingly, students look for instruction and report feelings of being overwhelmed by perceived expectations (Barnett, 2018; Gravett & Kinchin, 2018). This chapter will explore some of the ways students might experience their learning and the relationship between the development of literacies and students' developing learner identities. With financial, social and external pressures increasingly reshaping students' experiences of university, this chapter will argue that the way we work both to make learning happen and also to promote well-being deserves re-examination as we look again at the voices and behaviours of students to inform our practice.

Exploring the Information and Academic Literacy Landscape

What academic and information skills might look like can be understood in a number of ways. Some definitions that can be usefully applied are offered here with the understanding that there is still further debate to be had about nomenclature, the overlap between terms, and even the concept of 'literacy' itself. Secker (2017) argues that the use of the word literacy 'signifies not the teaching of skills or competencies, but practices, attitudes and behaviours' (Secker, 2017, p. 6). Information literacy is a central concept in the work of information professionals and is defined by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) as 'the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use' (CILIP, 2018). This definition from UNESCO goes further:

> Information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world. (UNESCO, 2005)

It can be argued that the need for students to develop information literacies has never been greater as technological growth has transformed the information landscape, resulting in a wealth of information being easier to access than ever before. Moreover, questions about the quality of information have become increasingly prominent due to the twin concerns over both the proliferation of information and also the difficulty of making informed judgements and determining the validity of a source (Secker & Coonan, 2013). In today's information-rich, post-truth society, many higher education professionals believe that it is critical that students be equipped with the appropriate skills to be able to manage information effectively (Secker & Coonan, 2013).

Further, parallels and overlaps for practitioners are with the debates surrounding the development of digital literacies. Digital literacies have been defined by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) as 'the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society' (JISC, 2015). Discussions about academic literacies also add richness to this debate. Academic literacies focus on students' writing and have been much theorised (Gourlay, 2009; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Lillis, 2010; Lillis & Tuck, 2016). There are significant parallels too with the concept of assessment literacy that is also increasing in prominence within the literature (Price, Rust, O'Donovan, & Handley, 2012). Reconciling different definitions is problematic, and clearly, there is further debate to be had; for example, Secker (2015, p. 1) asks: 'Do we need new literacies…does terminology matter?' Arguably, a plurality of interpretations can be enriching for practitioners opening up dialogues between professionals and across disciplines.

There is further diversity still regarding the practices institutions employ to promote literacy development. The learning developer role has expanded significantly over the past fifteen years and today is present in many institutions in different guises: within faculties or more commonly, as in the case of the author's institution, within a centralised service such as the library. Here, a learning development team includes student learning advisors and librarians. Students can approach learning developers via one-to-one tutorial sessions to discuss any aspect of their learning, and learning development staff also deliver embedded literacy development programmes. Differing service models reflect the debate that exists

within the sector regarding the relationship of learning development and disciplinary programmes, with many supporting the view that literacy development within academic programmes is preferable to 'disembodied skills' programs (Keane, 2011, p. 714).

Furthermore, the integrated teaching of literacy development is important if institutions are to avoid a pedagogic deficit model. These narratives locate literacy problems as the responsibility of individuals, who simply require extra support in order to assimilate (see Scott et al., 2014). As a result, perhaps the most significant definition of academic literacies has been offered by Lea and Street (1998, 2006) who were among the first theorists to offer a positive, divergent, approach highlighting the complexity of writing practices as:

> Complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities. (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369)

Lea and Street's work has greatly influenced recent understandings of the epistemology of academic literacies, for example Lillis and Tuck (2016, p. 30) who describe literacies as 'ideologically shaped, reflecting institutional structures and relations of power', and Price et al. (2012, p. 15) who explain that 'in order to be successful students must understand the rules of the new game'.

Crucially, this articulation of literacy practices as ideologically shaped social processes transcends a simplistic notion of mechanical skills to be learnt; in fact, it disrupts entirely a 'skills paradigm' conceptualisation. Indeed, Bent (2013, p. 29) argues that our primary objective should be to recognise the greater value of literacies:

> Is information literacy just one of a range of academic literacies or as academic literacies deal with making meaning from information, should we view information literacy as the broader concept? In reality the distinction is merely semantic the value lying in the recognition that information literacy is not a simple transferable skill in which students can be 'trained'.

Rather than attempting to consolidate or to delimit interpretations, then, this chapter is instead concerned with an exploration of the holistic learning process of academic and information literacy development. Ultimately, these understandings destabilise mechanical constructions of skills development and instead position literacy development as something broader: practices that reflect institutional structures and power relations. It is this concept of literacies as social practices that will be explored in this chapter.

Challenges Within Students' Learning Development

In recent years, the literature has started to examine the difficulties some students' experience when transitioning into and through higher education (Crozier & Reay, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2012; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Scott et al., 2014; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; See Chapter 10). Research has also begun to examine the relationship between transitions and literacy practices (Burke, 2012; Gourlay, 2009; Gravett & Kinchin, 2018; Hutchings, 2013). It has been observed that students recurrently use words such as 'stressful', 'overwhelmed' and 'anxious' about the development of academic and information literacies (Gravett & Kinchin, 2018). Students' emotions and how students *feel* as they experience higher education are only recently beginning to be prioritised in the literature (Gilmore & Anderson, 2016; Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan, & Titsworth, 2014; Quinlan, 2016a, 2016b). For example, Quinlan explains that:

> Higher education can evoke strong negative responses – anxiety, replete with beating hearts and sweaty palms; frustration, fear, guilt, shame…Yet these deeply felt experiences…are hardly discussed in the context of improving higher education. (Quinlan, 2016a, p. 1)

Students' self-reported anxiety relating to teaching and learning chimes with a wider backdrop of increased concern about student mental health (e.g. Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2013; Macaskill, 2012). Today's higher education experience has been described as 'anxiety-provoking' (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010,

p. 643), where 'the mental health of university students is of increasing concern globally' (Macaskill, 2012, p. 426). Likewise, statistical data suggest significant annual increases in students' support-seeking behaviour from university well-being centres (Anthoney, Stead, & Turney, 2017).

Similarly, research suggests that students may experience uncertainty and lack agency. Gourlay and Deane (2012, p. 26) explain that support staff such as librarians frequently 'observe students to be in a state of confusion regarding writing requirements' and Tapp (2013, p. 237) reported students to be concerned that they would 'do it wrong' because of uncertainty about writing at university and the greater independence expected. In our work, we have witnessed a growing reliance on staff for direction and emotional support: individuals request help to check their work, to tell them are they 'on the right lines', and to provide reassurance. Many students report frustration at not understanding 'what is expected' of them (Barnett, 2018; Gravett & Kinchin, 2018). Thus, staff observations resonate with perspectives from the literature depicting students as struggling to grapple with expectations (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Gourlay & Deane, 2012; Smith, 2008; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

However, it is also important to note that students' experiences are not homogenous. Indeed, Robinson and Taylor (2007, p. 6) remind us that the very word 'voice' causes concern as 'such a monolingual assumption is illusory'. Within any narrative of students' experiences will be those 'other' voices whom offer a variety of different perspectives and nuances to the debate. With this in mind, it is important to consider also those students who may not struggle with the development of academic literacies, or those students who may feel dislocated from the institution—as in the example of Alexander in Chapter 2—and whom may not make use of library services, or may not communicate their concerns. Thus, in seeking to understand how to support the needs of those we witness who do experience difficulties, it is also important to be mindful of the plurality of students' experiences and to seek to learn from and offer support to students who experience university differently.

However, while avoiding attempts to depict a 'monolingual' narrative of students' experiences, it is still of interest to unpack the tensions experienced within literacy development and to disrupt notions of this process as a straightforward experience of skills to be learnt. As Mann writes,

as practitioners, it may be worthwhile for us to 'consider carefully our own role in the potentially alienated experience of learning of our students' (2001, p. 17). Thus, this chapter explores the possible factors influencing these perceived trends in behaviour—albeit with an awareness of the heterogeneity of students' experiences—and seeks to generate further discussion and opportunities for research.

Understanding Students' Difficulties

Recent narratives of the student experience, particularly within the media, tend to homogenise 'the student experience' and have tended to be unflinchingly negative. It is often argued that the marketisation of higher education means that students pursue an instrumental view of learning. They require 'spoon-feeding' (Grayling, 2009), or worse, are *snowflakes* who lack resilience, unlike previous more robust generations (Fischer, 2017). Widening participation and the massification of higher education are often given as reasons to explain students' behaviours, with 'non-traditional' students posited as outsiders who exist in opposition to institutional norms (Gulley, 2016). Indeed, even the very description of students as 'non-traditional' can be seen to interpellate individuals into a negative identity: a social group defined discursively by 'otherness'—in binary opposition to more legitimate, 'traditional', students. Of course, student populations are changing. As outreach initiatives expand access to higher education, today's student population has diversified. Likewise, financial concerns are certainly prevalent, with increasing instability occurring in the educational and professional landscape and greater pressure placed on graduates as they seek employment in a competitive workplace (see Chapter 8). But narratives that homogenise students' experiences or that describe students in deficit terms are unhelpful at best, and at worst insulting and even infantilising, as per the metaphor of spoon-feeding.

Rather, there are undoubtedly many other potential contributory forces. Arguably, one possible contributory factor leading towards an increase in the seeking of reassurance from learning development staff could be the changing nature of staff–student relations. For example, Scanlon et al.

(2007) explain that neoliberal forces have reduced the time lecturers have to support students:

> Students must be more independent…this has always been difficult for many students in their initial transition to university. What is new, however, is the contemporary university characterised by an economically driven agenda in which lecturers have less time with students and a student population far more diverse than ever before. (Scanlon et al., 2007, p. 233)
>
> Students highlighted interaction with lecturers as fundamental to their identity formation because it was through this interaction that they began to understand the university construct of being a student. (ibid., p. 237)

Here, students describe the interaction with university staff as crucial to their formation of a learner identity; however, Scanlon et al. report that lecturers have less time to engage with their students. Research has shown that students may rely on the reassurance of staff and require scaffolding in order to develop independent learning strategies (Hockings, Thomas, Ottaway, & Jones, 2017). Teaching groups are now larger, and it has been increasingly recognised that today's academic staff experience a highly pressured environment, with many competing demands (Murphy, 2011; Winstone, 2017). Thus, a social justice agenda and discourses of widening participation and inclusion operate in tension with economic realities. This may mean that universities risk losing sight of the value of human relations (Mann, 2008).

Whitchurch's research has recognised the increasing blurring of boundaries between academic and professional support within a 'third space' (2013). Perhaps, this blurring of boundaries means that students are taking more opportunities to utilise the expertise of professional staff to complement the support offered by their faculty tutors, or more frequently turning to these staff members to express their anxieties regarding academic practices. It seems possible then that further consideration of the optimal relationship between different staff roles, as well as further work to ensure the provision of clearer, structured, independent learning opportunities, may be important if we are to alleviate student anxiety.

Another possible cause for student apprehension appears related to uncertainty about assessment. Research has shown that often students have

limited understanding of the standards expected of them, a lack of knowledge about university procedures, and that this can be deeply unsettling (Christie et al., 2008). Researchers have also used the work of Bernstein (1975) to demonstrate that some pedagogic practices can be *invisible* for students. This can be particularly the case for minority groups who may lack the required cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to easily interpret the university experience (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Here, Mann explains the challenges students' experience with a powerful metaphor:

> Most students entering the new world of the academy are in an equivalent position to those crossing the borders of a new country—they have to deal with the bureaucracy of checkpoints, or matriculation, they may have limited knowledge of the local language and customs. (Mann, 2001, p. 11)

Mann's research has revealed students' sense of alienation to be driven by a lack of understanding of university 'customs'. Similarly, the literature has explored the difficulties some students experience when interpreting assessment feedback (e.g. Jönsson, 2013; Winstone, Nash, Rowntree, & Parker, 2017). Academic practices, then, can be mystifying; a lack of understanding regarding university assessment, and the lack of clarity of practices, may be a key cause for apprehension.

At the same time, this uncertainty about assessment practices can be seen to be compounded by increased concerns about issues relating to academic misconduct. The rise of plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin and the increased emphasis on academic misconduct within university discourses potentially exacerbate the anxieties students feel about grasping the processes of academia (e.g. Ashworth, Banister, & Thorne, 2006). And recently, researchers have questioned the impact of Turnitin (Thompsett & Ahluwalia, 2015; Walker, 2010).

However, central to an understanding of this area of literacy development is a consideration of its relationship to the construction of student identity. As we have seen, literacies are not simply mechanical skills to be acquired. Rather, the development of literacies can be understood as a 'threshold practice' in the very construction of student identity (Gourlay, 2009). This trope of the threshold evinces the transformative nature of literacy practices. Literacy development thus becomes inextricably linked

with issues of identity formation. Moreover, issues of participation, and validation, are also important here—for example, Burke explains that:

> There are certain rules of the game that must be adhered to if a student is going to succeed in higher education. 'Other' bodies of knowledge that the student might bring to their work are often invalidated. (Burke, 2012, p. 147)

Developing literacies can thus be an unsettling process as students must 'unlearn' other pre-existing bodies of knowledge and master the 'rules of the game'. This learning environment can foster 'a sense of self-as-intruder in the new institution's space' (Hutchings, 2013, p. 313) as learning environments become no longer familiar or negotiable. Arguably, then, literacy development can be conceptualised as a threshold practice of both learning and unlearning.

Students have reported that when using learning development and library services, learning can happen in an environment where they feel safe, anonymous and empowered to share their concerns in a way that they may not feel comfortable doing with their faculty tutors (Gravett & Winstone, 2018). Likewise, while few students report that they would actually approach a member of academic staff to ask for clarification regarding their feedback (Carless, 2006), students may feel more content to seek advice from learning developers (Gravett & Winstone, 2018). Consequently, professional services staff may be in a unique position to observe students' difficulties with literacy development and to offer additional support.

Future Opportunities for Developing Students' Learning

It has been argued that some level of discomfort is a necessary part of learning if it is to be truly transformative (Land, 2017). It may be that we can understand this area of academic literacy as an area of 'troublesome knowledge' (Land, 2017, p. 180), where encounters with such troublesome knowledge potentially lead to 'a sense of frailty in response to being

confronted with troublesome knowledge, or ideas that may be disturbing' (Land, 2017, p. 182). Similarly, Gilmore and Anderson (2016, p. 694) contest the view 'that anxiety is inexorably linked with the inhibition of learning and cognition or with a diminished sense of human agency'. However, clearly too much anxiety can be debilitating. And yet, this discussion does not seek to 'diminish' students as somehow less capable—as has been a critique of previous explorations of students' emotional wellbeing (Ecclestone, 2011). Rather, it seeks to open up a dialogue regarding institutional practices.

It would be of interest for further research to seek additional opportunities to listen to the multiplicity of student voices. In particular, this may include the voices of those who may feel disengaged from university, such as Alexander (Chapter 2), and may not seek help from university support services. One direction would be to explore how different minority and majority groups develop literacies and cope with some of the challenges considered in this chapter and to seek further opportunities to listen to individual stories of academic literacy development, for example via autoethnographic or narrative interview research methods. There is also further debate to be had regarding the importance of collaboration between academic and professional services staff, and of the blurring boundaries between these two historically divided professional roles within a 'third space' of academic practice. Further, it will also be worthwhile to consider how we can create additional opportunities to prioritise students' voices via student–staff partnership models of working. In recent years, partnership models have been shown to have the potential to disrupt institutional cultures (Matthews, Cook Sather, & Healey, 2018) and to enable a more dialogic relationship between staff and students (Bovill, 2017).

Conclusion

Literacy development is pivotal to students' success within higher education. However, the anxieties some students report about even the basic structures and processes of academic practice can lead them to seek out help in superficial ways that we struggle to move beyond. Moving forward, perhaps more collaborative and partnership work is needed between

professional and academic colleagues, and between students and staff, to increase our understanding of students' experiences, enabling a deeper examination of the nuances of students' difficulties, as well as exploring further how to make learning happen in a generative, enriching, way.

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