
Brenda Leibowitz and Yasien Mohamed (Eds). 2000. *Routes to writing in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: Silk Road International Publishers pp. 285.

Thirteen contributors, ten of them from the University of the Western Cape, have produced the fourteen chapters in this pioneering work. The book is divided into six parts: Setting the scene; Diversity, culture and writing; Writing in the curriculum; Assessing sources; Reflections on teaching initiatives; Changing the scene.

In the first part, 'Setting the scene', Brenda Leibowitz provides a frame for what follows. In putting the case for a reflexive approach, she provides an insight into the process of writing demonstrating the interrogation of her own practice in eight think-aloud protocols. Thus her chapter underlines the need to recognise that writing development applies to lecturers as well as students. The nature of the development should be seen as a continuum, ranging, for instance, from apprenticeship to the development and refinement of an original style or authentic voice. She raises other important issues. One of these is the need to recognise the continuities between writing and speaking. Lecturers who comment that students can speak, but not write fail to take account of the connections between these modes and the opportunities these connections present. Another comment I found particularly useful is that communicative proficiency is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for academic success. Her brief account of the process of inducting students into academic discourse skilfully presents its complexity; her reflection on the form vs content debate avoids simplistic conclusions either in terms of grammar or structural conventions:

... we tended to make the fatal mistake of thinking that if we taught students writing skills, their writing would necessarily improve; what we were neglecting to do was to connect our comments not just to forms, but to the meaning the students were making with the forms. In subsequent years we have placed more emphasis on coherence as a guiding principle, which is the concept of logical connection at the level of meaning as well as form. (p. 26).

Yet another useful insight comes from work done by Benjamin (1995) which is quoted by Leibowitz (p.29) which suggests that third year students seemed to be in a better position to value a writing course.

The second part, 'Diversity, culture and writing', explores the role of culture in socially situated language. In my view the chapter by David Gough ('Discourse and students' experience of academic style') is particularly important. He analyses discourses associated with the 'oral tradition' to argue that we generally fail to take account of what students from an oral tradition bring with them. This means that a potentially valuable opportunity to facilitate access to academic literacy is missed. Allowing students to explore the discourses of the oral tradition could be a means of demonstrating the universality of secondary discourse. Western academic discourse could then be placed in perspective. At the same time the students could gain a clearer sense of their 'new identity', while becoming more conscious of previous and present identities.

Wendy Woodward ('Locating the writing self'), on the other hand, argues the need for ongoing self-reflexivity and to encourage students to 'speak the self'. Her aim in doing so is a complex one: she sets out to enable readers/writers to engage with text from their specific (in particular their gender) location. Her work is at an early stage, and part of the value of her chapter is that she is not afraid to reflect on the difficulties.

The chapters in the third part, 'Writing in the curriculum', explore assessment and feedback. All the contributors stress the need to make the criteria for assessment explicit and transparent. Brenda Leibowitz ('Policy in practice about teaching writing') uses the data elicited from a questionnaire to demonstrate how practices vary at one institution. This presents obvious difficulties for students. Her argument is not for grim uniformity, but for greater transparency so students are less confused and have a greater understanding of what is required. More discussion could also help to make lecturers more tolerant of differences in style or approach and have a greater understanding of students' real problems in producing written academic discourse. Lecturers gaining a greater understanding of the way they themselves write and their attitudes to producing scholarly writing could partly enhance the latter. In her strong contribution, Star Starfield ('Assessing students' writing') makes the interesting point that the washback effect of assessment practices can be a means of shaping student learning. The challenge, she suggests, is to find ways of making assessment transparent, reliable and valid. The self-assessment sheet is a particularly helpful example of assessment as a learning instrument. In the third chapter in this part, Andrea Parkerson gives a clear account of what constitutes productive feedback and the ways in which it is done at the Writing Centre at UWC. This one-to-one writing consultation demands clear, practical, focused feedback in order to facilitate writing development.

Part Four ('Accessing success') explores some of the technical aspects of writing. In her chapter ('Information literacy: a survival tool for lecturers'), Lulama Makhubela problematises the notion of being 'information literate' within the framework of the global information society. For her, the answer for lecturers lies in enabling student to become active students constructing the knowledge they need to be able to interact with information for a variety of resources including electronic resources. This means that students have to be coached and guided to use information within a clear disciplinary or interdisciplinary context. In developing her argument, she provides a brief overview of two Info Projects that have been implemented at UWC.

Her concrete example of an information literacy curriculum in action effectively illustrates how valuable this kind of learning is. She uses a hypothetical assignment given to Psychology II students to show how information literacy can be integrated into the curriculum. In this case an adapted form of the seven steps used by the American Association of School Librarians is used as the basic elements of an information literacy curriculum.

In her chapter ('Understanding plagiarism differently') Shelley Angelil-Carter problematises plagiarism. The thrust of her argument is that students rarely resort to 'plagiarism' because of an intentional desire to deceive. She explores the difficulty of 'putting something in your own words' where the author one has read has already put it so well. She also explores the real possibility that students may be paralysed by attempts to avoid plagiarism. Ultimately, her strongest argument is that careful development of competences is a prerequisite: the process of arriving at a point where one is able to adopt a critical stance is a complex one.

Rosemary Townsend's chapter provides a concrete example of her attempt to provide students with information on some of the procedures involved in using and acknowledging critical material. Apart from her argument that lectures should explicitly model the process of engaging in critical discourse in the lectures they give, there is not much that is new.

The four contributors to Part Five ('Reflection on teaching writing') offer a range of perspectives. In Chapter 10 ('Developing critical reading through writing'), Charlyn Dyers provides a candid account of a project which attempted to develop critical writing skills through a writing assignment. The process was facilitated in four lectures and four writing conferences. A number of problems revealed themselves in the course of the assignment. Many of the students, for instance, found one of the two passages, which formed the point of departure of the assignment, difficult. This meant that they tended to focus almost exclusively on the more accessible article rather than to compare and contrast the articles as they were required to do. Dyer concludes the article with a number of recommendations which usefully demonstrate the ways in which this research can be applied more widely.

Ed Katz's chapter ("Letters from the academic kraal") takes the form of a narrative. In it, he boldly challenges what he sees as the catastrophic approaches which bombard students 'with a barrage of constraints about which discourse patterns and knowledges are permissible' (p. 206). His innovative approach is to engage students in writing letters to each other. The excerpts from the letters reflect a vitality as well as individual exploration and negotiation with their readers.

His approach is somewhat controversial. However, it is important to recognise that he does not claim that the student writing presented here is adequate academic literacy. In fact, he concedes that 'there is still a long way to go. The breaks in language and argument are serious'. Whatever differences one might have with him in terms of theory or approach, it would be difficult not to acknowledge that these students are engaging in investigating and interrogating text – surely at least clear progress towards adequate academic literacy.

Klaus Menck ('Word processing as an aid to written language work') is concerned with the ways in which the computer can help to meet the needs of students learning a foreign language (German). He moves back in time as he reflects on the use of the PLATO computerised learning system of the early 80s. His focus here, however, is on his work with 15 students and his use of a process approach as a way of developing their language competence in German I.

Mario Smith tackles another area: thesis writing. He provides a clear account of some of the factors involved and offers practical suggestions as to how to meet the needs of students who might otherwise not ever finish the thesis.

In the final part, Terry Volbrecht ('Changing the scene') presents a case for the use of personal narrative. For him, personal exploration and academic discourse are strongly linked. He also underlines the danger that 'new vocationalism' as reflected in outcomes-education represents, especially in its tendency to dismiss critical literary practices as useful goals in the curriculum.

In my view, this book deserves to be read and applied widely. It represents an important contribution to advancing writing development (academic literacy) in higher education.

Practitioners especially will welcome the honesty and clarity of the discussion. The variety of views represented and the large number of issues raised should stimulate lively debate as well as further exploration and research.

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