

Academic Literacy: A Contested Concept

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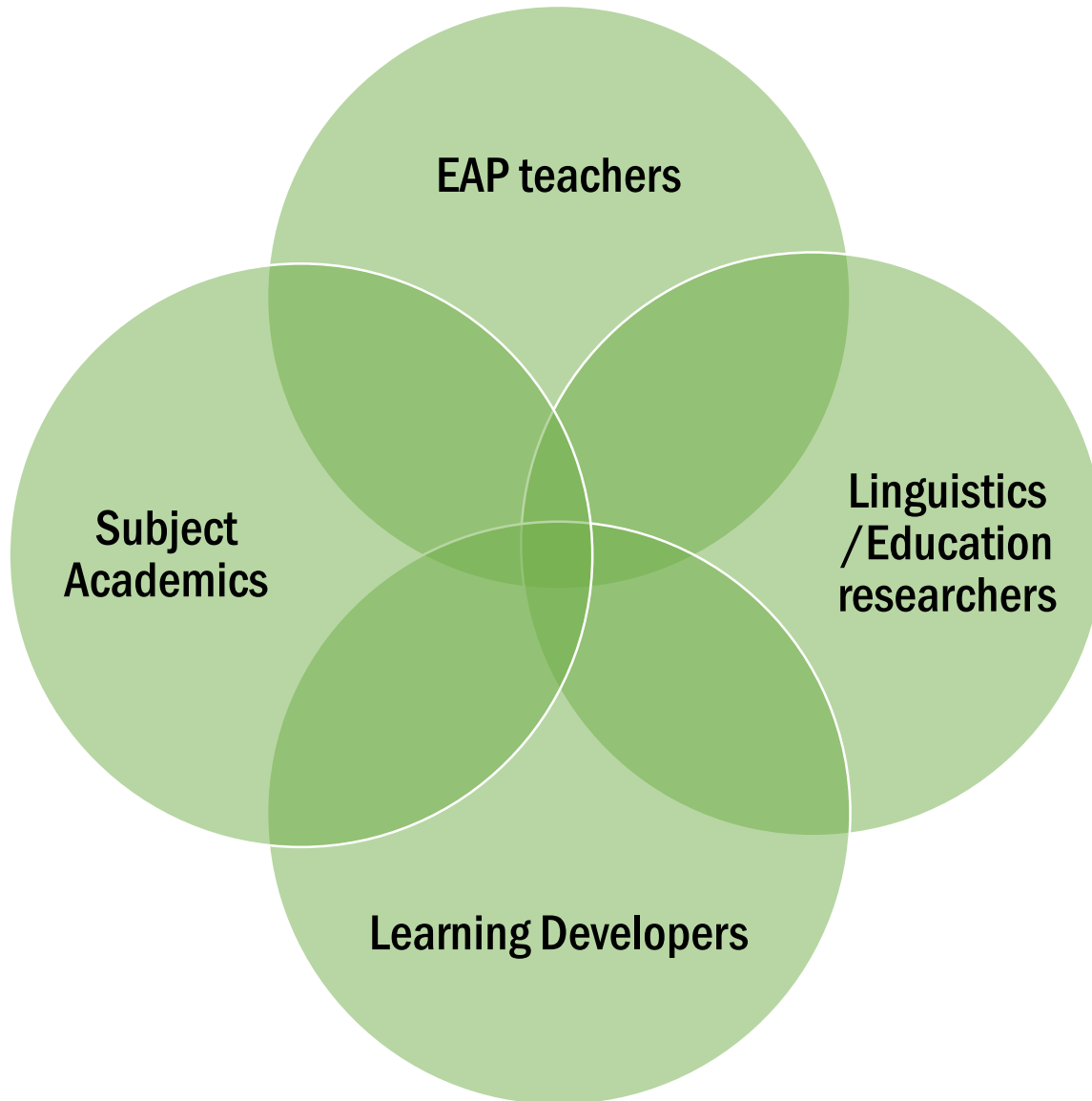
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What is 'Academic Literacy'?

- How might it be defined?
 - What might be included under this concept?
 - Who teaches it and how?
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- Why isn't it straightforward?



Who owns Academic Literacy?



Wasn't expecting to get much out of the essay lecture given that it was delivered by someone who didn't really know the field (especially given how lecturer suggestions in how to write essays are kind of patchy and inconsistent at the best of times), but it was actually really helpful. [...] it clarified a lot of stuff that lecturers haven't really been that good at explaining. (Student feedback)

Text One

- **What academic literacy issues do you identify with this text?**
- **What feedback or advice would you give this student?**



Study Skills Advice

- **Avoid abbreviations and contractions. Write words out in full:**
 - ‘dept.’ as ‘department’
 - ‘e.g.’ as ‘for example’
 - ‘didn’t’ as ‘did not’
 - ‘they’re’ as ‘they are’
 - ‘isn’t’ as ‘is not’
- **Avoid personal pronouns such as ‘I’/‘we’ and ‘you’. Instead, sentences begin in impersonal ways such as ‘it can be seen that...’**
- **Linking ideas together:**
 - **Introducing an alternative viewpoint: conversely; in comparison; on the contrary; in fact; though; although.**

(Cottrell, Study Skills Handbook)



The 'Study Skills' Model

'The study skills model sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill. This approach focusses on the surface features of language form and presumes that students can transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy unproblematically from one context to another'. (Lea and Street, 2006).

- **Study Skills: [Remediation of] Student Deficit.**
 - 'Fix it', atomised [transferable] skills; surface language, grammar, spelling.
 - Sources: behavioural and experimental psychology; programmed learning
 - Student writing as technical and instrumental skill (Robinson-Pant and Street, 2012).



Approaches and issues

- Approaches
 - Bolt-on
 - Generic
 - Diagnostic
- Issues:
 - These are just surface features – what’s ‘academic’ about them?
 - These ‘rules’ aren’t always true or applicable.
 - This is a deficit, remedial approach applying only to some (EAP, WP, SpLD)



Text Two

- What makes this text sound academic?
- Are there any instances where it sounds less academic?
- Can we derive the features of ‘academic’ writing?



Academic Socialisation Advice

Academic writing is clear, concise, focussed, structured and backed up by evidence. Its purpose is to aid the reader's understanding.

Characteristics of academic writing. Academic writing is:

- **Planned and focused:** answers the question and demonstrates an understanding of the subject.
- **Structured:** is coherent, written in a logical order, and brings together related points and material.
- **Evidenced:** demonstrates knowledge of the subject area, supports opinions and arguments with evidence, and is referenced accurately.
- **Formal in tone and style:** uses appropriate language and tenses, and is clear, concise and balanced

Leeds University https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing



The Academic Socialisation Model

- Academic socialization is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The academic socialization model presumes that disciplinary discourses are relatively stable and, once students have learned and understood the ground rules of a particular academic discourse, they are able to reproduce it unproblematically. (Lea and Street, 2006).
- **Academic socialisation: acculturation of students into academic discourse**
 - Inducting students into new 'culture'; focus on orientation to learning and interpretation of learning task, e.g. 'deep', 'surface', 'strategic' learning; homogeneous 'culture', lack of focus on institutional practices, change and power.
 - Sources: social psychology, anthropology, constructivism.
 - Student writing as transparent medium of representation. (Robinson-Pant and Street, 2012).



Approaches and Issues

- **Approaches:**

- Demystifying the ‘institutional practice of mystery’ (Lillis, 2001)
- ‘Academic language is no one’s mother tongue’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994)
- Embedded

- **Issues:**

- These aren’t ‘transferable skills’.
- Focus on product, not process
- These concepts aren’t transparent or straightforward.
- Gatekeeping - this perpetuates social and cultural capital without challenging it.



Texts Two and Three

- Which of these two texts is more academic?
- Why?



The Academic Literacies Model

- Academic literacies is concerned with meaning-making, identity, power and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context. It [...] views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions and social identities. (Lea and Street, 2006).
- **Academic Literacies: Students' negotiation of conflicting literary practices**
 - Literacies as social practices; at level of epistemologies and identities; institutions as sites of/constituted in discourses and power; variety of communicative repertoire, switching with regard to linguistic practices, social meanings and identities,
 - Sources: New Literacy studies; critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics, cultural anthropology.
 - Student Writing as constitutive and contested. (Robinson-Pant and Street, 2012).



Academic Literacies Advice?

In *this* situation,

Authority

- Who can you be?
- Who do you want to be?
- Who do you need to be?

Authorship

- What can you say?
- What do you want to say?
- What do you need to say?

Authorial Presence

- How can you say it?
- How do you want to say it?
- How do you need to say it?

'Heuristic' adapted from Lillis, 2001



Approaches and Issues

- **Approaches:**

- Switching between repertoire – subject, genre, level, language, institution, individual lecturer...
- Negotiation (both senses)
- Focussed on communicative acts (writing, sometimes reading, speaking, listening) but rooted in discourses, practices, identities and relationships
- Not skills possessed but social practices enacted
- Emancipatory - decolonising the Hidden Curriculum

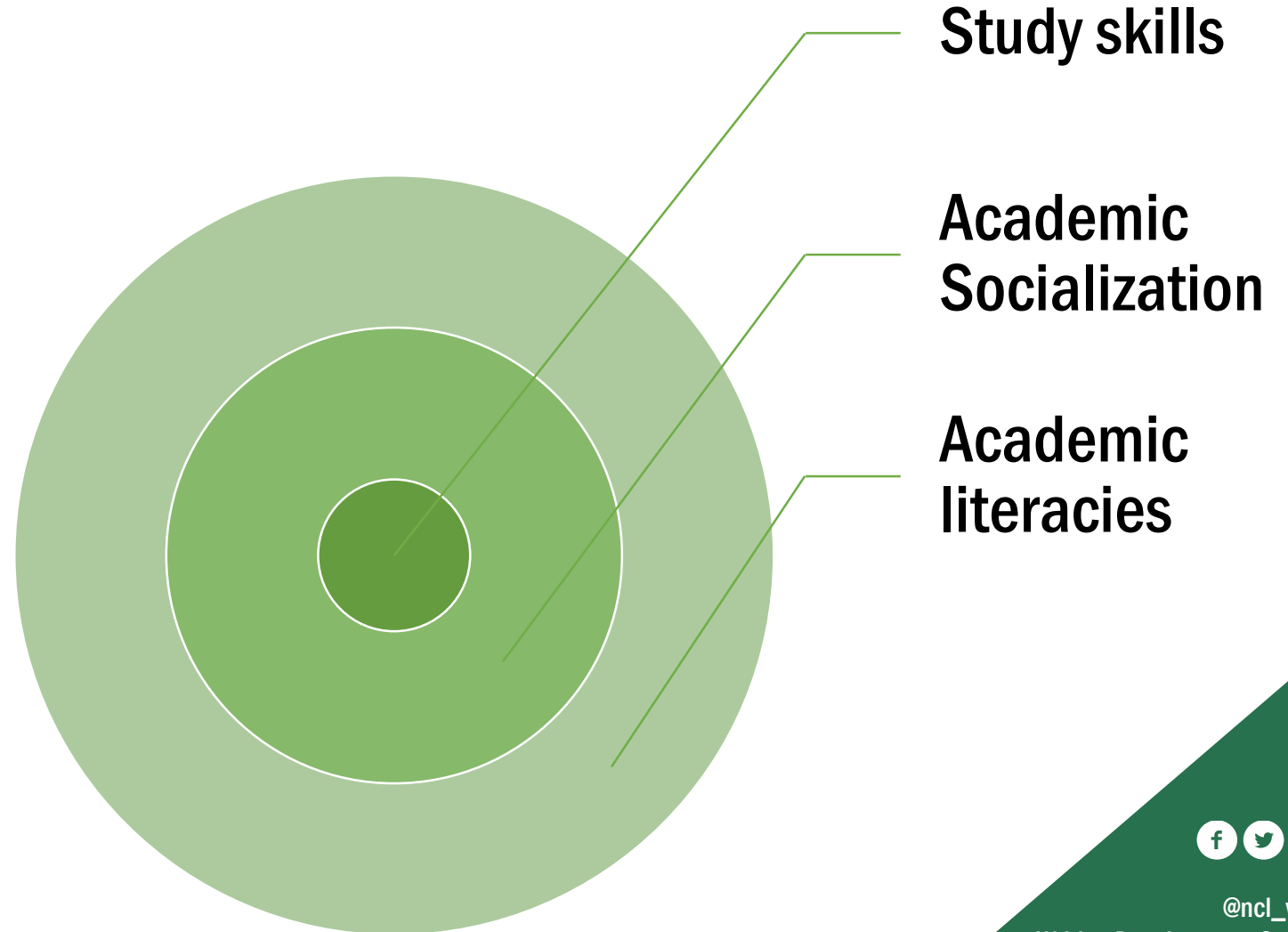
- **Issues:**

- Who is best placed to teach this, and where?
- How do we deal with power and authority?
- How could you – should you - ever establish an academic literacy ‘curriculum’?!
- Too focussed on writing - What about revision, criticality, time management, groupwork?



In summary:

- How might it be defined?
- What might be included?
- Who teaches it and how?



References

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With apologies to

- Dorothy Newbury-Birch (2000). *Drinking, illicit drug use, stress and other lifestyle variables in medical students and doctors*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Newcastle University.
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