Editorial

Special issue: 'Literacy, language and social justice in the changing university'

In this special issue we share insights into how academics understand and research literacy and language in the context of calls for social justice rather than (or as well as) throughput and efficiency. This special issue comes about in the wake of a crucial moment in South African higher education, a moment of intense student led protest that has asked fundamental questions about what higher education is, who it is for, who it excludes. Not since the student led Soweto Uprising of 1976 have young people so insistently asked questions of the flawed educational inheritance that is coming their way. This questioning is not only taking place in South Africa but the local protests have an added urgency and meaning because of the historical context – a generation after apartheid, inequality is still sharply etched despite widening participation. Literacy and language are often implicated in this challenge to business-as-usual, raising questions about knowledge, pedagogy and taken-for-granted forms. It continues to be a crucial topic in this journal, and in critical approaches to teaching and learning in higher education, in South Africa in particular with its post-colonial context where English is in one way or another always a borrowed language, and writing in English carries with it profound dilemmas about identity and being.

Most of the papers here interpret literacy through the influential distinction drawn by Brian Street and amplified in the university context by Mary Lea; an ideological rather than an autonomous conception of literacy. We note the wide use of the plural 'literacies' in these papers to signal an alignment to the ideological angle on literacy. All add interesting nuance to this distinction which is shown to be crucial but difficult to effect. As guest contributor to this special issue, in the concluding piece, Mary Lea looks back to the roots of 'academic literacies', and helpfully notes some of the tensions and dilemmas that have always been present in the field of scholarship in this tradition. Beginning with the tension around the terms – singular literacy or plural literacies – she notes how the distinction between normative and transformative approaches, introduced by Lillis and Scott in 2007, has been taken up. Jacobs (2013) shows how stubborn normative approaches to literacy remain particularly in the SA academy. A further dilemma for Lea is the distinction between 'socialisation' and 'academic literacies' approaches to pedagogy, and how these divisions are hardened through reifying these as theoretical positions which then get further solidified through the written mode, within the limitations of the research article genre. She identifies several studies that turn the lens in multiple directions either theoretically (such as the sociology of knowledge) or in practice (professional literacies, and for her a key point, digital literacies). While the academy seeks ways to 'fix' textual forms through templates, decontextuliased courses, plagiarism detection software and so on, evolving literacy practices create a different picture: 'The sector increasingly values these texts which are regarded as

"academic" but are themselves unstable, fragmented and multi-authored' (Lea, this volume, p. 94). Thus academic literacy is a moving target: as tweets, MOOCS[1] and blogs redefine academic forms, teaching these forms may place academics more familiar and comfortable with 'traditional' texts and forms on the back foot. She ends with a brief introduction to the new materialist and post-humanist approaches to seeing the university as a set of 'precarious networks' and that 'this pull and push between networks is at the heart of how the university is constantly reinventing itself' (p. 95). At the heart of her argument is 'the need for a shift from the practices of individual students to the broader institutional and socio-political landscape' (p. 97).

Thus we begin this special issue with a paper that makes an argument about the relationship between academic literacy/ies and socio-political context – specifically expressed in student-led protests across the South African higher education system. This is Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna's 'Academic literacy and the decontextualised learner'. They ask the question: 'what do these student protests have to do with academic literacy'? Clearly a great deal. They note the many warnings and critiques over time of the dominance of the autonomous model and the concomitant 'decontextualised learner' prevalent in the burgeoning courses that 'teach' academic literacy. Showing that acquiring academic literacy requires profound shifts in student identity, they note that it is not surprising that students describe these often alien encounters on academic literacy courses as 'colonial', or 'white'. Outlining both epistemological and economic neglect of the importance of how students experience 'being and becoming' in the face of the seeming-neutrality of academic practices, they ask for recognition of the deeply social nature of academic engagement. This will require academics to 'embark on a learning journey' way beyond their comfort zones.

Sandile Ngcobo, Nobuhle Ndaba, Bulelwa Nyangiwe, Njabulo Mpungose and Mahomed Jamal's paper takes us into the heart of an academic literacy course in a university of technology where the majority of students do not arrive at university with English as a primary language. Theirs is the only paper to look close-up at how medium of instruction in a colonial language contributes to inequality. Noting that students for whom English is an additional language are often 'subjected to remedial English language programmes that stigmatise them as deficient', they introduce an innovative and critical approach - translanguaging - into a traditional summary writing activity. Ngcobo et al add to the well-established literature on autonomous literacy practices by introducing work that recognises 'language alternation' as the norm rather than the exception. Translanguaging sets out to be transformative in that it aims to expand repertoires and validate hidden practices rather than reinforcing the dominance of existing genres. Showing sensitivity to the ambivalence of staff and students around any activity that is perceived to take away from time spent learning the dominant language (English), their research takes us into the processes and attitudes of students to reveal interesting sharing practices and expanded repertoires. It also reminds us of the important work still needed to work against the 'Anglonormative ideology' that pervades post-colonial education (McKinney 2016).

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[1] Massive Open Online Courses. See https://library.educause.edu/topics/teaching-and-learning/massive-open-online-course-mooc for more information.

Taking us into the discipline of Physics, one of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) disciplines that has not been exempt from questions raised by the call to decolonise curricula - Honjiswa Conana, Deila Marshall and Jennifer Case take us deep into academic practices in the acquisition of problem-solving discourse in two undergraduate Physics classes at a South African university. One of the courses is in the 'mainstream' and the other in an extended degree programme for historically excluded students. They show, using Maton's Legitimation Code Theory, a sociology of knowledge perspective, that it is possible in an extended degree programme to widen access to Physics by making the learning process less alienating. Their findings suggest that it is possible to counter the 'scientisim' of the curriculum and its view of physics as autonomous, through embedding physics knowledge in a transformational approach that sees physics as a process of modelling and predicting phenomena in the world, and unpacks how physics knowledge is constructed as well as contrasted with other knowledge forms. Thus it is possible to combine normative elements with transformative ones allowing both induction and critical engagement so as not to alienate students.

The final two articles take us into new territory, extending academic literacies research in interesting new directions beyond the classroom. Kate le Roux's article, 'Re-imagining mathematics and mathematics education for equity and social justice in the changing South African university' asks why mathematics education has largely escaped scrutiny in the recent student protests, in spite of it being a gatekeeper and major hurdle to degree completion. Taking a discourse approach to mathematics, her starting point is Shay's injunction to consider how curriculum 'at every point […] mirrors back the historical and current unequal distribution of educational resources in the broader society' (2016: np). She works with students' comments about learning mathematics to interrogate and re-imagine mathematics education beyond deficit views. Drawing on insights from mathematics education research internationally, le Roux describes a generative 4-part framework for re-thinking mathematics education to acknowledge access and achievement, but adding the critical concepts of identity and power. This framework has the potential to work productively with the tension between, on the one hand, access and success in mathematics as currently configured, and, on the other hand, not losing sight of the constraints of the dominant practices and their social relations.

The last contribution – Paul Vincent Smith and Alex Baratta's 'Religion and literacies in higher education: scoping the possibilities for faith-based meaning making' - raises major questions for literacy and social justice. Their point of departure is Lillis and Scott's (2007, 13) argument about the need to continue to be open to new ways of making meaning, 'not least by considering the resources that (student) writers bring to the academy as legitimate tools for meaning making'. They note the silence around religious affiliation as a potential source of meaning making. Their question is pertinent in post-colonial South Africa, given its high levels of religious affiliation, but also more widely where religion is at issue as one marker (though often ignored) of 'intersectional' identity. They make the important theoretical move of exploring the 'knowledge' vs 'voice' (standpoint) debate that social realists see as a 'blind spot' in academic literacies thought (that experience trumps knowledge). They see a helpful way forward with regards to religious affiliation as a legitimate tool. Rather than simply asserting it, it should be open to investigation empirically.

Their paper opens this question up with reference to data from a larger study in the United Kingdom. Their paper concludes with a helpful set of questions to open up research around religion as a possible legitimate resource in the academy. This has major implications for a re-imagined academy.

All contributions both assert and trouble the notion of academic literacies, whether through theoretical extension or acknowledging paradoxes and tensions. It is clear that a future agenda in this area involves, in Boughey and McKenna's words, a 'learning journey beyond our comfort zones'. It needs to be theoretically multifaceted and it would do well to start with dilemmas, rather than arriving at them a little apologetically, at the end. What this more complex starting point will mean for writing and researching in the academy, and how we will teach this, is an open, but urgent question. This collection of papers goes some way to beginning this conversation.

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