

**Book review**

Lillis, T., Harrington, K., Lea, M.R. & Mitchell, S. (eds.) 2015. *Working with academic literacies: case studies towards transformative practice*. Fort Collins, Colorado: WAC Clearinghouse.

ISBN 9781602357617. Pbk. viii+433pp.

This collection of chapters by university-based academic literacies practitioners and theorists is a valuable and accessible contribution to the broad field that was more trivially and problematically known in earlier times as ‘student/academic writing support’. The collection is a substantial one and marks out the space of a field of practice that claims recognition. Over 31 chapters academic literacies practitioners describe, reflect on and theorise their experiences of working with students and academics on questions of writing and research in as well as across disciplinary and institutional frames. The chapters are consistently clearly written and well-focused on particular sites of practice, and the theoretical work done is mutually supportive across chapters. Loosely organised into four sections, each with a short introduction, the collection also includes a further six chapters, called Reflections. These are more general pieces than the other chapters, some of them dialogues between noted scholars, each of them thoughtful and interesting explorations of important issues in the development of academic literacies as a field of practice and of current pressing concerns in the field. Spread throughout the book, they enhance and complement the more site-based, practitioner-driven focus of the other chapters.

All the pieces start from a common commitment to work on questions of writing, literacy and language in university settings from within an ‘academic literacies’ orientation. This is signalled in most chapters early on by a brief discussion of the influence of the paper that Mary Lea and Brian Street wrote in 1998. Street and Lea identified three approaches to student writing at universities, namely, a ‘study skills’ approach where writing improvement was seen to be about developing mastery of the grammatical and discourse features of standard academic writing; an ‘academic socialization approach’, which seeks to enculturate students into disciplinary literacy practices and communities; and an ‘academic literacies’ approach, which, they suggested subsumes and extends the other two approaches. Drawing on Street’s influential critique of “autonomous” approaches to literacy, academic literacies research draws attention to power relations and identity processes around student writing in relation to institutional practices, highlights the diversity of writing practices and genres across disciplines and recognises that students bring their histories, identifications, resources and commitments to writing as an activity. The academic literacies orientation says that these complexities shaping writing as an activity can be productively engaged with by university teachers rather than having them treat particular examples of student writing as evidence of lack or deficiency on the part of the students. The academic literacies approach sees writing

and text production as socially situated practices and activities of diverse kinds and looks at extending the range of semiotic resources -- linguistic, rhetorical and technological -- that are allowed in contemporary universities.

Along with Street, Lea, Mary Scott and others, Theresa Lillis's work is frequently cited in the practitioner chapters as foundational or shaping the work of the varied contributors and her role here as first editor signals further the part she has played in field development in academic literacies. There is also noticeable South African influence in the collection, in the work cited and also through chapter contributions from Cecilia Jacobs, Lynn Coleman, Moragh Paxton and Vera Frith, as well as a Reflection piece by Lucia Thesen in which she mulls over post-colonial ideas about writing and identity at South African universities. The other chapters are written predominantly by UK-based academics, but also include contributions from the USA, Canada, Australia, Spain, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Brazil and France. This spread is impressive as are both the clarity and focus of individual chapters along with the coherence across the chapters that brings together ideas, pedagogic case studies and critical commentaries from university-based teacher-researchers describing innovations and projects. The chapters variously describe strategies and interventions which aim to help students reflect on the resources, values and intentions they bring to their university writing, explore alternative ways of meaning and meaning-making, and consider how these tally with institutional commitments, habit and expectations.

The range of university sites, disciplines and research strategies is impressive. Amongst others, they include attempts at 'transformative learning' through efforts to make students 'visible participants of academic practices' in Art and Design and Nursing, and with photojournalism students who are encouraged to visually represent their feelings around attempting to engage with difficult texts. Engineering students in Portugal are led to examine the implicit or hidden features of academic texts; Sociology students elsewhere are encouraged to write auto-ethnographic texts along with their more conventional thesis writing. A programme of workshops in a Canadian university includes a focus on 'play' to encourage students to creatively move out of entrenched ways of writing and thinking; writing circles in an Australian context are used to provide a space for students to consider how academic socialisation has shaped their writing. In one of the Reflection pieces, Mary Scott considers how her own autobiographical trajectory from studying English with Guy Butler at Rhodes to running an Academic Literacies seminar series with Gunther Kress in London shaped her a writer and researcher.

Elsewhere, workshops on disciplinary knowledge construction, identity and power aim to help sports and exercise medicine BSc students who are trying to write publishable papers; a South African study examines the challenges of developing transformative pedagogy in the field of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences; and a Finnish university study tries to find a way around the tensions between calls for clear writing and allowances for diversity on the part of a group of international students. Jane Creaton in the USA gives a conceptually rich and informative account of analysing supervisor feedback comments to highlight the unique features of the student-supervisor relationship in thesis writing. She concludes with a striking two paragraph coda to herself on what she has written, that starts:

Dear Jane,

This was an interesting and enjoyable read. However, it was interesting to note that, despite the implied critique of traditional academic writing conventions, this piece was written largely in accordance with those very conventions. So for example, it is written in the third person and you have avoided positioning yourself explicitly in the text.

Other 'Reflection' pieces include David Russell in conversation with Sally Mitchell; Isabelle Delcambre in conversation with Christiane Donahue; Bruce Horner in conversation with Theresa Lillis; Brian Street in conversation with Mary Lea and Theresa Lillis, all of them rich with ideas. The book will be valuable reading for academic literacy practitioners, in particular, as well as for other university-based language and literacy scholars and also for university educators, more broadly. The book is available as a downloadable pdf at no charge from <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/lillis/>.

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### **Reference**

Lea, M.R. & Street, B.V. 1998. Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2): 157-172.



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