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What are we thinking of?
A critical overview of approaches to developing academic literacy in South African higher education

ABSTRACT

In South African higher education, the development of academic literacy is often seen to be the responsibility of those working in the field that is known as 'academic development'.

This paper uses an analysis of submissions to the 2012 annual conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa, the forum most used by those working in the field to present their work, (i) to examine critically the way the construct of academic literacy is understood by practitioners in the field and (ii) to consider the approaches to the development of literacy to which these understandings lead.

Key words: academic literacies, academic development, higher education, reading, writing, skills, practices

1.   Introduction

Language and literacy have long been a focus of attention in the field commonly known as 'academic development' in South African higher education. Much of the initial work conducted in the field from the early 1980s onwards, focused on the status of black students as speakers of English as an additional language (Boughey, 2002, 2012). As Bradbury (1993) points out, during the apartheid years, the attribution of difficulties experienced by students as they engaged with higher learning to their language status was important in that it allowed any idea that their experiences were related to innate differences in cognition and thought to be dismissed. The 'second language' tag thus became a means of eliding the differences that had been constructed by apartheid.

Much early language work tended to be based on what is termed by Christie (1985) 'a model of language as an instrument of communication'. This model constructs language as a vehicle for transmitting pre-formed ideas and concepts. Communication is then understood to rest on the accuracy of the means of transmission or, in more simple terms, on 'getting the code right'. A model of language as an instrument of communication thus leads to a focus on teaching the forms of language such as grammar and punctuation.

In many respects, the adoption of a model of language as an instrument of communication in the early phase of academic development work in South Africa can be seen to have drawn on developments in the field of foreign language teaching more generally. Pennycook (1994) points to the way in which what he terms the 'English language teaching industry' grew from the 1960s in order to exert its influence on the developing world. This 'industry' was based on theory and pedagogy developed in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and, more latterly, Australia. The identification of 'functions', or 'uses' for which language can be used (Wilkins, 1976) an interest in teaching English for Specific Purposes and other developments then led to the production of text books dealing with academic English. Considering the power of the 'industry', it is not surprising that the response of early workers in the field of academic development to students' language and literacy related experiences can be seen to have been influenced by this global phenomenon.

As an alternative to a 'model of English as an instrument of communication', Christie (*ibid*) points to a 'model of language as a resource' for meaning making, which draws on Halliday's (1973, 1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL sees language use as involving a system of choices made on the basis of understandings of a 'context of culture' and a 'context of situation'. In academic contexts, such understandings would prompt us, for example, to use the word 'child' rather than 'kid' to refer to a young human being or to spell the word 'you' as 'Y-O-U' rather than using the shorthand 'U' because of the values and attitudes which permeate both the broader academic context as well as more narrow institutional and disciplinary contexts. Sadly, although many of the approaches to language and literacy development that have dominated the field of academic development have emphasised academic contexts, they have not always drawn on an appreciation of the way access to socially constructed values, beliefs and attitudes in the 'context of culture' and the 'context of situation' impact on students'

language use and literacy practices. In failing to appreciate these values and attitudes, they have also ignored the role of power and have tended to construct language use, and language teaching, as socially, politically and culturally neutral.

Although understandings of the 'language problem' were arguably constructed quite narrowly in the early years of academic development work, a pair of papers published in 1990 (Starfield, 1990a, 1990b) introduced a new perspective on language and literacy issues and succeeded, as they did so, in challenging dominant understandings that the perceived problematic nature of students' language and literacy related experiences was related to their lack of mastery of the language *per se.* Work conducted on bilingual education in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s had resulted in Cummins' (see Cummins, 1986; Cummins & Swain, 1986) positing a model of language proficiency consisting of two intersecting axes with the horizontal axis describing the amount of contextual support available for making meaning in language use and the vertical axis representing the cognitive demand involved. This then allowed a distinction to be made between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

BICS describes the use of language to communicate about cognitively undemanding topics in situations where rich paralinguistic support for meaning making exists. Most everyday, face-to-face language use therefore calls for BICS. CALP, on the other hand, involves using language in relation to cognitively demanding, and often abstract, subject matter in situations with little or no support for meaning making other than the linguistic sign system. The need to read an academic text or produce an academic assignment could thus be seen to call for CALP.

The BICS/CALP distinction allowed academic development practitioners to conceptualise their students' language and literacy experiences afresh since it could be argued that the difficulties they faced were not due to language use *per se* but rather to the need to use language in 'context reduced' situations for cognitively demanding tasks. In other words, it allowed practitioners to see that students' language experiences were *context related.* This was important as it offered the opportunity of shifting attention away from students themselves as the 'source' of language and literacy related 'problems'.

This move continued as, in the early 1990s, the term 'academic literacy' began to creep into work produced in the field of South African academic development (see, for example, Bond, 1993; Prinsloo, Millar & Morphet, 1993).

In 2013, the term 'academic literacy' is widely used in the field although it is often appropriated to signify something diametrically opposed to that intended in the underpinning theory. In many cases, the use of the term arguably draws on some of the earlier understandings of students' 'language problems' outlined above and the pedagogical approaches to which these gave rise.

This article begins by exploring the construct of 'academic literacy' as it pertains to

South African higher education before moving on to look at the way the term was conceptualised at one conference central to the academic development movement, the 2012 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA). It does this because it is through the work of those contributing to the conference that much language and literacy development is attempted. Understanding how the field conceptualises academic literacy and the way these conceptualisations not only lead to understandings of students' experiences but also to pedagogical approaches must therefore underpin any statements about what needs to be done in the future.

2.   Academic literacy and South African higher education

The work of social anthropologist Brian Street (see, for example, 1983, 1995) gave us an alternative to an understanding of literacy as involving merely the technical ability to encode and decode to and from print by positing what is termed the 'ideological model' of literacy.

Although the 'ideological model' acknowledges that mastery of sign-sound correlations is important in some forms of literacy, it goes beyond the 'technical' in that it argues that literacy also involves a socially embedded disposition to interact with certain kinds of texts in certain kinds of ways. These texts might even be minimally linked to written language. They could, for example, include road signs or maps or other visual texts commonly associated with the internet and engagement with them could include 'talk around text'. The term 'literacy' thus comes to encompass much more than the silent reading usually associated with higher education. All this leads to the idea that literacy is a multiple rather than a unitary phenomenon and to the claim that we need to speak of, and identify, multiple *literacies*, rather than a singular literacy. From this perspective, even the term 'academic literacy' is problematic as it becomes possible to identify multiple academic *literacies*, related to disciplinary difference and the values which underpin these, rather than a single generic set of practices often conceptualised as 'skills' (see, for example, Lea & Street, 1998).

The social embeddedness associated with the ideological model has important implications for South African higher education which, like other higher education systems across the world, has opened its doors to a diverse range of students in the last twenty or so years. These 'new' students come from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds and, thus, bring with them experience of a range of literacies. As they enter the university, they are confronted with a range of literacies, each of which must be mastered if membership of the social group comprising the 'discipline' is to be achieved.

The assumption has always been that schooling prepares students for higher education. Once the notion of multiple literacies is acknowledged, then it becomes possible to identify school based literacies that are different to literacies in higher education. Geisler (1994)

reviews a wide range of research that shows how literacy in schools differs from literacies in universities and, therefore, why it cannot be assumed that schools prepare learners for higher education. Since Geisler published her review, school based literacies have changed even further thanks to the widespread use of computers and the internet for teaching purposes. In a recent newspaper article, for example, Van Wyk (2013) draws on a recent doctoral study (Harley, 2012) to describe how learners, in a resource-poor South African context, copied and pasted from internet sources into a school project and how one learner believed that, as she had found the information copied into her project on the internet, it was 'hers' to include. This is a telling insight into the development of a literacy at school which will not serve the learner well in higher education.

Even if schools do support the development of literacies that resemble more closely those of the universities, questions need to be asked about the role of the home in supporting that development. Learners returning to homes where the practices associated with 'academic' literacy are affirmed and even extended arguably have a better chance of mastering that literacy than those who return to homes were other literacies are practiced (see Heath, 1983 on this point). This explains research which shows how the privileges enjoyed by those from middle class homes with educated parents in gaining access to and success in higher education are maintained in spite of increased access for all as higher education systems have grown (see Arum, Gamoran & Shavit, 2012 for a discussion).

Given South African history, social class and the educational background of parents intersects with race. Research that shows how white students, admitted to South African institutions of higher education in 2000, consistently outperformed their black peers regardless of the programme or institution in which they were enrolled (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007) also adds weight to this point. What is arguably the case, therefore, is that home based literacies are intricately linked to an individual's chances of accessing and succeeding in higher education regardless of the type of schooling available. Where home based literacies differ substantially from both school based and academic literacies, then the mastery of literacies associated with school and university may not be affirmed. Where home based literacies support and affirm school based and academic literacies, then the individual's chances of mastering both are increased.

Street's identification of the ideological model of literacy marked a 'social turn' in understanding reading and writing. In South African academic development, the work of James Paul Gee took this further. Gee's (2008:154) notion of a 'Discourse' (deliberately capitalised) pushes us to consider reading and writing as linked to values and beliefs and, importantly, to identity itself. A Discourse, argues Gee, is

> ... composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/ reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognized activities (original emphasis).

A Discourse can thus be likened to a 'role' played to signal membership of a particular social group. Specific ways of reading and writing may then be part of that role.

Gee (*ibid*, 156) goes on to make a distinction between primary and secondary Discourses, where a primary Discourse is understood to give 'us our initial and often enduring sense of self'. For Gee, then, the primary Discourse is intricately related to our 'being' or personal identity. A person's primary Discourse results from being socialized into the group into which we are born. Multiple secondary Discourses are acquired later, over time, as a result of interactions with institutions other than the home, for example through membership of a religious group, through employment and so on. A secondary Discourse could thus be acquired through schooling although, as noted above, some primary Discourses resemble school-based and academic Discourses more than others.

Gee's insistence on understanding Discourse as a way of 'being' and of seeing literacy practices as 'embedded in Discourses' (*ibid,* 162) prompts us to consider what we ask of some students entering South African higher education in different ways. Increasingly, students enter our universities with primary Discourses that are very different to those we seek them to acquire through their immersion in the disciplinary or vocationally based programmes in which they are enrolled. If literacy practices are embedded in those Discourses, then we need to understand those practices as related to valuing and believing and to a person's *identity* and sense of self. The need to acquire secondary Discourses as an individual enters school or moves into higher education may then present profound challenges. From this perspective, reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and so on, are not asocial, acultural, apolitical activities but are intricately related to a sense of self. To move one step further, the socially embedded practices of the secondary Discourse are then much more than the neutral 'skills' we claim they are as we develop courses intended to develop academic literacy.

The example of so-called 'critical reading skills' serves to illustrate this point. In academic contexts, critical reading involves using background knowledge and knowledge of other texts to interrogate statements made in another. Doing this involves a *disposition* or willingness to question a text rather than simply believing it at face value with a view to repeating it thereafter. In courses intended to develop academic literacy, however, critical reading is often taught as a method or set of techniques, as in the case of the SQ3R – survey, question, read, recite, review method (Robinson, 1946). Such methods or strategies do not take account of the challenges to the individual who, in order to read in the 'critical' manner sanctioned by the academy, must often adopt a different (and possibly uncomfortable) position in relation to the text as a reader which challenges her/ his value and belief system.

The practice of referencing offers another example. In many courses, referencing is taught as a technical 'skill' along with the injunction that plagiarism involves the stealing of another person's words or thoughts. As Van Wyk's (2013) example noted above shows us, learners in South African schools may have very different understandings of what it means to 'own' ideas and thoughts, understandings which are related to

circumstances in which they find themselves[1]. While a course intended to develop academic literacy might be able to teach the technicalities of referencing, what chance is there that the need to reference will be understood unless changes to conceptions of knowledge also occur? Academic knowledge is built on a series of claims, each of which is evidence based. In many cases, the evidence for these claims comes from the work of others that is then referenced. For students to understand the value attached to referencing in academic contexts, they first need to grant themselves the ability to question the knowledge claims of others (by interrogating the evidence used to support them) and then make claims of their own by drawing on appropriately referenced work. In many cases this will require a shift in a sense of 'being' that is likely to be more difficult for some than for others and that, in any case, is not likely to happen in a first year course.

In conclusion, then, what are the implications for research and theory related to academic literacy in South African higher education? Firstly, it is clear that understandings of the socially embedded nature of literacy have profound consequences for the ways in which we understand what students can and cannot do when they first enter university. Given the very different contexts in which they have been socialized, the ways they use language and the language related practices of reading and writing they engage in must be understood as involving more than mastery of what might be termed the 'technicalities' of language use.

Secondly, given the relationship of socialization to 'being' and identity, we need to take account of the shifts required of many students and of the impacts these will have on them as individuals. From this perspective, the need to acquire an academic literacy can be seen as a challenge to a sense of self that is not to be underestimated.

As indicated earlier, given the history and circumstances of South African higher education, the task of developing academic literacy has largely been allocated to those working in the field of academic development. This is especially the case following the introduction of Extended Programmes with an Integrated Foundation Phase on a large scale thanks to funding provided by the Department of Higher Education and Training. These programmes 'stretch' the curriculum of a three year programme leading to a bachelor's degree or a diploma over four years, allowing for the insertion of 120 additional credits worth of 'foundational' tuition. Most, if not all, of these programmes use some of these credits to develop language and literacy.

In the context of this observation, this paper now moves to an exploration of the way academic literacy is conceptualized, and to the pedagogical approaches to which these conceptualisations lead, in the South African academic development movement. The exploration is based on an analysis of submissions to present at the 2012 annual conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa.

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1   In Van Wyk's example, learners had to walk for more than an hour to gain access to the internet at the nearest public library.

The annual HELTASA conference attracts large numbers of academic development practitioners. The 2012 conference, hosted by the University of Stellenbosch, was particularly large, featuring no fewer than 214 presentations. It is argued that the conference therefore offers a useful opportunity to explore what is happening in the field of academic development in South Africa and, given the focus on academic literacy in the field, what is happening in relation to the development of academic literacy itself.

3.   Research design

In 2008, Scottish academic Tamsin Haggis delivered a keynote paper at the Higher Education Close Up Conference hosted by the University of Cape Town entitled 'What have we been thinking of?'. The paper (which later appeared as Haggis, 2009), was based on an analysis of forty years' worth of research on student learning in higher education. Haggis used an analysis of article titles published in three leading international journals in the field to answer the question 'What have we been thinking of?'. This paper follows Haggis in conducting a similar sort of analysis in relation to academic literacy. However, since the analysis focuses only on one, very recent, conference, the question has been adapted to 'What are we thinking of?'.

The analysis was conducted firstly by searching an electronic copy of the conference programme for keywords. The keywords were: 'literacy', 'reading', 'writing', 'language', 'communication' and, lastly, 'skills'. Any abstract containing any of these keywords was copied and pasted into a file. Duplicates (identified because two or more of the keywords appeared in a single abstract) were then eliminated. This resulted in the identification of 71 abstracts. The use of keywords allowed for the identification of abstracts on a range of topics and not only literacy or language development. For example, a presentation on a tutorial programme was also included since the programme aimed to work with students' writing. This method allowed a wide range of academic development work encompassing elements of the development of language and literacy to be captured.

The abstracts were then subjected to repeated scrutiny in order to identify dominant language and literacy related discourses. The construct of discourse used for this part of the research followed Kress' (1989:7) definition of discourses as:

> . . . systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension – what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally.

In the case of this study, the 'institution' of the definition was taken to be the field of South

African academic development. Following critical realists (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer, 2001) discourses were understood as enduring mechanisms with a 'relative autonomy' (*ibid*: 3) from human agents. Although discourses exist independently of human agency (and are, in this sense, 'real') they are dependent on this agency for their reproduction. The exercise of agency through engagement with a discourse was then understood to lead to the emergence of events (which, in this case, would include courses or workshops intended to develop academic literacy) and to experiences of those events.

In the case of this study, discourses were understood to be signalled by words and phrases identified as a result of repeated scrutiny of the abstracts. These words and phrases were captured until 'systematically organised sets of statements' (i.e. discourses) about academic literacy became apparent.

4.   Findings: What are we thinking of?

Three main discourses emerged from the analysis.

4.1   The skills discourse

Although some of the papers at the 2012 HELTASA conference undoubtedly drew on the sort of theorised understandings of academic literacy outlined above, these were by far in the minority as by far the most dominant discourse in the abstracts constructed literacy as a set of neutral skills. The range of language and literacy related skills identified as needing to be developed include: 'generic skills', 'language skills for academic purposes', 'language and study skills', 'academic literacy and study skills', 'communication (English) skills' and 'academic reading and writing . . . skills'.

Lea and Street (1998) identity three models of research on student writing: 'study skills', 'academic socialisation' and 'academic literacy'. They go on to note that each model encapsulates the other becoming progressively more complex – that is that the 'academic literacy' model encapsulates both the constructs of study skills and academic socialisation adding to these two earlier perspectives with its own understandings.

As already indicated, Street's (1983, 1995) 'ideological' model understands literacy as a set of socially embedded *practices* that can be seen to be related to values and attitudes about what should be written and read and how that reading and writing should take place. These practices are developed over time through apprenticeship to the group in which they are embedded. According to Gee (2008:176):

> Literacy … is a product of acquisition, not learning, that is it requires exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings, and (overt) teaching is not liable to be very successful – it may even initially get in the way.

Many of the abstracts cite courses or modules that aim to teach the 'skills' listed above, sometimes only over the course of a semester or, at best, over an academic year. One abstract, for example, reports on a course in the foundation phase of a four-year, extended (i.e. funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training) programme that

> … aims to equip students with all the academic literacy and study skills that they will need to successfully complete all of their discipline-specific subjects.

If the understandings of literacy posited by the ideological model and theorists and researchers in the field of New Literacy Studies are to inform practice in South African academic development, then some serious work needs to take place in order to challenge dominant 'skills based' discourses and the belief that a single course can develop academic literacy.

There is awareness in the abstracts that the common approach in extended programmes of spreading the first year of a three year degree over two years and inserting skills based modules is not necessarily successful. One abstract describes a programme in which:

> … [s]tudents are granted two study years to complete their first academic year, and developmental modules in generic skills, language skills for academic purposes, and mathematical literacy are offered with the mainstream modules

before going on to note that:

> [t]he failure and dropout rates remained high, however. We realised that granting students more time to complete their studies does not necessarily improve their performance.

The solution, in this particular case, was to implement a project:

> … in which students are supported to master basic academic and generic skills, and integrate these skills with the academic content of their mainstream modules.

This so called 'infused' approach is common in particular kinds of courses in extended programmes where a regular course is 'augmented' by teaching intended to develop literacy and conceptual understandings. The periods allocated to teach the 'augmented' course are then increased by a minimum of 50%. Clearly, this sort of approach is preferable to 'stand alone' courses that teach 'skills' in complete isolation from disciplinary context usually by drawing on 'popular' rather than academic texts and by getting students to write 'essays'. However, they are not without problems. Academic

development practitioners, who may themselves not have mastered the conventions of the particular disciplines they are supporting, usually provide the 'augmented' portion of these courses. The extent to which academics teaching the discipline are prepared to guide the academic development practitioner or to engage in the discussions, identified by Jacobs (2010a) as critical to this sort of pedagogy, that will allow the practitioner to begin to identify conventions which may be covert is questionable and is often dependent on the relationship the practitioner is able to forge with the disciplinary expert.

4.2   The discourse of the workplace

The range of 'skills' identified in the 'skills' discourse encompasses more than 'traditional' understandings of academic literacy. Some of these 'skills', such as 'employability skills' strongly relate to the world of work. The term 'competencies', which also appears in the abstracts, can also be seen to draw from discourses constructing the university as a means of providing a global economy with highly skilled 'knowledge workers'.   In the South African context, what is here termed the 'discourse of the workplace' can be seen to relate to the emergence of vocationally focused programmes at universities of technology and comprehensive universities and to discourses which bemoan graduate unemployment and, indeed, lack of preparation for employment.

The allocation of a vocational training role to universities calls for sophisticated understandings of what it means to read and write in diverse contexts. Harran's (2006) study of report writing in the automotive industry, for example, identifies both literacy events and literacy practices which differ from those characterising literacy in the universities. For example, engineers used a template for report writing although an increased use of software such as PowerPoint to communicate with global audiences was also identified. Claims are frequently made in popular discourse for the value of the academic essay in developing literacy although, as researchers such as Lea and Street (1998) also argue, disciplinary requirements are such that the ability to write in one field does not mean that a student is able to write in another. While it could be argued that writing practices such as producing multiple drafts of a piece of writing do transfer across the production of genres, the extent to which these practices are taught is highly questionable as is the extent to which so called 'language specialists' themselves have experience of working with genres other than the academic. The notion of 'employability skills' therefore requires careful consideration of what this might mean for literacy development in contemporary South African universities.

Yet another conceptualisation of literacy related to the world outside the university can be seen in the notion of '21st Century skills' defined as 'the fusion between the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) with the four Cs (critical thinking and problem-solving; creativity and innovation; communication and collaboration)'. A Google search for '21st Century skills' led to the website (www.p21.org) for an organisation devoted to infusing these into school-based learning in order to support the United States as it 'continues to compete in a global economy that demands innovation'.   '21st Century skills' therefore appear to relate to an identity related to the global economy. While South Africa needs to be able to compete globally, the extent to which the 'skills' required for the '21st Century'

will hold meaning for students from, for example, rural working class backgrounds, needs to be questioned, given the challenges to 'being' identified earlier in this paper.

Widened conceptualisations of literacy, in what has been termed the 'discourse of the workplace' in this paper, also referred to 'soft skills' (defined as 'skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour, rather than to formal or technical knowledge'), 'cognitive and social skills', and 'life skills'. Of interest here, and paralleling Street's (1983, 1995) critique of the 'autonomous' model of literacy, which sees reading and writing as culturally and socially neutral activities, is the neutrality afforded to behaviour, which includes cognition. 'Knowing' in the university can be different to knowing in other contexts. An academic knowledge claim, for example, is theoretically substantiated by evidence that is produced according to discipline specific rules and conventions. Ballard and Clanchy (1988:19), for example, stress that 'the demands of a *culture* of knowledge - and its disciplinary sub–cultures - rather than … the more individual psychological dimensions of study' impact on literacy.

The way a culture of knowledge constructs knowledge impacts on the way that knowledge is represented through language. Knowing and language are thus intricately linked – and both are socially and culturally constructed. In contrast, the conceptualization of 'skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour' speak rather to individualized conceptions of knowing and being that Ballard and Clanchy (*ibid*) eschew.

4.3   Searching for theory

In spite of the dominant discourses constructing academic literacy as dependent on the acquisition of skills and as related to 'being' that is autonomous of social contexts, there is some evidence in the abstracts of practitioners 'searching' for theory to explain observations and experiences of attempts to develop literacy. One abstract, for example, referred to research that used a test of academic literacy in which performance on the test was correlated with a number of factors. The results showed that:

> [s]tudents who were rated by the Test of Academic Literacy Levels as being less at risk had higher affective levels for reading, whereas those who were deemed to be at high risk of failure academically had lower affective levels for reading and indicated poor reading backgrounds…

Arguably, the 'affective levels' cited in the abstract could relate to socially embedded dispositions to read the academic texts used in the test. The abstract notes, however, that:

> … information on reading literacy at tertiary level and with regard to socio-affective factors that influence reading proficiency is sparse.

Had the author(s) of the abstract looked in the field of New Literacy Studies, where the likes of Gee's (*ibid*) and Street's (*ibid*) work would be located, then research and theory would have been available to illuminate the link between what is termed 'affect' and

literacy. It is a matter of concern that work based on a test of *Academic Literacy* does not engage with the theoretical area from which the term emerges.

5.   And where to now?

That conceptualisations of academic literacy in the data are so far removed from the theory that underpins 'ideological' notions of literacy is not surprising. As Boughey (2007) has pointed out, the effects of higher education policy on the movement has resulted in the pursuit of an uneven trajectory over time. Although the movement grew in the early 1990s, by the end of the decade, academic development centres were being closed across the country with the resultant loss of jobs as universities sought to confront economic stringency. The concomitant result was then the loss of expertise in relation to the development of language and literacy to the higher education system more widely.

As more policy impacted higher education in the 2000s, the call for individuals with expertise in teaching and learning re-emerged. The introduction of funding for Extended Programmes with an integrated foundation phase noted earlier in this paper, for example, led to a demand for individuals who could work with language and literacy in informed ways. Many of those who had worked with language and literacy in the 1990s had left the field, however, with the result that new practitioners had to be employed. As this happened, in my opinion, commonsense assumptions about language and literacy, which had been dispelled as a result of engaging with theory and research in the 1990s, resurfaced and came to underpin practice.

Grant based funding for Extended Programmes has not helped matters. Until 2012, all Extended Programmes were funded in three-year cycles with the result that universities were reluctant to offer those employed to work in them anything other than short-term contracts. In some cases, these contracts were for fewer than twelve months and job insecurity drove many to seek other kinds of employment. As a result, it has not been possible to develop the cadre of highly qualified and experienced practitioners so badly needed by the field.

In 2012, thanks to a change in policy, Extended Programmes were moved onto the same basis for funding as other programmes. This move signals an opportunity for universities to offer more permanent employment and to support academic development staff as they pursue postgraduate qualifications and thereby deepen their theoretical engagement with their field.

The analysis of abstracts from the 2012 HELTASA conference shows that 'what we are thinking of' is far removed from theory produced in the field of New Literacy Studies characterized by the work of the likes of Street (1983, 1995), Gee (2008), Baynham (1995), Barton (1994) and, in South Africa, Prinsloo (see, for example, Prinsloo & Baynham, 2013; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996), McKenna (see, for example, 2004), Bharuthram and McKenna (2006), Jacobs (see for example, 2009, 2010a, 2010b), Paxton (see, for

example, 2007a, 2007b) and Boughey (2002, 2005). The extent to which initiatives can draw on this vein of work to inform practice in South African higher education remains to be seen. What is without doubt, however, is the need for it to do so.

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