

Academic Literacies in Higher Education

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THE FOCUS OF THIS ISSUE IS THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC LITERACIES to the successful performance of students at the tertiary level. According to Lea and Street (2006), “The term ‘Academic Literacies’ refers to the diverse and multiple literacies found in academic contexts such as disciplinary and subject matter courses.” During the last two decades, this ‘Academic Literacies’ approach has received increased attention as a disciplinary field.

The Academic Literacies approach

- gives priority to practice over text;
- regards academic writing as a social practice;
- operates on the view that reading and writing practices vary based on issue, context and genre;
- focuses on student, lecturer, and institutional issues.

Several epistemological, strategic, and ideological positions are applied in the research which is designed to investigate academic communication, within and across disciplines. Academic Literacies is critical to students’ success in Higher Education, particularly because they are assessed mainly through their written work.

Contributors were invited to write articles which address, but were not limited to the following areas:

- The teaching/learning of discipline-specific writing;
- Genre-based writing models and the teaching of Academic Literacies;
- Academic Literacies and Information Literacy;
- Academic Literacies and instruction in the teaching/learning of foreign languages;
- Academic Literacies in the networked academic environment;
- Student Support Services in the development of Academic Literacies;
- Academic Literacies and students’ sociocultural backgrounds.

This volume enjoys wide support from across The University of the West Indies and from other tertiary institutions. The volume comprises twelve carefully selected

articles which bring a wide range of topics, ideas, and disciplines that help to expand the debate about the Academic Literacies approach. Each paper contributes its own unique dimension to the discussions. Together they all emphasise the centrality of Academic Literacies in the tertiary level context.

Academic Literacies and the Teaching of Writing

Claudette Coote-Thompson's, "Identifying the Quantum and Nature of Skills Transfer from Research to Professional and Technical Writing by a Group of University Students" is an admirable study which exhibits excellent research on the topic. Coote-Thompson's study investigates the nature of research skills transfer from research to professional and technical writing. She provides detailed analyses of graduate students' writing portfolios and structured interview responses and shows that they carry over a range of research skills to writing for related, but different genres. The results reveal that professional and technical writing – a critical workplace competence – and selecting professional and technical writing teaching approaches will aid in developing appropriate transfer for writing tasks beyond the classroom.

Carmeneta Jones' "Science Students' Perceptions of the Use of WhatsApp, Read Aloud and Tutor Scaffolding for Self-initiated Learning in a Discipline-specific Writing Course" reveals that despite the immense popularity of WhatsApp among university students, they do not necessarily use such applications for academic purposes. Jones' action-study focuses on 32 science students' perception of the use of peer WhatsApp networking, read aloud and solicited tutor scaffolding as a means of self-initiated learning in their foundation writing course. The results are revealing and intriguing.

Debra Ferdinand-James' and Claudette Medina-Charles' "Peer-Review of Classroom Teaching: Addressing Student, Lecturer, and Institutional Improvement Using an Academic Literacy Approach" discusses how a graded review quiz intervention helped to close gaps in students' knowledge of the previous lesson, in readiness to cue their understanding of the new lesson material. The benefits of such quizzes are discussed including improved lecturer-student interaction, and teacher repetition for affirmation of students' answers.

Academic Literacies and Information Literacy Instruction

With "The Significance of Information Literacy Instruction in the Preparation of Jamaican Students for Tertiary Studies", *Rosemarie Heath* and *Rashanna Sinclair*

propose a path for policy makers, educators and information professionals through the elucidation of the nature and importance of information literacy in education. They examine the current state of information literacy instruction in the Jamaican school system and offer recommendations for the development of Information Literacy Instruction (ILI) in Jamaican schools.

Defining Literacy in the Context of the Academic Literacies Approach

Kemoy Shureen Edwards analyses literacy by discussing the cultural, cognitive, historical and political factors involved in “Teaching and Defining Literacy Through a Sociocultural Lens”. In her discussion of the link between literacy and culture, Edwards examines the correlation between literacy and cognition and also considers the relevance of Bloom’s taxonomy by highlighting the significance of higher order skills and levels of comprehension, linking them to the cognitive capacity of students and critical literacy.

Academic Literacies and Computer Sciences

In the paper “Academic Literacies in Computing at The UWI” by *Daniel T. Fokum, Daniel N. Coore* and *Gunjan Mansingh*, the researchers establish connections among competent writing, reading comprehension, critical thinking and Academic Literacy. They studied the relationships between the average performance in UWI Foundation courses and performance in four core advanced Computing courses at The UWI, as well as the overall average Computing performance. Of the four core courses examined, two are heavily quantitative with minimal writing, and the other two involve projects that require substantial written reports. They conclude that there were statistically significant associations between performance in the UWI Foundation courses, the quantitative core Computing courses and also, the overall Computing performance, except in one of the project courses.

Oral Performance in Standard English

“Jamaican Students’ Confidence, Sociolinguistic Background and Oral Performance in Standard English,” by *Elizabeth Montoya-Stemann* reports on research into the ability of drama students at the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica to perform a poem using Standard English (SE). The task is important since the oral use of SE at this college level is

compulsory for assessment. This study analyses the correlations among the students' self-reported levels of confidence performing a poem using SE, their assessed oral performance, and their sociolinguistic and educational backgrounds. The data were drawn from questionnaires and an assessment of students' oral performance of the poem. The analysis found that sociolinguistic and educational background and exposure to SE connect to the students' level of confidence in SE.

Reflections on the Work of Dennis Craig

Yewande Lewis-Fokum's "Revisiting the Work of Dennis Craig in Light of Teacher Preparation for the English Language Secondary School Classroom", is a critical inquiry into the work of Dennis Craig and its usefulness to the Jamaican classroom in terms of improving academic literacies. It is a conceptual paper which also includes examples from classroom activities at the tertiary level in preparing pre-service teachers to teach in the secondary school English language classroom within a Creole-speaking context. This focus on rethinking Craig's work is important because his research has formed the foundation for many scholars. Lewis-Fokum proposes that there needs to be more research in terms of operationalising some of Craig's pedagogical recommendations (Lewis-Fokum abstract).

Translation and Foreign Language Teaching/Learning

This volume includes three (3) very welcome papers on Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, and one (1) on Translation Literacy. They add an important dimension to the discussion regarding Academic Literacies. *Tamara de Inés Antón* writes about the significance of translation literacy in the higher education classroom. She argues for an understanding of an academic skill, a language and cultural awareness learning process, and a discourse practice, essential to both the broad international higher education context and the multilingual Caribbean region in particular. She suggests that translation literacy allows the student to better recognise the specificities of different textual genres, and to understand disciplinary discourses as historically, culturally and linguistically situated (de Inés Antón abstract).

In a carefully crafted article titled "Foreign Language Acquisition: The Teaching/Learning of Spanish in the Jamaican Context", *Nadine Barnett* and *Anthonesha Henry* highlight the challenges and the relevant theories that arise from the teaching/learning of Spanish as a foreign language in Jamaica, an English-based

creole-speaking country. They stress that teaching/learning of Spanish as a foreign language continues to present a difficulty for the students in such a setting and this challenge often translates to poor performance. They propose that the approach to the teaching/learning of a foreign language in the Jamaican context should be eclectic in order to cater to the varying learning abilities and gradations of students in any given classroom (Barnett and Henry abstract).

Maite Villoria Nolla writes about “Academic Literacies in Foreign Language Acquisition: Challenges, Strategies and Practices.” She claims that traditional foreign language teaching and learning theories are no longer suitable. University Foreign Language Departments need, instead, “to adapt in order to comply with the productive abilities and critical thinking skills, demanded in the academic environment, bringing up new initiatives and practices to equip students beyond functional language learning. Reading and writing are presented as essential learning tools, allowing for cultural access and enhancing students’ critical thinking. She attempts to identify the links between reading, writing, and foreign language learning and explores the possibilities *academic literacy* offers in students’ learning process.” (Villoria Nolla abstract).

“The Teaching of Spanish and the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Jamaica” by *Ossain César Martínez Moreno* adds a new study to a field that has been very often researched. He studies “how an effective and systematic use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) could enhance the teaching and learning of the Spanish language in Jamaica. He poses that by using devices such as computers, tablets and mobile phones, as well as accessing digital resources, students can be presented with improved learning opportunities. Martínez also assesses curriculum needs and addresses specific and actual issues of teaching Spanish through ICT in Jamaican educational institutions (Martínez Moreno abstract).

We hope that this Volume will bring new insights to teaching and learning in different disciplines and that we will be able to draw from some of the new inquiries and results to enhance our deliveries and counselling of students. We congratulate all the contributors for having had their essays selected and for accepting the many comments and advice which they received during the writing process.

Endnote

1. M. R. Lea and B.V. Street. 2006. “The ‘Academic literacies’ Model: Theory and Applications.” *Theory into Practice* 45 (4): 368–77, doi 10.1207/s15430421tip4504_11