Chapter 6

New Genres in the Academy: Issues of Practice, Meaning Making and Identity

Mary R. Lea

Background and Context

This chapter foregrounds the changing context of higher education and, in relation to this, explores the potential value of taking an academic literacies perspective to help us understand more about new writing spaces in the academy. As such, it is both framed by but also develops further the field of ‘academic literacies’, which has been concerned with highlighting the relationship between language and learning in higher education, particularly in terms of understanding student writing (Lea, 2008; Scott & Lillis, 2008). This body of work draws on applied linguistics and social anthropology for its theoretical orientation towards the social, cultural and contextualized nature of writing in the university. Its use of the plural form, ‘literacies’, signals a concern with literacy as a range of social and cultural practices around reading and writing in particular contexts. Research findings suggest that to understand more about student writing it is necessary to start from the position that literacy is not a unitary skill that can be transferred with ease from context to context (see, Robinson-Pant & Street; Russell & Cortes, this volume). This points to the requirement for students to switch between many different types of written text, as they encounter new modules or courses and the writing demands of different disciplinary genres, departments and academic staff. It has unpacked this diversity primarily through ethnographic-type qualitative case study research, looking at student and faculty experiences of writing
for assessment,¹ and the gaps between their expectations of the requirements of writing. In foregrounding the relationship between writing and learning, writing is conceptualized in terms of epistemology and what counts as authoritative knowledge in the different contexts of the academy.

The development of academic literacies as a field of enquiry has gone hand in hand with ongoing changes in global higher education, including increased diversity in the student body, the introduction of modular degree programmes, moves from traditional academic disciplines to more professional courses, e-learning and the globalization of the tertiary sector. These are having profound influences on the kinds of texts that students are being asked to produce for assessment. More recent research reflects the application of the principles of academic literacies to these changing contexts, which are resulting in new genres entering the academy, often when professional courses jostle with traditional, discipline-based programmes of study. Some developments have already been documented in terms of undergraduate study (Baynham, 2000; Rai, 2004) but, despite the prevalence of professional courses at masters level, little attention has been paid to post-graduate professional qualifications, the genres involved in such courses and the questions that this raises for understanding issues of meaning making, practice and identity in student writing. This chapter takes earlier work, which examines changing contexts (Lea & Stierer, 2000), as its starting point in interrogating a very specific space, when university lecturers themselves become student writers. It draws on data from a small research project in examining how emergent genres of writing articulate diverse literacy practices and academic identities. It raises questions about the inherent tension between professional practice-based knowledge and a theorised written assessment of that knowledge as this space is negotiated and contested by different participants, both those who teach on the course in question and those who study it. It will examine how — in addition to disciplinary identities — different experiences of writing before starting the course, values about writing in relation to professional identity and the models of writing associated with specific professional fields all suggest a contested space for writing.

The particular context under consideration is a postgraduate certificate in ‘academic practice’ for new university lecturers. The purpose of this course is to help academics to improve their own professional practice as university teachers. The people who study it teach in various different contexts, ranging across primarily practice-based subjects, such as nursing, more traditional discipline areas, such as history, literature, economics and those fields of study that combine elements of professional practice with more conventional academic subjects, for example, business studies. In the United Kingdom, teachers in higher education are not required to have a formal teaching qualification prior to taking up a teaching post. Historically, this is due to an implicit assumption that since applicants for teaching posts are already likely to hold a postgraduate qualification, and in many instances a PhD, then they will already be experts in their own subject areas; this alone should qualify them to teach others. This

¹In UK English the term ‘assessment’ refers to the marking and grading of student work.