Chapter 2.05.03

Writing Cultures and Student Mobility

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The organization of a common European Higher Education Area, as attempted by the Bologna Process, rests on national educational systems differing greatly in such important aspects as the role of independent learning, the implicit conceptions of student literacy, the expectations about critical thinking abilities and the connection between secondary and higher education. Writing, as a part of the teaching arrangements in higher education, is related to many of these aspects. Historically, the introduction of writing as a means of learning, as exemplified by seminar teaching, thesis writing, school essays or written examinations, provided new forms of independent learning and intellectual socialization (Kruse, 2006). The resulting genres are amazingly persistent through the course of history and easily outlast several centuries as Bazerman (1988) has shown with the research article.

Today, intercultural differences in writing practices in higher education are marked and tend to be a serious obstacle to student mobility. Confronted with the task of writing in another culture, students are likely to misunderstand the rationale of the genres and to fail meeting the expectations of their teachers. Educational genres like the seminar paper or the critical essay demand mastering the linguistic and formal requirements but also allow acquiring and rehearsing what is considered the appropriate way of academic thinking, arguing and communication in the respective culture. Educational genres are providing learning opportunities that help constructing, shaping and integrating knowledge and allow students developing rhetorical authority. Educational genres are part of the disciplinary socialization processes allowing the learners to try out new author roles and acquire an accepted academic habitus.

Academic writing culture may be defined as a set of rules, regulations, practices and attitudes regarding the usage of writing for learning and teaching. The terms
‘genre practices’ and ‘writing practices’ refer to the fact that genres in educational settings are routinely used in a recurring and regulated manner. Genres are embedded in teaching routines and serve defined functions of learning, reflection and communication within the study programmes. They are also used for examination and grading purposes. Traditionally, study programmes end with the submission of a final thesis which is seen as an important opportunity for independent learning but also as part of a passage ritual within academic socialization. Genre practices are regulated by detailed prescriptions determining the goals, length, time frame and grading criteria of the compositions.

Writing cultures exist at different organizational levels. Writing cultures are part of the disciplinary identities but may also be identified at the level of university type. Differences in national cultures have been documented by several cross-cultural studies (see, e.g. Foster & Russell, 2003) and they seem to persist in spite of the homogenization of higher education through the Bologna process. Genres, for these reasons, are a good focus for intercultural studies and genre knowledge can help transform writing experiences from one culture to another. Preparing students for exchange visits thus should be connected with teaching them the ways writing is handled in the guest culture. The following issues will be focused on: Which text genres are used? How are they defined? How are they integrated in academic learning? How they are connected to writing practices? There also will be an investigation of how genre skills are taught, how they are valued by the faculty members and how their place in the respective curricula is defined.

The project’s objective is to explore writing cultures at European universities and provide data helping to establish comparability and transferability of writing practices. Studying the contexts of writing is helpful to gain insight into the differences of the genres used in higher education, or, vice versa, studying genres is helpful to come to an understanding of writing cultures.

Project Design

The main methodological problem of the study is to secure comparability by creating unbiased measurement tools for the use in different cultures. The study of writing practices in Europe demands assessment tools in different languages which have to be pre-tested in different cultures to show stable reliability and validity measures across cultures.

Cultures cannot be measured directly but have to be inferred from observations. To understand cultures, it is necessary to gain an adequate data base to draw conclusions from. In this project, we will collect data from comparable disciplines at universities of different cultures which may allow drawing inferences to writing cultures. The following data will be gathered:

Student writing skills by a multilingual questionnaire
Attitudes of university teachers towards writing and writing practices used in class by a multilingual questionnaire