

The Dialect of the Tribe: Interviewing Highly Experienced Writers to Describe Academic Literacy Practices in Business Studies

Liz Cain
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Ian Pople
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

Much recent discussion of ‘academic literacies’ has focussed upon the ways in which students are acculturated into appropriate discourses and genres in the academy. This may be particularly true where a discipline has a very strong sense of lexicon and content. In awareness of this, semi-structured interviews were carried out in the spring of 2009 with three highly experienced academic writers in the department of Accounting and Finance at the Manchester Business School. The main focus of this paper is on academic literacy practices. The results of the interviews are discussed in this paper, which examines the relationship between experienced writers and their discourse community, the norms within which they work, the place for creativity, and the extent to which each of these may be negotiated. It will firstly consider the concepts of ‘discourse community’ and ‘Community of Practice’ (CoP), before discussing notions of creativity and ideas-generation as a means of informing the academic work that these writers develop.

Introduction

Much has been made of the idea of the academic discipline as a discourse community having certain language practices and particular knowledge, and ways of exploring and explicating experience (Borg 2003). This sense of a community generating and sharing a common discourse has also been mapped onto the sociological concept of a ‘Community of Practice’ (CoP) of which one definition is Cox’s ‘situated social construction of meaning’ (2005: 527). English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutors teaching within particular departments may feel that they need a greater knowledge and feel for the discourse community of that department in order to best meet the needs of the students. This knowledge and feel may materially benefit both the teaching in, and materials development for, work in particular departments. The University of Manchester University Language Centre currently teaches in-session classes within the University of Manchester Business School. To inform this teaching, semi-structured interviews were carried out in the spring of 2009 with three academic writers in the department of Accounting and Finance at the Manchester Business School. Although this is a very small sample of writers within this discipline, these were all highly experienced academic writers. Two of them were full professors; one with some eighty authored or co-authored academic texts to his name; the two other interviewees had, between them, authored or co-authored fifty academic texts. The former interviewee was editor or co-editor of two academic journals in the field of Accounting and Finance, and sits on the editorial boards of eleven others. The semi-structured interviews initially focused upon definitions of elements such as ‘argument’ or ‘essay’ and then the component parts of the texts such as introductions. However, the interviews continued into a broader discussion of academic literary practices, and it is this that forms the focus of this paper.

This paper examines the relationship between experienced writers and their discourse community, the norms within which they work, the place for creativity, and the extent to which each of these may

be negotiated. It will firstly consider the concepts of 'discourse community' and CoP, before discussing notions of creativity and ideas-generation as a means of informing the academic work that these writers inspire. For clarity, when discussing the interviews, the respondents will be referred to as Writer 1, 2 or 3.

Discourse Community/Community of Practice

For Wenger, the CoP builds a 'shared repertoire' (1999) of resources, which can include concepts, vocabulary, values, and ways of doing things (Wenger 1999: 83). For the EAP teacher, the origins of such concepts lay with Swales' early definitions of 'discourse community' (1990) where the following elements come into play:

1. a broadly agreed set of common public goals
2. mechanisms of intercommunication among its members
3. participatory mechanisms that primarily provide information and feedback
4. one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims
5. an acquired specific lexis
6. a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise (Swales 1990: 24–27).

This latter comment can be mapped on to Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation' whereby those new to the discourse community learn to move into that community by 'a continuous, active, engaged, situated and identity-forming process – in contrast to the then dominant cognitive view' (Cox 2005: 528). It is important to note at this stage that the notion of a CoP might not always usefully describe the academic discourse community, as the former tends to suggest a sense of collectivity, yet this is not always a feature of an academic discourse community. Indeed, critics of this theory suggest that commonalities are focused upon, thus failing to adequately acknowledge the existence of diversity and conflict within such groups (see Jackson 2008).

What is important for this paper here, however, is the notion of such a community being bounded. This is because such definitions of community posit a directed movement into the community from a posited and perceived outside. Such metaphors of directed movement are slightly mixed with the addition of Swales' concept of 'a threshold level'. But this 'threshold' is consistent with the metaphor of the outside and inside, and even more consistent with the notion of a doorway through which novices enter. Borg also exploits this metaphor in the following comment:

If discourse communities are seen as stable, with experts who perform gate keeping roles, then their genres are normative, and novices must conform to the expectations of the community in order to enter it (Borg 2003: 400).

And here we move into the other metaphor much used in this area: 'the master-apprentice relationship', which we will discuss further below.

Borg was not the first to perceive the bounded nature of the discourse community in academia:

Men of the sociological tribe rarely visit the land of the physicists and have little idea what they do there. If the sociologists were to step into the building occupied by the English department, they would encounter the cold stares if not the slingshots of the hostile natives [...] the disciplines exist as separate estates, with distinctive subcultures (Clark 1963 cited in Becher 1989: 23).

We have to note here the sexist appellation at the start of the passage and view this text as of its time. However, the sense of the discourse community as tribe is something that is also explicitly commented on by our writers.

At the same time Hyland and Hamp-Lyons have cautioned against viewing such communities as 'determinate, static, autonomous, and predictable arenas of shared and agreed upon values and conventions' whilst wishing to retain the terminology for its explanatory value (2002: 7). To return to our metaphor for a moment; an arena has a boundary, within which heightened activity occurs, and outside which the spectators sit. However, not all of the players in the arena may be wearing the same uniform or running in the same direction. Perhaps another metaphor for the discourse community is as a *heterocosm* implying that the community is a space rather than a process (see Abrams 1989).

These notions of space and process have been further investigated by Street and others as part of what has been termed the New Literacy Studies (Lea and Street 2006). Lea and Street identify academic literacy as 'concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, [which] foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context' (2006: 369). And, similarly to Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, Lea and Street do not view such 'appropriate' academic literacies as a static situation. For them, students must involve themselves in a 'more complex, nuanced, situated' process which contains 'both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions and social identities' (2006: 369).

The Tribal Hero

The writers in our interviews have their own range of metaphors for the transmission, including Becher's metaphor of academia as a system of tribes. In the first of our quotations from the writers, the tribe and the apprentice become mixed in the idea of the hero who may be conventional or not:

[I] Copy models in the way that a musician would look at a Dylan song and think 'Well, Dylan's done it this way. How can we modify what we're trying to do and build on Dylan'.

We're all taught by – we're all apprentices, if we're lucky, to masters. You'd be an apprentice to that person and you'd learn that style and you'd gradually develop your own style. I think this is pretty similar. We work in tribes and we have our heroes, and we follow our PhD supervisors and we gradually build our own style. I think still we're influenced by those we admire; I know I certainly am.

I'll think, 'Well, how did ****, who's a colleague, who's a professor from the Judge in Cambridge whose work I admire, and I'll think, How did [he] do that?' We write in a similar tradition and we share similar views about the way papers should be written. And he's an older guy, much more experience, written a lot more, he's a top journal editor and written several books. I'll think about how he handled it; I'll look at his work and I'll get inspiration about how to phrase the section that I'm trying to write. I do that a lot. (Writer 1)

What is clear here is that 'heroes' do have a number of what we might call normative functions. They are located in desirable locations – the Judge Business School at the University of Cambridge, or in the London School of Economics. They perform desirable functions – editing 'top' journals – and have age and experience which is both admirable, but also itself located within admirable and thus desirable traditions. They have played the role of conscious 'masters' as PhD tutors, but also as masters observed from a distance and through the mediations of their products. Those products are 'shared' within the discourse community which has an agreed, collusive 'similarity'. Within that normative world, there might be mavericks who 'deviate and play' but they are allowed to do that because of where they are located. Also they have 'paid their dues'; they have earned the right to be mavericks:

Writers such as Claudio Ciborra, the late Claudio Ciborra, from the London School of Economics, would often deviate from [a classical model] greatly to deviate and play with his readers. But it's not something you would do early in your career (Writer 1).

Occasionally, these heroes might be analogues to bigger heroes within the wider culture outside academia, who encode both the hero and maverick in equal measure: Bob Dylan. At the same time, such figures may also be emotionally available, '[...] who's a colleague', 'we share similar views', whereby our writers might claim insider status with their 'masters'.

Restrictive Character of Discourse Communities

This world may seem cosy but when that world changes into a process it can be less so. If we return to our notion of the movement in and out, we can see here that our commentators are part of a centripetal process which is both colluded with but is also admirable. This is fine when these are heroes, with charisma and distance mediated through their own products. At other times, however, that centripetal pull is less warm, particularly when it involves lesser and more anonymous figures in the actual hands-on process of product creation; what we might call, after T.S.Eliot, 'purifying the dialect of the tribe'. McKay, reflecting on her experience as a journal editor, put it this way, 'One of the key functions of a gatekeeper is to enforce existing policies' (2003: 93), and we note the entropy which is inherent in the word 'existing'. If we turn to our writers their comments on the reviewing process reflected this:

We sent it to arguably the top journal in the field, and it got through the first round of refereeing; usually that means major revision and stuff like that (Writer 2).

My point-of-departure always is that I try to bend over backwards to go as far as I can, without doing total violence to the whole thing, of course. [*To please the reviewer?*] Yes, to accommodate a reviewer. While on the other hand, if I disagreed with them I would say so and notate that in the reading, in a note that accompanies the revised paper, in the revision.

Usually, my replies back to the reviewers are longer than the reviewers' post themselves [laughs]. But the worst thing I know myself, is when people don't take the reviewing process seriously, because I tend to feel that that's a sign of arrogance. I was specifically asked to [use the first person] by the reviewers [...] they felt that the 'we' which I probably use in most cases [...] didn't really fit in within the paradigm that I was writing in. [...] I remember this particular reviewer was very picky, very detailed comments, much more detailed comments than I normally get, and a lot of details about language. (Writer 3)

In these quotations, that centripetal process of the discourse community has become delimiting and militates against creativity and individuality. These quotations start with the comment that the tribe can also be a herd. Interestingly, at this point the metaphors spread into rather painful areas: 'bending over backwards', 'doing a violence'; this transition has a very practical focus: the reviewing process.

In the reviewing process, the discourse community is seen as mediating the product. If the writers wish to aspire to achievement within that community, through the creation of highly valued product, i.e., placement in a 'top journal', 'usually that means major revision'. At the same time, that process has, itself, an agreed value; not to take that process seriously is seen as a sign of arrogance. And that arrogance is recursive upon the person who shows it; a reviewee may be the reviewer elsewhere. To show arrogance can end up with the bitter bit. This must be particularly true when such writers are highly established and have themselves been asked to be on the editorial boards of journals. Here, as McKay has commented, the discourse community polices its own. It can bend the authors to its will. The nature of this policing can be not only content-based but also the language in which that content is couched. For Swales that language is held in 'a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise' (Swales 1990: 27). But the key word for our writers here, is 'suitable'; what is it that suits the discourse community, and what is it that does *not* suit the discourse community? As Lillis puts it, 'the language and literacy practices which are valued in schools are not taught to those who do not already know them' (Lillis 2001: 55). It is, she writes, 'the enactment of the institutional practice of mystery' (2001: 55).

Origins of Creativity

If what all this implies is the difficulty of telling a story into and around an enclosed and self-regulating world, why do our writers bother? One clear and unavoidable answer is that there is immense pressure on these academics to publish, and they have to publish something. So where do they get that something from and is that process of 'getting' *creative*? Our writers obtain the contents of their writing from places which are placed at greater or lesser distance to themselves.

What I always say to people is, the real creativity – doesn't have to come this way – but for me, is based on close observation, close empirical observation; very detailed, very time-consuming. And then you say, 'Hey, this doesn't make sense. It doesn't follow the theories. It doesn't match what so-and-so claimed.' So for me real creativity comes from close empirical observation that you then iterate with other empirical and theoretical data (Writer 2).

Creativity here is not a Romantic creation from nothing. Creativity is an exploitation of the tension between what is found and observed and what the discourse community/community of practice posits as a field of knowledge. Our writer is placing himself between the empirical findings from a 'world out there' and the world in there, inside the discourse community with its theories and 'what so-and-so claimed'. The writer orients himself towards such people in the community in order, we would suggest, to obtain the dynamic which fuels the originality of what he is doing. As this same writer comments below, this 'herd' instinct might lead to less originality, and more of a sense that the creativity derives from positioning new knowledge against old knowledge:

Well sometimes you're not as creative as you think, because you're mixing in the herd of like-minded people; reading the same stuff, going to the same conferences, and so on (Writer 2).

This is the Bergsonian model of creativity as a continuous flow rather than a thing with temporal boundaries of beginning and ending. In this flow the discourse community provides the stimulus and the energy (see Pope 2003: 43).

For another of our writers that creativity is both a product of the community and something akin to the Romantic idea of creation *ex nihilo*.

Creativity doesn't come out of a vacuum. It builds up over time, I think, as you accumulate knowledge and the more you read, at least if you reflect on the stuff you are reading. At least, for me personally, that is a great stimulator, stimulus for my own creativity in writing.

Disciplined creativity [...] the easiest thing to say is that you either have it or you don't. Sometimes it feels that way. (Writer 3)

Firstly, our writer explicitly credits the discourse community with the stimulus for production, where knowledge comes from reading. This, one assumes, would not exclude obtaining knowledge from other means of transmission, e.g. conferences or seminars. But the fact that the writer relates the creativity to the reifying written word is an important factor in the transmission of the mores of the community. Additionally, creativity is stimulated over time, possibly through the actual time taken to read and reflect. Time taken for creativity to generate may also be time within which that written product and the knowledge it encodes are held within the normative grasp of the community. It suggests that the writer's reception of that knowledge is also informed by the norms of which he is part; the knowledge and the reception are both coterminous and recursive.

At the same time, this same writer also has a notion of a creativity that is independent of that community, and which is a 'gift' which is innate. In a separate comment, this writer felt that he could see this quality of creativity in undergraduate students; there were students who would make it and those who would not. Thus, creativity is perceived both as something that someone either has or does not have but which can be sustained by the community and its demands. Whether a lack of creativity leads to a lack of access to the discourse community is something which this paper cannot seek to address. There is, however, an underlying ambiguity here; without saying so explicitly, the writer identifies himself with that gift but suggests that the gift, in turn, has been nurtured within the discourse community. On the one hand, there is the sense that there is a gift which allows one to join

the chosen community. On the other hand, once in the community, that community feeds and sustains.

The interviews turned next to the structures in which creativity was expressed and organised. When asked the relation of his writing to story-telling, one writer commented:

Absolutely, and sometimes when I'm asked that's what I say, 'I just tell stories' [...] Yes, that's what I tell my fellow academics. The only difference is that I admit it [...] In a way, it's like a Shakespearean play; there's often several subplots running simultaneously in an overall text. And holding all those together can be quite hard (Writer 2).

This latter comment might explain why academic writing can be so complicated. However, it also suggests that narrative skills, and taking the reader on a journey through an article are important to academic writing. This comment might also imply a knowledge of pace and control of the dynamics of an incident in story telling, which many readers of academic prose would be surprised by. So it may be that this writer is being a little disingenuous here, by positing a Platonic ideal of academic writing that is all but unattainable except by any but the very best academic writers.

At the same time, once this writer turned story to structure, then the forms of the article became clearer.

So the first thing is to get the structure and that might take a long, long time. Sometimes it comes easily. And that I find is the hardest thing. And that's actually the creative side. And to some extent quite agonising. [*The structure is the creative side?*] Yes, 'cos that's holding the whole thing together. It's the ideas, it's what goes in. Yes, that's the hardest side (Writer 2).

For this writer, ideas feed structure, in ways which mimic the ways in which fiction writers do suggest is the way that narratives get built, with creativity at all stages (see McIntyre 2008). This writer commented that his early drafts were often three or four times the allowable length for the article and that cutting material out was one of the main revision and editing tasks. As mentioned above, the writing process is a recursive process in which the repetitions are both creative in themselves and also informed by creativity. It might be that this can be mapped onto the process of writing a PhD thesis whereby the doctoral candidate is called upon to bear in mind the original research question at all times during the writing up. Space does not allow much development of this point, but one wonders, then, what the relation is between the discourse community and the creativity brought to bear on the rewriting process. How much inner monitoring of the creativity is occasioned by the need to orient the final article and, thus, the creative structuring of the text, towards the gatekeepers appointed by the community of practice in the form of editors and reviewers, or, indeed, PhD supervisors?

Conclusion

What has been highlighted in this paper is the way in which experienced writers respond to and interact with the established norms of the discourse community. The creative process is identified by our commentators as being created and stimulated by the discourse community, whilst they also acknowledge that the accepted conventions within a specific discourse community can at times be somewhat restrictive. These are passed down from discourse community to writers, who help support such conventions. In turn these are then passed on to students, who may feel required to meet these accepted conventions of structure and style, in order to bolster marks. The importance of recognising the accepted style and framework of the discourse community within which the subject sits is identified here; without this, access may be denied.

As noted in the introduction, there has been little investigation into this area of study. We acknowledge the small-scale nature of this study, and the focus on one very specific discourse community. The above discussion is not intended to be generalisable. However, this study has shown the care with which our writers view their role as transmitters of situated knowledge, to provide energy and momentum for the discourse community itself. The commitment of these writers indeed suggests

that academic writing can be ‘a continuous, active, engaged, situated and identity-forming process’ (Cox 2005: 528).

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