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University Lecturers Learning to 'Write Education': Issues of academic literacy and professionalisation

Barry Stierer, University of Westminster

**Work-in-progress seminar presented to the Annual Research Symposium of
the Literacies in Higher Education Research Group, University of Westminster,
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Introduction to the session

I have a long-standing interest in researching professional people when they come into a university to study typically postgraduate courses related to their jobs, often as part of their continuing professional development, and in particular focusing upon the writing they're required or expected to do. I think it's an interesting site of tension between potentially conflicting identities, forms of knowledge, and purposes for university study, which therefore raises issues of power relations in higher education, and the relationship between learning in universities and learning in workplaces.

I've recently started to research the academic writing done by a rather unusual group of students. These students are in fact the very people that we often speak of in Academic Literacies research as 'the problem' – that is, university lecturers. These lecturers are, for the purposes of this research, themselves students. They are, to varying degrees of willingness, participants on teacher development programmes. That is, they are on courses designed to help them develop their knowledge and their expertise as university teachers.

In many ways, the circumstances in which these lecturers are studying match precisely the circumstances of student groups that have been the focus of previous Academic Literacies research. The course they're taking sits within a subject area – 'Education' – with which most of these students are unfamiliar. The writing requirements are highly complex, and they demand a range of writing styles that are new for many of them. Moreover, the ground rules for successful writing are themselves expressed in highly specialised language and are therefore baffling for many of the participants. The course relates to an aspect of their professional work which may not feature very prominently in their professional identities – that is, it positions them as teachers – and novice teachers at that – rather than as researchers or expert professionals.

In some respects there should be nothing peculiar or problematical about university lecturers using the specialised genres, discourses and epistemologies of Education in their writing. They are, after all, *teachers in higher education* and in this sense can be described as Educationists. However, few lecturers describe themselves in this way, and few have backgrounds that prepare them to write effectively and confidently in this field. We all know that university lecturers are typically specialists in academic disciplines and/or professional domains other than Education. So, my starting point is that, for many university lecturers, Education as a domain of specialised knowledge and language practices is a 'strange land' – a term Lucile McCarthy used back in 1987 to describe an unfamiliar subject area for undergraduate students. For this reason, I

believe that the phenomenon of university teachers 'writing Education' is a suitable focus for Academic Literacies research.

A quick bit of background to teacher development programmes for HE lecturers for those of you who are unfamiliar with them. Most universities now offer such programmes in-house to lecturers new to teaching. Institutions vary considerably in the degree of compulsion associated with the programmes, in relation to probation for example. The programmes typically involve a combination of:

- practical training and induction
- introduction to analytical concepts and theoretical models for understanding teaching and learning
- small-scale investigation of educational issues, and
- opportunities to consider connections between these various elements through discussion and/or writing.

They are usually validated within institutions as credit-bearing postgraduate programmes, and accredited by the national professional body for HE teaching, the Higher Education Academy. Lecturers participating in such programmes are often expected to maintain some kind of written journal throughout the duration of the programme, in which they reflect on their learning and development as HE teachers. Participants are then assessed on various written products, often assembled into a portfolio of evidence. Few, if any, such programmes involve formal assessment of participants' actual teaching practice. Although the HE Academy has published a national framework of professional standards governing these programmes (HEA, 2006), successful completion of a programme does not bestow a formal teaching qualification or a 'licence to practice'.

These programmes are part of a concerted attempt by institutions, and by government, to professionalise university lecturers in relation to their teaching role. This was given particular impetus by the Dearing Report in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997). There are intense ongoing debates about the content and delivery of such programmes, about the impact of such programmes on teaching quality, and about the position they should occupy within institutional and national policies and practices. These debates provide part of the background for this project. My particular intention, however, has been to examine the texts and practices surrounding lecturers' experience of 'writing Education' within such programmes, using an Academic Literacies frame – partly to shed new light on these wider debates, and partly to gain a deeper understanding of the core concepts within Academic Literacies work such as identity, genre, epistemology, ideology and disciplinarity.

There is a growing literature on the experiences of lecturers taking part in teacher development programmes. I don't have time to review it today, but there does not appear to have been any attempt to examine 'close-up' the texts and practices surrounding the writing elements of these programmes.

I should explain that I'm directly implicated in all this. I have myself convened and taught on these kinds of programmes in several different universities, and have worked with many university lecturers as they struggled to understand and to fulfil

the writing requirements, despite being perfectly competent academics in their own right. In this sense, this is a research project that has been staring me in the face for years, but I didn't recognise it. So, there is a sense in which this is practitioner or pedagogic research for me, in that I am problematising my own practice.

This is very preliminary work-in-progress. I've been reading through a number of portfolios written by lecturers who have completed teacher development programmes, and I've interviewed a few of them.

Initial research questions

- How do lecturers describe, and handle, the continuities and disjunctions between the unfamiliar writing demands in Education and those that are more familiar to them?
- How do lecturers represent their academic and professional identities, and any process of change, in their writing?
- What devices do lecturers use in their writing to mark the degree of comfort and fluency they feel in relation to the 'core' concepts and methodologies of Education?
- How do lecturers account for their experience of crossing the multiplicity of boundaries inherent in their transition?
- Is there evidence in lecturers' writing that they have devised 'hybrid' styles and genres which contain elements of both Educational discourse (however defined) and those of their own disciplinary and/or professional background?
- How do participants understand the privileged 'ways of knowing' – what counts as knowledge – within teacher development programmes? How do they encode that knowledge in their writing?
- How do they negotiate the complexities and possible tensions between *criticality* (making the familiar strange; problematising), *reflectivity* (applying analytical tools to the self; meta-cognition) and *praxis* (the integration of theory and practice)?

References

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