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Academic Literacy and the Languages of Change

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For Stella, who is in our midst
(1957–2005)

'. . . to conceive of other worlds and other intentions is actually theoretical.

My students themselves made whole the circle where theory and practice inform each other, and I learnt to recognize my own theory, and how it both gave rise to and was itself a product of my own practice.

. . . my teaching was my political contribution to change.'

From:
Stella Clark (1996), 'Finding theory in practice',
Educational Action Research, 4 (1).

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Contents

List of Figures

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Preface

Language is a fundamental component of society. Language is the carrier of society's perceptions, its attitudes and its goals, for through it the speakers absorb entrenched attitudes. Through language we create and express our visions, wield power, suppress or liberate souls. In exploring the authority and agency of language, this book focuses on the centrality of language in bringing about change.

Change challenges all of us in our complex, globalized world. In South African higher education we encounter these challenges in every aspect of what we do as we struggle to overcome past inequities and injustices. Despite many structural and policy changes the academy is only slowly becoming aware of how deeply our personal histories, our social, political, racial, ethnic and national backgrounds, shape our understandings and impact our academic and intellectual pursuits. This book, in exploring the 'languages' of change in the education environment, not only highlights significant academic achievements of the Language Development Group at the University of Cape Town, but also focuses our attention on the role of language in bringing about change in the institution.

The research described in this book exemplifies the potential for utilizing context-specific studies to complement and extend 'international' theories. Building on the tradition of the New Literacy Studies, the authors site their research among students and learners for whom English is not their mother tongue. These students are required to perform and are assessed by an institution with a complex history of colonialism and opposition to Apartheid, an institution that is seen to be an elite island in a developing country which, despite having extremes of poverty and illiteracy, is itself seen as an island of economic privilege in Africa. The authors question the nature of the academic literacy required of these students, and in so doing also raise seminal questions about the educational programmes and the policies of the institution itself.

In engaging closely with the students' experiences of the curriculum and the academy as an institution, the authors reflect on ways in which both could be made more accessible to the diverse student body. They make the case for an educational environment in which the

needs and experiences of the student body shape the educational programmes. In so doing they contribute to the call for systemic change across the university and a continuing interrogation of the processes that result in the exclusion of many young South Africans from the academic environment.

It is exciting to see how the research of the Language Development Group, soundly based as it is in international literacy theory, but deeply cognizant of the complexities of the South African multilingual environment, has led them to theorize around some of the most complex issues of transformation facing higher education in the country. Teasing out the interrelationships of language, learning and identity gives insight into power relationships in the institution, and shows how the values and experiences of students can be masked and even negated. As the authors point out, this results in the institution being deprived of 'a vast reservoir of diverse knowledge and experiences'.

This book challenges both the institution and the hegemonic academic system which privileges selected cultural and language groups. It points to the student as a source of knowledge and a means of taking the dialogue of transformation to a new level. However, the difficulty of undertaking this journey of discovery in our multilingual, multicultural society cannot be ignored. I am optimistic that transformation of our academic systems can be achieved, and know that this must involve sharing and dialogue at levels that we have not yet even contemplated. The authors of this book state that their aim is to 'renew our ways of talking to each other' about literacy-based academic practice. I believe that it is dialogue such as this that will lead to change and that institutions of higher learning need to encourage such scholarly explorations of our human experiences and interactions.

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Introduction: The politics of place in academic literacy work

Lucia Thesen and Ermien van Pletzen

This is a book about language and an institution, about students creating and recreating texts, and about individuals and a South African university evolving identities at a time of intense change and contestation. We start with a few moments gleaned from classrooms, student texts, interviews and conversations in which people recognize that linguistic resources have moved from one place to another, and that there is a change in valuation that accompanies these shifts.

Consider these moments, and what they signify. In an Earth Science course, two female students asked to use their own words to explain the concept of stratigraphy in an essay find that their domestic metaphors of layered cakes run aground against the complexities of scientific language. In another course, a young woman from a working-class 'coloured'[1] family, a yoga teacher who has done some travelling and who is now slightly older than the other students in her Social Sciences class, asks the question, 'Who in the institution decides what you can or cannot bring into your writing?'. Three 'black' students in Economics try out a stylistic device that they know from traditional African poetry and story-telling, and manage to incorporate it successfully in their first-year essays. Elsewhere students in Engineering and Medicine grapple with the impact of Southern African socio-cultural realities like poverty and ritual on their disciplines of study, and in a Humanities lecture hall filled with first-year students from widely different life worlds, a young 'white' male lecturer analyses a photograph of Xhosa initiates watching a game of cricket in rural South Africa. Finally, the world of international funding creates new spaces, one outside the formal curriculum for two senior 'black' students being groomed as future academics to debate their individual viewpoints of what it means to be 'black' in South Africa today, and the other a space for a group of academic literacy professionals, the writers of this book, to develop themselves as researchers.

These moments have been chosen from chapters in the book, and signal contributors' interest in the richly generative relationships

1

existing between texts, identities and institutions. The research in this book is strongly situated, aiming to give an insight into different forms of reading and writing in one institutional setting, and to raise questions about academic literacy work and the politics of place. The places that locate these texts are multiple: geographical, socio-economic, disciplinary, institutional and conceptual.

The book presents recent research in the Language Development Group at the University of Cape Town, funded by the US-based Spencer Foundation. The project researches students' literacy practices (with provenance in home, school and university) and how these function as both resources and barriers to learning in higher education. In taking up this challenge, we chose as our unifying theme 'Languages of Change', a theme that expresses our interest in the role of language as an index of change. The use of the word 'languages' in the plural form signals the many meanings of the term, including language as in *which* language, in the richly multilingual environment we work in; language as in semiotic system; language as in 'discourse' (ways of knowing), and as in 'metalanguage', i.e. as in ways of talking *about* something – in our case, engagement within a changing institution, mediated by this research to a wider readership. A metalanguage provides opportunities to renew our ways of talking to each other, wherever we are situated.

This chapter begins by locating the work of the Language Development Group in changing socio-political and policy contexts, and makes links between our practice and these contexts. The next section outlines the theoretical tradition known as the New Literacy Studies, and its relationship to our work. While this approach has been productive, we demonstrate that our location leads us to question some of the assumptions in this tradition, and to see that some theoretical constructs have developed different inflections here. Much of the theory we use has its origins in the Anglophone, 'mainstream' traditions that still dominate the global politics of academic knowledge in the field of academic literacy studies, and translates in a postcolonial, post-Apartheid South Africa in interesting ways. This is illustrated in a discussion of two important concepts in the field – 'English as a second language' and 'multimodality'. We touch briefly on some of the constraints on our theorization before concluding with an overview of the themes and chapters in the book.

Before proceeding, we must acknowledge the limits of this account. It is not possible to write a chapter like this without leaving major gaps in the narrative. As editors, we are writing from a very particular perspective as individuals, in a small unit, in a relatively elite South African university at the foot of the African continent. We

2

look closely at our practice, and attempt to theorize from where we stand. It is neither broadly representative nor comprehensive. Nor should it be.

Changes and continuities in higher education

The history of the Language Development Group is firmly positioned in wider circles of context – the changing character of higher education and the profound historical shifts in the South African political landscape in the past two decades. This section briefly surveys the higher education sector, beginning with a summary of the broad policy shifts since the early 1990s, and then pointing to major changes and continuities in the field.

Higher education has changed dramatically from the Apartheid inheritance characterized by inequality legislated along racial, ethnic and regional lines. This fragmentation was underscored by governance arrangements, through which eight different government departments were responsible for institutions divided along ethnic lines, the most notorious being the inefficient and under-funded Department of Education and Training (DET) responsible for the education of 'Africans'. Language policy further entrenched divisions, as Afrikaans and English were the only recognized official media of instruction in a richly multilingual country, and each was assigned to specific institutions. Class differences were entrenched in the sharp vertical distinction between universities and vocationally-oriented technikons.

There is general agreement (Council on Higher Education 2004: 230–33) that the policy break from the old Apartheid inheritance of a deeply divided and divisive, isolated system has been achieved in three periods. These changes can be read through the lens of the discursive tensions[2] between a 'popular democratic' discourse, with its roots in the liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and an 'economic rationalist' discourse, oriented towards skills development and training for the requirements of economic growth and globalization.

The first period is characterized by *symbolic policy-making* (1990–1994), with the intention of severing links with the past, and signalling a different future as the African National Congress prepared to govern. This immediately opened up the higher education system as institutions rushed to position themselves. The discursive tensions between 'popular democratic' and 'economic rationalist' discourses were often subsumed by the imperative of doing symbolic work in the interests of building consensus for national unity. The second period, roughly coinciding with the Mandela years, focused on *framework*

3

development (1994–1998), in which an overarching policy framework was put in place. The discursive tensions settled as the 'economic rationalist' position was entrenched in a focus on the development of 'higher skills to meet the needs of economic development and global competitiveness' while the 'popular democratic' position was expressed in a 'declared commitment to a programme of redress' (Council on Higher Education 2004: 232). In the third period, the *implementation* phase since 1999 that coincides with the period of Mbeki's presidency, the equity thrust has become secondary to economic development imperatives.

In an assessment of the current situation, a decade after the democratic elections of 1994, Jansen (2004) identifies both changes and continuities in higher education. Some of the changes noted (such as a shift from collegial governance to managerialism, and an increase in transnational trade in enrolments in higher education) can be strongly related to the combined effects of globalization and the end of Apartheid. One of the most striking changes has been a major shift in student distribution patterns, which show a marked increase in enrolments of 'African' students in the system between 1990 and 1999. However, these figures cloud the issue of socio-economic redress. Jansen notes that 'the problem ... will not be race ... [it] will be the background class and regional character' (p. 301) as urban universities attempt to become more inclusive of diversity, while rural universities remain marginalized in class and racial terms. Among the trends he identifies is the change in patterns of student political activism. Schools and universities have played an important role in political organization since the 1970s, with the Soweto uprising of 1976 the most visible expression of this. Since 1994, student politics has taken on a different character, often supporting the new managerialism. This has left something of a vacuum for many educationally disadvantaged students, for whom political activity provided a sponsoring discourse[3] that offered a reference point as a holding community in an otherwise alienating environment.

Importantly for this book, Jansen also identifies the continuities – areas in which there has been little change in the sector. First, the profile of academic staff perpetuates the past. Identifying and keeping leading academics of colour in the system continues to be a major challenge, as institutions often fail to offer satisfying work experiences against the attractions of the private sector and government. Second, knowledge production through research is still carried out largely by 'white' males. Third, institutional cultures have to a large extent remained the same. Institutions 'still bear the racial birthmarks in terms of dominant traditions, symbols and patterns of behaviour that

remain distinctive despite the broader changes sweeping the higher education landscape' (Jansen 2004: 311).

The history of the Language Development Group should be read against this background. The major factors are i) the ongoing tension between equity and economic development priorities, which impacts on the Group's emphasis on redress and social justice, particularly at a time when the economic development position has gained strength; and ii) the continuities in institutional culture that persist, and constrain our work in important ways. We return to the second point later in this chapter.

The Language Development Group: a brief history

Our history of the Group begins in the mid 1980s. Since the enforcing of Apartheid legislation on admissions in the 1950s, the University of Cape Town, like other English-speaking, liberal, 'white' universities, had carved out small spaces to admit 'black' and 'coloured' students on merit. However, these numbers were no more than a trickle: in 1986, there were only 350 'African' students out of 12,500 at the University (Scott *et al.* 2005). There was recognition that unless ways were found of testing student *potential* (rather than their performance in school-based assessments influenced by the poverty of the Apartheid schooling experience for disenfranchized South Africans) very few students would ever qualify for entrance to the University on the basis of their school-leaving results. To bridge this gap, the University supported a programme of alternative testing, the Alternative Admissions Research Project.[4] This initiative developed ways of assessing student potential for university-based study, and importantly, linked admission to appropriate curriculum development and support.

In its efforts to create curriculum space to support students admitted through the testing-for-potential route, the Academic Support Programme (the unit established in the early 1980s to shape the University's response to educational disadvantage) introduced several programmes across disciplines in the first-year environment, including an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course in the Humanities. For 'black' students, language was the most visible available marker of the disparity between schooling and the University. Most students spoke English as an additional language, were from working-class homes, and had attended structurally under-resourced Department of Education and Training schools. There was a mismatch between available teaching approaches and students' needs and experiences. Our curriculum was initially informed by materials from Britain used on academic skills courses for 'overseas' students who were typically

speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL). The first task was to adapt these materials to the local context of inequality and struggle, since the inherited approach that focused on surface aspects of the English language system embedded in assimilationist English as a Second (ESL) or Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogies did not meet the needs of the South African context. We worked towards integration of skills and content, and developed materials and approaches with a critical edge that acknowledged that academic language is, in Bourdieu and Passeron's terms, 'never anyone's mother tongue, even for the privileged classes' (1990: 115). Teaching was premised on a fairly homogeneous view of the typical student: 'black' and 'coloured', working-class, invested in the liberation struggle – in a sense, both hero and victim.

The key signifier used to characterize students was 'disadvantaged'. While the term provided an opportunity to talk about 'the system' and how it created inequalities, there was also a shadow to this work (Angélil-Carter and Thesen 1993). Courses such as EAP, however empowering in confronting the mysterious practices of text-based literacy, also perpetuate deficit models of student competence in the institution. By locating the problem in the students, we were letting the university off the hook and reinforcing what Rose calls 'the myth of transience' (1985: 355), the belief that the problem of inequality and its manifestation in language was temporary, and that the existence of a course like EAP would bracket 'the problem', until things reverted to 'normal'. The shadow can be seen in the way some students parodied the acronym EAP and changed it to 'English for African People'.

These issues were picked up in the Academic Support community nationally, where we debated the politics and relevance of language-based access curricula. The critique (that these language-based courses at the University of Cape Town and elsewhere perpetuated notions of disadvantage) was widespread, and contributed to some universities opting for a focus on curriculum and staff development rather than student disadvantage. The 'student versus staff development' question was vigorously debated, as can be seen in the proceedings of the annual Academic Support Programme Conferences, and the journal *Academic Development*, based at the University of the Western Cape. These debates, which began in the mid 1980s, have surfaced only relatively recently in international research on academic literacies (see, for example, Lea and Street 1998). With a few exceptions, most of the writing in the national academic development community is not easily available. There are many factors that have contributed to this silence. One is the isolation of South African academics in the Apartheid years. Another is the pressures of working in a

university while the national liberation struggle intensified around it. For many in the language development community, priorities were directed outwards, and the competing demands of being a conventional academic, and sometimes an activist or social worker, could not easily be reconciled. In addition, the language in education field was not yet able to offer satisfactory theorization of language and broader social issues that would help to explain the politics of access. Janks' influential paper (2000) on access and curriculum is an example of theorization that was probably forged in this period, but only appeared later.

Breaking with the past

In the early 1990s, political changes culminated in the democratic elections of 1994. The national discourse of this period could be described by the term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: the 'rainbow nation'. In this period, referred to earlier as the 'symbolic policy-making' phase, the discourse of struggle shifted almost immediately to accommodate the need to build a unified national identity, expressed in the rainbow metaphor. This metaphor was also heavily critiqued by some (for example, Alexander 2002) for its erasure of the massive historical material inequalities that still shape life in South Africa. Chisholm (2004), in an assessment of the post-1994 decade in the education field, has referred to this historical moment as the 'negotiated transition of elite-pacting' (p. 13).

At the University of Cape Town, there were important responses to these national changes. The Academic Support Programme was re-named the Academic *Development* Programme, in recognition of the imperative to focus on systemic change across the university, rather than on designing fragile bridges for 'non-traditional' students. The notion of development was applied less to students than to the multiple sites of students, staff, curriculum and institutional policy. In the discourse of the Academic Development Programme, student 'diversity', rather than 'disadvantage', became an important signifier for the expansion of our work into mainstream curricula. It was this focus on systemic change, assisted by strong institutional backing, that led to permanent staff posts for members of the Language Development Group, and enabled our work to expand rapidly beyond a generic course for students with English as an additional language in the first-year environment in the Humanities. This expansion was accompanied by a new strategic focus on writing-across-the-curriculum, which recognized the centrality of writing in learning for all students across all disciplines and professions, and (at least in theory) located