

Using annotated bibliographies to develop student writing in social sciences

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Abstract

In this chapter we talk about work we have been doing in incorporating annotated bibliographies into undergraduate writing classes for students from the social sciences. We have been doing this work as a means of developing their academic language and literacy practices, subject-specific knowledge and disciplinary identities. This chapter begins with an overview of the field of academic literacies and how this field of research has shaped and informed our practice. We then discuss how this approach benefits students and helps them in the production of their written texts: examples of how we have used annotated bibliographies to develop students' writing are provided before we finish with a discussion of some of the challenges when using such an approach.

Key words: academic literacies, annotated bibliography, essay writing, process writing, identity, reading, writing, voice, literature reviews.

Introduction

In this chapter we discuss ways in which we, as writing teachers, have responded to requests to help students develop their academic writing. In our experience of working with faculty in the social sciences in both the United Kingdom and Hong Kong one of the most commonly identified areas that faculty feel students need help with in their writing is in displaying a knowledge and understanding of the literature. Common concerns are that student writing does not demonstrate sufficient levels of engaging with the texts they have read or of synthesising ideas from these texts, and that the students' writing betrays a lack of understanding of the field and of how to use key terms and concepts.

An effective literature review is often regarded as being a crucial component of a good academic writing. It is the basis upon which the writer is able to construct a critical discussion from the textual ideas and to show their knowledge and understanding of key issues and ideas relating to that specific topic and field: especially so within the varied fields that constitute the social sciences (business studies, education,

international studies, political science, public policy, sociology, for example,). Yet, from research and practice, writing a good literature review is something that student writers (both novice and experienced) find challenging and difficult to master (Swales & Feak, 2009; 2012). It is also something that, in our experience, is often overlooked in writing classes particularly at undergraduate level. Indeed, research has shown that reading forms an integral part of academic writing (Carson and Leki, 1993), with students frequently required to base their ideas and writing on other texts (Spack, 1988). However, reading skills and especially how these reading skills are applied in student writing is often overlooked in the writing class itself. For instance, in many types of writing assignments at university, students are expected to include academic sources in their work but they often only receive a cursory explanation, such as the number of sources to include, about what this actually entails. Writing teachers are often more interested in the mechanics of how sources are incorporated into the text as opposed to what these sources are actually doing and how they have affected or helped construct the ideas in the text (Wingate, 2006). This may be due to the fact that the writing teacher does not see him or herself as an ‘expert’ in the students’ field of study so may feel that it is difficult to comment on the choices that students have made with respect to their use of sources.

This chapter details how we have made use of annotated bibliographies in our writing classes with undergraduate students in social sciences to address concerns that students are not effectively engaging with the literature in their writing. We have specifically chosen annotated bibliographies in order to bring reading back into the classroom and to make this a visible element in the writing process. Although the focus here is on social sciences, students from other disciplines may also be likely to benefit from this type of attention to reading as part of writing.

Adopting an academic literacies perspective

As teachers of writing, the target set for us has often been expressed as the need to ‘fix’ the students’ writing problems and to make them in to better writers. For us though the approach we have adopted in our practice, moves away from the view of students as deficit writers and/or in need of fixing. Central to the work discussed here is a focus on what the task requires the student to do, rather than what the student cannot do.

Therefore, we are more interested in an approach that moves away from a deficit model.

As Lea and Street (1998:158) remind us:

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. Academic literacy practices - reading and writing within the disciplines - constitute central process through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study.

The seminal work of Lea & Street in the 1990s as well as work by scholars such as Clark & Ivanič (1997); Ivanič (1998); Lillis (2001); and Lillis & Scott (2007) have drawn attention to the ways in which disciplinary knowledge and identities are constructed, enacted, redefined, and in some cases challenged through the academic language and literacy practices that students engage in at university. In this paradigm, literacy is not simply a set of transparent skills that all students acquire in equal ways, nor is it a set of skills that can be homogeneously applied across all writing and reading tasks (Ivanič 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Lillis 2001; Wingate, 2006). As Street (1984) argues, literacy is not 'autonomous'; it does not stand alone as a set of neutral skills. It is 'ideological', at all times involving issues of power, agency and personhood. Understanding literacy as a social practice has had significant implications for the ways in which writing at university is conceptualised and many teachers and researchers working in the field of academic literacies make a case for the need for writing, and the processes that go on around it, to be a more visible element in the curriculum (Lea 2004; Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Scott 2007; Wingate & Tribble 2012).

Lea and Street (1998) argue that students' academic language and literacy development has, in the United Kingdom as well as in other contexts, traditionally been understood and approached from two dominant perspectives, which are often used to explain perceived problems and challenges in student writing. The first is that students have traditionally been perceived as arriving at university in deficit, that is, that students do not have the right skills and/or knowledge to complete tasks. This leads to what Lea and Street (1998) have described as provision that has taken the form of 'study skills' that students can pick up and apply to their work. The types of study skills they identify include isolated skills such as paraphrasing, in-text and end-text referencing and citation systems. The second perspective is that issues and challenges around student writing are due to a lack of knowledge and familiarity with the new culture of the

university. A common view in this perspective is that students simply need to be inculcated into these new practices and cultures and the quality of the work they produce will increase and improve. This is what Lea and Street (1998) refer to as ‘academic socialisation’.

For Lea and Street (1998) these two perspectives have led to very particular conceptualisations of students, student writing and literacy practices and to specific pedagogy and approaches, which they believe fail to get at the full complexities of the academic practices students are engaged in during their academic studies. They argue for the need for an approach, academic literacies, that moves away from a focus only on individual skills and surface level grammatical features that might characterise a study skills approach, to one that highlights the different ways in which language and literacy practices vary across different genres, fields and disciplines. This means a movement away from the idea of university writing as one monolithic act to one that recognises the different ways in which knowledge is created and presented in different ways, by different people, for different purposes.

An academic literacies approach promotes the importance of understanding literacy as a social practice, since language and literacy are not fixed but rather are context dependent. With its variety of genres, fields, and disciplines, they argue that literacy also involves power and identity and that student writing involves meaning making, which is always contested:

A practices approach to literacy takes account of the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices, and this in turn has important implications for an understanding of student learning (Lea & Street, 1998:158).

Rather than trying to inculcate students into a discipline, an academic literacies approach attempts to cast students as engaged participants in the practices and texts they encounter during their studies. It also acknowledges that texts do more than represent knowledge and by taking account of students’ present and previous literacy practices it recognises and builds upon issues of identity and how these are implicated in the creation of texts.

In our work, adopting an academic literacies perspective means asking a range of questions about the texts and practices that we are asking students to engage with. It

also requires us to take the position that writing at university is not a homogeneous practice and that there is not simply one right way of doing it. Instead, as the plural form would suggest, an academic literacies approach asks us to recognise the messiness and diversity that exists within and across different subjects and disciplines. It also asks us to recognise the different requirements and approaches to tasks in the construction and presentation of knowledge. Some of the questions we might ask from such a perspective might include:

- How do we engage students in reading and writing?
- How do we talk about and position reading and writing?
- How do we set up and frame reading and writing assignments/activities?
- What kinds of reading and writing do we ask students to do and what demands does this place on them?
- Where and when do we give students opportunities to talk about reading and writing?
- How do students understand the connection between the reading that they do and the writing they produce?

Academic literacies and our teaching contexts

A key aspect to our work, and one which will be similar for other colleagues, is that the contexts in which we find ourselves teaching are not always neat and tidy. Our teaching takes place amongst a range of different relationships between students, language teachers, and discipline tutors. We need to take into account how we approach the writing class, how we engage with the parent department, and the writing teacher's background, all of which potentially have competing and conflicting demands. It is rare that we find ourselves working with small groups of students from the same specific academic disciplines and contexts and with similar writing histories. In our experience, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes are often made up of students from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds. In addition to this, students come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, have different nationalities, different levels of English and use different L1s. Such classes pose a challenge for us, as the remit is often to fix specific issues and target specific needs and wants, often laid out in the course aims and objectives.

From an academic literacies perspective, these contexts are important as they determine not only how students, ‘mediate the texts through their own personal readings and understanding of the materials they encounter during their studies (Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001, 2003; Paxton 2006, 2007)’ (Paxton & Frith, 2014:173) but also how teachers plan and construct lessons. Taking all of this contextual messiness into account, we need to consider how an academic literacies approach can be manifested into a pedagogical form, i.e. what does it actually look like in the classroom?

With specific reference to the classes we have been teaching i.e. developing students’ ability to engage with the literature, and given the issues involved in the make-up of the writing class discussed above, adopting a one-size-fits-all approach for us is not possible. Instead, what we have attempted is to make use of a task that encourages and allows students to find their voices as social scientists, by enabling them to discover what it means to research, read, write, think, critique, and simply ‘do things’ in these fields (Curry & Lillis, 2003). The task chosen, and which we feel is best suited to issues of helping students develop their abilities to engage with the literature of their field/s, is the annotated bibliography.

Annotated bibliographies

Although not as common as other forms of academic writing (Cooper and Bikowski, 2007; Horowitz, 1986), many universities now offer guidelines to their students on how to write an annotated bibliography (See for example Purdue’s Online Writing Laboratory) as this type of assignment is viewed as useful in aiding both organization and the development of ideas for student writing. In their classification of genre families, Gardner and Nesi (2012) placed annotated bibliographies in the ‘literature survey’ category, and they were seen as, ‘consist[ing] of lists of references with accompanying description of the information that these sources offer’ in Cooper and Bikowski’s description of different types of writing at postgraduate level (2007: 210).

An annotated bibliography is usually linked by a common theme, but there are no set rules about word count, bibliographic style, or format; with the texts or entries that form the annotated bibliography mainly comprising three main elements: an appropriate bibliographic reference of the source, a short explanation or summary of the key ideas of the text followed by a brief evaluation of this text. Although they can sometimes be

used as ‘stand-alone’ assignments, for example, Knight (2006) looked at how they could be useful for information literacy classes, Flaspohler, *et al.* (2007) noted how they were able to benefit biology students when citing sources, and Stapleton, *et al.* (2012) used them in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class to evaluate students’ choice of web sites, the use of annotated bibliographies in writing classes that we are suggesting here adopts a process approach in that they help to drive students’ written work. Indeed, it could be argued that the process not only informs the students’ essay but also their writing practices at the department and university level more broadly.

Principles for the use of annotated bibliographies

The role that differing student contexts play in how texts are processed is, of course, an important one (Lillis, 2001; Mann, 2000; Paxton & Frith, 2014) but there are other issues involved in academic reading, including the idea that often circulates amongst academic faculty that students are not reading or writing well enough. We think using annotated bibliographies in a writing class is one way to ensure that students are doing this reading and that teachers can see whether they are able, or not, to work within the disciplinary practices of their subjects and groups. One of the main reasons we have adopted annotated bibliographies in our writing classes is to encourage, develop and organise student reading so that it can better inform their ideas and writing.

The fact that students in these types of writing classes often come from a wide range of social and disciplinary backgrounds and possess a variety of English levels means that they need to be provided with opportunities to focus and engage with types of knowledge from their own discipline and interests. By asking our students to organise and select their own reading, and use this to develop their own themes and choose essay topics, we are able to explore and address issues such as audience, voice, genre and criticality in our writing classrooms.

The annotated bibliography process

Below is an overview of the key stages in developing and using annotated bibliographies in class and which can form the basis of a writing course. For example, annotated bibliographies can help students put together different forms of writing such as a literature review, a report, an essay. These will likely be familiar categories for

anyone with their experience of teaching EAP classes but one of the things that makes the approach taken here different from those classes is that instead of teaching these skills in isolation and then having the students apply them in writing their essays, making use of annotated bibliographies that form the basis of the students' writing means that these skills are constantly being developed. Each aspect of the task is developing skills and ideas in relation to each student's specific field. It also allows for the challenges that students often have when thinking, reading and writing to become more visible which, in turn, makes it easier for teachers to help them.

In our classes we have used annotated bibliographies as the basis from which students write an academic essay. Annotated bibliographies are an effective way to help students develop their abilities to critically engage with the literature of their subjects and disciplines in their academic writing. From our classes we have identified five stages that are crucial in this development. We have also included some of the activities we have made use of as well as some of the challenges we have experienced. The five stages of using annotated bibliographies are as follows:

- 1) Preparing for reading and writing
- 2) Understanding sources
- 3) Reading and note taking
- 4) Generating questions/topics for essays
- 5) Summarising and evaluating sources

Stage 1: Preparing for reading and writing

At the start of the course students are asked a series of questions to help inform and shape their choice of topic and reading. These could include things such as why they chose to study their particular degree course, what areas of their course they are interested in discovering more about, whether or not they have any experience of reading or writing in their field, and the type of challenges they expect to face when reading and writing. Having students discuss these topics in class before they actually start writing is useful as it provides them with a chance to reflect on their own positions vis-à-vis their areas of study. It gets them to think about how they engage with their subjects and can help them to think about possible themes, topics and/or issues to explore in their reading. It also makes these ideas more explicit and visible for the

teacher, who will subsequently be able to better guide students in their work, in addition to learning more about the students' own contexts and knowledge.

Stage 2: Understanding sources

By compiling an annotated bibliography students become accustomed to the writing practices of their disciplines so that the voices that they are trying to acquire begin to become a little less distant, that is, they can move a little closer to the ideas of their subject. Therefore, they become empowered in terms of selecting their reading materials and although this may need to be guided at times by the tutors this is also, in many ways, an important step by which students begin to develop their sense of ownership over the ideas and textual practices that make up their fields. It is part of how they learn where the sources are, who the main 'names' are in their fields, which journals are useful and/or important and what purposes these sources can be used for in a particular task.

This final point is an interesting one as students are often told that certain sources are 'academic' and therefore acceptable in their writing, with other texts considered to be 'non-academic' and therefore inappropriate. For many students, deciding which texts they should or should not use for their writing is a difficult one. They come across a large variety of text types that may include chapters in an edited book, an online version of a text, a thesis, a report, a section of text from a book, a review of the field, a critique of another text, a newspaper article, a text written in a language other than English, abstracts and countless other forms of academic texts which can cause difficulties for students as they attempt to make sense of these different forms. At the same time, these texts can form the basis for class discussion on such issues as genre, audience, voice, and purpose. Rather than having students ask if a source is 'right' or 'okay to use' in their work, it is much better to encourage them to understand what each text is attempting to do, so that they can make a choice whether or not to adopt the text into their own work. The types of questions they might be encouraged to ask include: How will they employ the text, if at all, in their assignment? How does this text work or engage with other texts? What is the significance of the text with respect to other texts, or indeed, other audiences? What is this text doing and who is it written for?

Stage 3: Reading and note taking

We have already noted some of the complexities involved when students read academic texts, which means that it is often difficult for teachers to actually see how their students are performing in this area (Lillis, 2001; Paxton & Frith, 2014). Students are often unaware of the genres, conventions or styles of how academic texts are put together, while they may also feel overwhelmed by the amount of text(s) they have to deal with. These difficulties can be addressed by allotting time in the writing class for reading or discussions on reading, whereby students explain to others about their text, how it has been constructed, what the main purpose is, what the author wanted to say, and whether or not she or he was successful in doing this. At the same time, students can see from other colleagues how texts from other disciplines are constructed. This sense of stepping outside of their own disciplines is a useful way of knowing who they are and what their, and other, disciplines do.

In order for students to be able to explain ideas from their reading, good note taking skills are required, but, again, like reading itself, we as teachers often fail to make this explicit. Note taking from a text is an effective way to help students avoid issues of plagiarism but they also help students start to find their voice with respect to their topic or subject. This engagement with the text makes visible the choices they think are important, in that students are now not only participating in an academic conversation with the text but also starting to construct knowledge in their own field. Students also become responsible for thinking about the types of connections that can be made between arguments and texts, the types of sources that help them to do certain things and not others, or the types of texts that allow them to make certain claims and not others. The learning for us here is that such activities are crucial in terms of developing an academic voice and an academic perspective on what it is that their subjects involve.

Stage 4: Generating questions and topics for essays

Many writing courses often include sessions on how to break down essay questions and help students to identify what a question is asking them to write about. Ultimately this engagement with the question should also influence and direct students' reading. Common feedback we have had from faculty and essay markers is that students submit essays that may only give a superficial treatment of the question, while students often remark that they had difficulties in trying to 'guess' what the teacher wanted from them, or that they were simply not interested in the topic. Something that we have found in

making use of annotated bibliographies is that it allows space for the traditional top-down approach of being given an essay question to be inverted. This allows students to become the decision makers about the topics and at the same time enables them to feel closer to, and indeed more invested in, the topic about which they are writing.

Whilst students often find generating topics or developing their own titles challenging, we have found that when students compile their annotated bibliographies they are better able to generate themes. With guidance and classroom discussions on identifying arguments, similarities, differences students are able to generate working titles and better understand this process. Their engagement with the reading provides them with more control over what they wish to say and how they say it. The practice of being able to self-generate topics and guide reading is a crucial stage in learning how to construct and develop academic arguments and whilst this may be a skill that is traditionally considered to be the domain of postgraduate students, undergraduate courses increasingly require students to complete a dissertation or capstone project as part of their degree studies. We have placed this topic here in stage 4 but it could appear at any of the other stages as it is an ongoing process that sees reading informing the topic and the topic itself driving the reading.

Stage 5: Summarising and evaluating sources

As we noted earlier, an annotated bibliography is made up of three main parts: the source, a summary, and an evaluation of the text. Summary writing is not an easy task as students often do not know what to include or how. By asking them for a summary of the text the students need to focus on what they see as the main ideas of their original text and these observations can form the basis of class discussions in which students can explain and justify their choices. Bringing the discussion of summaries into the classroom and making it a specific task provides time, space and opportunities to demonstrate how the students engage with texts and how the texts can be used to build their knowledge. At the same time, these discussions show the teacher some of the issues and challenges that the students may face in becoming familiar with their subject content and in developing their disciplinary identities. Summary writing, of course, also allows for a focus on how ideas and content are expressed in an academic manner (e.g. appropriate use of reporting verbs, tense usage and lexical choices). Unlike some traditional teaching materials that make use of generic language and grammar, in our

classes the students are exposed to language and grammar that come from texts from within their own disciplines.

This focus on student experiences is a crucial stage in them taking ownership of their ideas and interpretations, which is a necessary part of becoming critical evaluators of texts. Teachers can help students by asking why they chose particular information from the original text (and why other sections were omitted), how the text is similar or different to other texts they have read, what the text tells them that other texts have not and what the author wants the reader to know, and what the students feel or think about the text.

Affordances and constraints of such an approach

Feedback from courses we have taught using this approach has generally been positive in the sense that tutors from the parent department have commented on students' improved sense of what it is that they are required to do in their writing. The academic work is clearer and they are exhibiting skills that are appropriate to and desirable within their chosen disciplines. The additional benefit of the task is that it allows students to develop their own disciplinary specific knowledge and identities. Of course, using annotated bibliographies in writing classes is only one aspect of teaching students academic writing and it is not without flaws.

For some teachers this use of an academic literacies approach may be seen as a challenge to themselves. We understand that this may be difficult for teachers in the sense that it requires a shift in thinking and the use of different sets of teacher behaviours. The teacher is asking the students to become the specialist and for those of us that find ourselves teaching large mixed groups of social science students, for example, this is perhaps one way that we can be both honest with our students (that we cannot be specialists in every discipline) and help to re-position ourselves as teachers who can do some things but not *all* things. We can guide the students and give them input but the main part of writing and reading is down to them and this is the way, in these classes, it sometimes needs to be.

Despite the fact that we see the incorporation of an annotated bibliography into a writing class as being crucial as it allows space for students to explore and develop their

subject knowledge, some students may need explicit help in seeing the annotated bibliography as a way of informing their final piece of writing. Although we think this is a key part of students developing their understanding of their field and coming to grips with the academic language and literacy practices of their disciplines, students are often not accustomed to the process of generating their own titles, finding their own readings and developing their own themes and may feel worried or overwhelmed by the task. The teacher is, therefore, important here in helping the students to develop an appropriate sense of agency.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how an academic literacies approach can be adopted into an academic writing class by using annotated bibliographies. The focus here is in using the annotated bibliography as a foundation for knowledge and ideas development that can then be drawn upon to suit the literacy practices or purposes the students are trying to achieve. In this sense, students focus on the content and to develop their sense of ownership of the materials. We believe that the students should be given this space to explore ideas on a specific topic of their own choice to help them produce writing that reflects their developing knowledge of the topic. As a result, we feel that students often have a better understanding of the way that knowledge in their field has been constructed and presented; meaning they can have a better understanding of how ideas, propositions and disciplinary styles can be effectively used and chosen. This also allows students to co-construct a better epistemological understanding of their own discipline, something that writing classes do not always address (Mitchell, 1994). In contrast to a traditional approach to writing classes where teachers control themes, topics and titles, using an annotated bibliography enables students to identify and generate their own themes, ideas and possibly even their own titles. This allows students more say over the construction of knowledge, which, in turn, inverts this power structure and provides greater autonomy and agency and, we argue, better writing.

Discussion Questions

- 1) In your own writing courses, how has the writing assignment been set up? Is reading into writing a part of the course? If not, how and where could you make space for this type of focus?

- 2) How do your students manage their reading? Are students aware of the different types of texts available to them?
- 3) How would you make use of annotated bibliographies in your writing classes? What challenges do you think you might have with them?
- 4) How might an annotated bibliography effect/influence other non-social sciences classrooms? How might they be adapted to suit these classes?

Further Activities

1. One way of demonstrating how an annotated bibliography operates is to assign a topic to different groups in the class and then ask each of the group members to find and bring in a source related to this topic. Group members can then discuss some of their reasons for choosing each particular source, as well as how this source might be used in addressing the topic, how each of these texts are linked, what type of difficulties or challenges they faced when searching for these texts, before seeing how these sources might be put together to actually form an annotated bibliography.
2. The annotated bibliography could also be used in the writing class to help students at the editing stage in their writing. Here students can discuss with colleagues and their writing instructor how and why they have used their sources from their annotated bibliography in their final essay. This will strengthen their justification for incorporating those sources, and at the same time help students see the way that the annotated bibliography can inform academic writing.
3. Instead of producing an essay, students (individually or in groups) could be asked to prepare an annotated bibliography and use this to form the basis of such materials as an infographic, a report, an oral or video presentation or any other assignment that requires students to think through the ways in which an argument can be put together.

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