

Envisioning university literacies in the 21st century:

The case of the United States

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Abstract

This article draws on extensive research about the evolving nature of university literacies in the US context and about the most effective approaches to teaching them and learning them in the 21st century. While the examples will come from US higher education, the questions addressed will be broadly applicable: 1) how disciplines interact with literacies, 2) how multimodal and digital work is changing our understanding of students' literacy needs, and 3) how a rapidly-changing globalized multilingual world influences the way we think about and teach literacy. The research frame of "knowledge transformation" and research results that establish concretely how to enable this transformation in terms of literacies will provide the thread linking these challenges. The article will conclude by highlighting key necessary research paths regarding teaching and learning university literacies for the future.

Introduction

Our current preoccupations in the US in terms of literacies in higher education, including our directions in the past and in the next few years, are the focus of this article. I'll be drawing largely from US, French, and UK scholarship, but not exclusively. We're grappling, in US higher education, with many of the same questions I see addressed in contexts around the world, though often without the strength of intervention studies or data-driven research to help us understand. In fact, most "intervention" studies about writing are done in contexts outside of writing classrooms, in other disciplinary contexts (Haswell 2008), in part, because (Durst 2006) we – US writing studies – rejected

empirical-social sciences approaches in the 1980s-90s and have returned only recently to an interest in them.

Our current models of university literacies make us question ourselves, in part because we focus on key transitions, from pre-university to university and then into disciplines, as well as how literacies in one domain are useful, or not, in another. For US education, there is a major transition from first-year university to later university, as students often do not choose a discipline until year 2 or 3 of their university studies.

Those transition points are not the same in Europe or North Africa or Latin America; perhaps not elsewhere either. Delcambre and Lahanier-Reuter (2008) have demonstrated for example that in some disciplines the key transition in France is near the end of the first cycle, in year three of the university, and the secondary-post-secondary norms, genres, and expectations, if we take France as an example, are much closer in some ways. In addition there are deep social reasons to see difference. College in the US has an almost legendary status as a social transition space, away from home and into a career. This is not always true, of course, and this model of higher education is also becoming a more and more elite experience as other models, from distance (online) education to community colleges become the norm.

The overview presented here will draw from areas of research about which there is substantial, replicated work. Many of the results reported here are from meta-analyses of multiple studies. The methods most frequently used in these studies include: ethnographies, surveys, pre- and post- tests, speak aloud protocols, text analysis of students' work, discourse analysis of student and faculty talk about their work, large-scale correlation studies, and eye-tracking and other experimental studies.

Literacy is difficult to study effectively. "We know little about the ways that the compositional motives, choices, and processes of students are

influenced by their extracurricular work, financial aid, living group, study environment, concurrent coursework, peer support outside of classes, continued involvement with family, and dozens of other dynamics of their academic surround” (Haswell 2008). In short, the variables at play in measuring student literacy development at the university are multiple and make research difficult to pursue.

What we do have to offer is extended attention to US higher education in the 1st (undergraduate) cycle; we also work, sometimes, from a different set of references that can interact productively with references in other countries paying the same kind of attention to writing in higher education. I’d like to introduce two influential frames for US work today:

- the “literacy/ies” frame
- the “writing knowledge transfer” frame

Then I’ll discuss what we know and how we have acted, before ending with what I see as a shifting nature in US higher education writing—a way to begin to consider new literacies, in which I include multimodal and plurilingual or translingual literacies, in order to clearly move us away from thinking that writing is only words on the page, and writing is only done in English, two unfortunate tendencies in the history of US writing studies.

I. “University literacies”

My title says “university literacies”; I am taking the term from the work of Isabelle Delcambre and some of her colleagues at different points in the development of the term (Delcambre 2011). Literacies are “in reference to specific writing and reading practices at the university [...] – in different disciplines – and the research about it crosses two major and ancient fields of research, linguistics and the didactics of writing” (Delcambre and Donahue 2011). It encompasses university literacies at all levels, especially advanced undergraduate, Masters, and doctoral levels, and has evolved across different strands:

- The “intertextuality/polyphony/citation” research strand has studied a range of specific university student writer practices related to source use.
- The “particular types of higher education texts” research strand has extensively analyzed different types of writing (including multimodal) and how each type functions in students’ knowledge construction or construction of self.
- The affect and identity strand has focused on aspects of the self as writer or reader and the connection to what we know about learning from educational psychology.

I see university literacies in relation to “academic literacies,” a UK-based development which examines in detail students’ struggles with meaning making and the nature of power and authority in student writing (Ivanic, 1998; Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 1997). In part this was influenced by related developments in critical linguistics (Fairclough, 1989). Work on critical language awareness in schools (Fairclough, 1992) seemed particularly pertinent to the new higher education context.

One scholar has argued that whereas an autonomous model of literacy suggests that literacy is a decontextualised skill, which once learned can be transferred with ease from one context to another, the academic literacies model highlights the contextual and social nature of literacy practices, and the relationships of power and authority which are implicit in any literacy event. That aspect of literacy has long interested us in the US in the writing of students just entering the university. But while the academic literacies attention to resistance and negotiation is something very familiar to us, it has been situated in the context of first-year writing. In writing in the disciplines, we have tended much more towards integrative/acculturative models.

Another reason it is useful to think about university literacies and the different layer of academic literacies is because US notions of

“literacy” have almost become too broad to be useful, at least for analysis. We freely name scientific literacy, computer literacy, cultural literacy, health literacy, moral literacy... as well as the literacy of a given discipline.

The US definition tends towards a focus on the ability to navigate domains, critically, in reception and production, in order to develop and create knowledge and know-how. I’ve chosen “university literacies” precisely because it is more specific than the others I’ve mentioned and it is more disciplinary and contextual, but academic literacies’ attention to power and authority and US definitions of literacies are layered in.

II. Knowledge “transfer” (or, indeed, “transformation”)

The second frame for considering where US higher education is currently in terms of developing university students’ literacy/ies is the “transfer” frame, grounded in research beginning in the 1920s, and redeveloping with Engestrom et al. in the 1990s. Generally, it meant at first “using what we learn in one place, in another.” It is the learning “activity” automatically present in language development: we want to understand how what works one place can (or cannot) work in another place, and how it transforms in the process. Because it is clearly about more than a simple “transfer,” a simple movement of knowledge from one context to another, scholars have developed models such as “generalizability,” “transformation,” “expansive learning,” and other dynamic versions. The idea that “transfer” is indeed “transformation” as in “adaptation–appropriation” makes the most sense to me.

While transfer has long been studied in Europe in education sciences, it is currently being developed in connection to another longstanding element, transversality (Sitri and Rinck 2012). In this model, something that can be transferred across contexts is transversal. If we move to the meta-enough level, we can find the transversal, Sitri and Rinck suggest, across contexts, and then better teach it.

Research on writing knowledge transfer in university work was first focused on the trajectory of university-to-work, and then to the more internal movements across university contexts. This research has shown us that:

- University students do not perceive of writing as a generalizable or transferable ability.
- What university students learn about writing in one context sometimes prevents them from learning a new approach in another.
- University student writers who do successfully “transfer”-transform do not see writing as a set of skills or tools but as a way to accomplish a variety of social goals.
- Individual students need different kinds of scaffolding to develop the transforming ability; this is difficult to “teach.”
- Literacy teachers must create conditions that enable and foster “transformation” of literacy knowledge and know-how. (Perkins and Salomon 2007; Haskell 2001; Alexander and Murphy 1999).

Research has also shown that teachers can create “affordances,” for transfer, a term drawn from the scientific sense of a match between “organisms’ capacity in relation to the environment’s offerings” (Tuomi-Grohn, Engestrom, and Young 2003).

These intentional affordances create an environment that opens up possibilities. For example, successful knowledge transformation is enabled when teachers share materials and goals with each other across courses and are thus able to invite students to use what was learned in the previous course. We can see how this frame of knowledge transfer can affect how we might teach university literacies.¹

¹**This discussion of transfer as transformation might be linked to Bereiter and Scardamalia’s discussion of knowledge transforming. Experts and novices process writing differently in several ways; for example, novices “tell**

III. Snapshots of key areas of university student development:

Starting from the premise that what we want is to teach university students in ways they can transfer-transform their writing knowledge, then we need to understand both general literacy development and the literacies students encounter and must engage as they move through university work.

Research has shown us several things about university students' literacy development. Most are shared with what we know about students' pre-university literacies, but shaped differently in the university context.

We know that:

- “Being literate” is a cognitively demanding task that actually entails multiple kinds of knowledge. These knowledges and abilities are engaged and shaped by social spaces and social activities.
- Writing as a process involves *reflection* (problem-solving, planning, decision-making, inferencing), *production*, and *revision*. These are entirely recursive stages. All stages makes demands on working memory, which is a limited-capacity memory in relation to long-term memory; writers and readers can only manage a limited amount of cognitive demand at any one time and must constantly juggle knowledge with process.
- Reflection and planning require the most cognitive effort, followed by revision, then by production. Long-term memory in terms of genre knowledge and topic knowledge and subject knowledge can support short-term processing. Reading phases accompany every step of the process of text production. We therefore know there is a clear and established relationship between content knowledge and literacy.

knowledge” while experts “transform knowledge,” as we know from Bereiter and Scardamalia’s work. Novices look to content first and do not conceptually plan a text; experts form goals and plans to achieve them before drafting. The effect must be that each works with knowledges differently.

- Reading, writing and meaning making are dependent on common cognitive abilities(Swanson and Beringer, 1996).

We also know some important general things about teaching university literacy: again, these are common to all of our interests. I'm simply highlighting these as applied to university contexts.

- Instruction of “traditional grammar” has a negligible effect on writing improvement at all levels.
- Classrooms that support “positive dispositions, social behaviors, problem solving and other skills that have value in and of themselves” seem to aid in the development of strong writing abilities, though the exact relationship between these factors is not clear.
- Classrooms that are structured as communities of inquiry, in which writing can be used as an authentic tool of learning and a mode of community participation, have the potential to enhance students' metacognitive abilities.
- Scaffolded learning, via assignments that demand evolving cognitive activity over time, offers more opportunity for students' writing to develop than isolated assignments asking for different kinds of work. Indeed, different writing tasks engage students in qualitatively different kinds of thinking(Britton et al., Applebee). Not all writing draws out the same growth.
- Commentary on student work is very effective in certain forms, but not automatically. We've also learned that student perception of the commentary is sometimes very different from the teachers' perspective. Finally, we know that:
 - Individual meetings about writing are rated by students as highly effective. So is feedback that is facilitative rather than directive, helping students to build their skills of self-assessment.

But then, specific to university disciplines and literacies, we know a considerable amount as well. We had initially thought anything taught in the first year would naturally transfer and transform in future

contexts, but the general knowledge about literacy development in higher education has been much further complicated by our growing understanding of the relationship between literacies and disciplines—precisely the relationship that university literacies underscores. To think about university literacies, we must also think about what a *university* discipline is. In US undergraduate education, it is neither a “school subject” nor quite a “discipline–scholarly field,” though it moves on a trajectory between the one to the other. When students are first introduced to disciplines it looks less like the scholarly domain; when they are doctoral candidates, it is of course much closer. Each discipline has a dynamic, permeable, but relatively stable set of epistemologies, conventions, ways of knowing (Carter 2007), institutional constructions, history, methodological project, and so on. But also, disciplines are changing. Interdisciplinary work, in the 21st century, is more and more inevitable (Grossman); spheres of disciplinary activity are increasing, overlapping, becoming interdependent; all disciplines need systems thinking for complex problems; every discipline is also terribly internally heterogeneous. Given these movements, how might disciplines and literacies interact, in particular in the development of expertise? What frames can help us to best understand and study university literacies? There are three relevant frames: literacy as engaging with communities of practice; literacy acts as a way to learning; literacies as disciplinary construction

A. Communities of practice

First, literacy is the way of functioning of disciplinary communities of practice. University disciplines have often been described or imagined as discourse communities, into which students and other novices get initiated (Bizzell 1992; Sommers and Saltz). More recently, studies suggest replacing discourse communities (general academic or specific disciplinary) with Lave and Wenger’s “communities of practice’ model” (1991). Instead of imagining disciplines as a discrete shared core of

abstract knowledge and language or jargon that people internalize to become expert members, a community of practice imagines groups made of a “set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (1997, p. 21).

A community of practice is much more supple, its knowledges are not static, and activity is partially improvised by its participants, partially by collective context (p. 20). The emphasis is on practice, rather than on discourse. We see disciplines, in this framework, as conflicted, shifting, fluid, “open networks, forged through relational activity” (p. 25), and thus a process rather than a product. Disciplines are thus quite human rather than “just a unified anonymous structure of linguistic, rhetorical, and epistemic conventions” (Prior, 1998, p. 22). In this model, “disciplinary enculturation thus refers not to novices being initiated, but to the continual processes whereby an ambiguous cast of relative newcomers and relative oldtimers (re)produce themselves, their practices, and their communities” (Prior, 1997 p. xi). The resulting boundary-crossing is precisely what the knowledge transfer literature suggests is supportive for transforming literacy.

In this model, literacy functions as both something general that might allow a new participant to begin to find his way, and as a local literacy that is tied to the practices of the community: we are no longer, here, in the realm of expertise as the acquisition of discipline-specific conventions, but in the domain of *rhetorical flexibility*, the *hallmark of advanced literacy*, a *flexibility* that includes both versatile use and the ability to analyse rhetorical variation. How, then, might student writers develop expert disciplinarity and appropriate the scientific literacy of their fields? The model enables a different way of thinking about developing expertise, one that affords transformation of writing knowledge.

B. Writing as learning

Another way of thinking about university literacy is in its role as a means to learn and construct disciplinary knowledge. There is less empirical research about how this kind of literacy functions in relation to disciplinary knowledge. We do know writing as a literate act enables learning of material. For example, we know that:

- Expressive writing helps students to articulate and remember learning.
- Written text extends memory, especially if the text is revisited.
- Analytic essay writing leads to knowledge transformation and active meaning-making. It also fosters depth over breadth of engagement. The “dissertation” process is a great example of this process.
- Writing encourages goal-setting about learning. It also helps students reflect on and better understand their learning process.
- “Writing to learn” activities seem to work best when they are framed by adequate “meta-cognitive scaffolding,” (Bangert-Drowns 2004) in other words, adequate opportunity for students to understand how and why they are engaging in a particular activity, and to what end.
- Student writers develop by grappling with intertextuality—a term that describes the way texts they have read become part of texts they are creating. Therefore, we know that writing and critical reading need to be taught in tandem, so that students can better learn to understand other ideas and structure critical responses to them.

C. Literacies as disciplinary construction

And finally, literacy *is* disciplinary knowledge (not just a means to acquire it); a third way to see university literacies is thus to directly teach them: their conventions, their ways of working, their role in constructing disciplinary knowledge. “Meeting new and conflicting standards and tasks within disciplinary settings is understood as a natural step” (Haswell 2008) in the epistemological work of a field. Research in the 1980s and 1990s showed clearly the differences both laterally and longitudinally:

– Differences in one year in the kinds of writing expected of a student in biology and history, for example. An interesting example: some research has suggested that the same students can write successfully in the writing course and be judged quite insufficient in their content courses being taken simultaneously. The disconnect between the transversal course and the content course might be student-generated, as students don't realize "writing matters" in those courses.

– Differences across years as students move through different courses, from their first year writing course to courses in disciplines (for example, in the first-year course students were asked to draw on their own experience while in the upper level course this was forbidden).

Here, the "transversal" possibility becomes increasingly complicated – as each context is so different (and yet there must be a shared core). Transfer *demand*s transformation. But it also demands that we spend more time exploring what must be shared, what must be different, overlapping circles.

So, how do students get from the first year to the fourth year literacy? We think, in the US, about the "disciplines" question in relation to literacies because of our tendency to offer college literacy development in introductory courses and then to allow it to develop or not in the following years. We have some longitudinal studies that suggest an understanding of literacy development writing scholarshare, but that is not shared by most university faculty and administrators outside of writing experts:

- While college writers do develop and strengthen their writing abilities throughout all four years, they do so in sometimes-unpredictable patterns and with frequent episodes of regression. The process is very slow and recursive.
- Writing development across four years of college involves frequent steps backward and requires a lot of meta-cognitive awareness.

- Expectations for writing across and within the disciplines vary widely and are often opaque; the teaching of these expectations is often not explicit.
- Students do clearly have “milestone moments” when they leap ahead: when they choose a major or develop a deep sense of voice, for example.(Rogers 2009; Haas 1994; Sternglass 1997; McCarthy 1987; Wardle 2007).

This is in contrast to the longstanding US notion that one introductory course should “teach” college writing and we can pre- and post-test students’ abilities. This approach is so entrenched that US scholars and teachers have a hard time seeing outside of it.

Taking one longitudinal study as an example(Donahue 2008), here are some results from a study of how students’ intertextuality, reformulation, and writing and disciplinary knowledge evolved over 4 years. The study suggests that the development of university literacies is complex and sometimes counterintuitive, linear development is certainly not the path students’ writing takes but rather that content, assignment, reading, teacher emphasis, and student’s disciplinary affiliation are interrelated.

The study has collected all informal and formal writing from 20 students from a variety of disciplines for 4 years. We analysed their organisation strategies, their positioning, their macro-and micro-coherence strategies, including intertextuality, enunciative choices, number/type of error, forms of argument, influence of length and formatting, and so on. We also interviewed students twice, in year two and year four, and surveyed them at the end of each year.

While the data analysis is not yet complete, some preliminary trends are intriguing for the discussion here. In the first year, students describe writing criteria as arbitrary, associated with different faculty members and their requirements. They do not see their knowledge as transversal. By the fourth year, students articulate these criteria as related to the

discipline of a course. Few students report usefulness of the first-year writing course; most point to formative pre-university periods, both positive and negative. In the texts we have studied, however, students' writing increases in its facility with handling sources and in its forms of intertextuality. Students, in this writing, do not integrate or acculturate so much as they negotiate with and in the knowledge and conventions they are working to appropriate.

Another promising initial result is related to students' meta-narratives. While the student writers in our study do not appear to evolve in their conscious understanding of literacy, knowledge, and disciplinarity, (although certainly they acquire a certain facility and a set of ways of articulating experience), in their written texts their relationship to knowledge as represented in their source use and interactions changes substantially. These observations suggest that expertise is perhaps developed with less meta-awareness than is usually recognised.

We know from a recent study at Dartmouth (Donahue et al. 2013), however, that students experience no connection between the two courses. We face a challenge: how to develop full, connected literacies and rhetorical flexibility across contexts, given the complexity and the non-autonomous nature of literacy.

IV. "Future literacies" for the university

I've discussed what we know and what we currently do, including the deep challenges we face because of our history, the specific structure of our curriculum, and the assumptions we have made. I believe exchanges with scholars in other contexts can help us to envision some new ways forward. I also believe working across different types of writing scholarship could be deeply useful. For example, English as a Second Language scholarship and practice—a key area for those of the conference participants working with *Français Langue Etrangère*—should be consulted much more often as we work to understand

university writing, as should linguistics scholarship, and yet deep divides persist.

But we have other challenges. There's so much we don't know. I can sum up the two most important current evolutions in two phrases:

In terms of literacy, writing isn't about "writing" as in words on the page, nor is reading about "reading," and writing and reading are not about "English," for us in the US.

Let's take each of those on, in this final segment.

A – multimodal and digital work, or "new literacies"

Certainly we are in a very different context today. Inman in 2002, already, reported that his students were using 56 different kinds of technology on a given day as they composed. Today it is perhaps more. On the one hand:

- New technologies in the writing classroom suggest that no technology is a benefit unto itself; on the contrary, "the key issue is instructional design" (MacArthur 1996). In other words, there is no evidence that any individual technological tool creates improvements in writing performance in isolation from other variables.

On the other hand:

- We need new ways of teaching and evaluating literacies in electronic environments.
- Existing studies suggest that the current generation of young people is involved in unprecedented levels of online content creation (64% of teens have participated in some form of online content creation; Pew Research Report 2007). However, much of the content they are creating is low-stakes and low-effort.
- This research suggests that students have deep familiarity with online environments but need help building their critical literacy in these environments.

- Our students are likely to understand information differently and would benefit from an updated, more fluid and recursive approach to the teaching of research.
- They must be ready to communicate or make meaning in multiple modes beyond print—to be rhetorically flexible in this way.

In sum, the research that exists seems to suggest that students are developing significant literacy practices in online environments, and that these practices should be further investigated for their potential to enhance instruction. Indeed, our traditional literacy learning outcomes are well served by this shift. At the same time, we do need to avoid becoming so inclusive that everything with which students make meaning is “writing” or even “literacy.”

B – A globalized, multilingual world brings another “new” literacy

As many of the conference participants know all too well, the future will be multilingual; it will require a new mindset. It is our responsibility to help university students develop that mindset. In the US, however, this is a particularly fraught question. This is a short section of my article but perhaps the most important one. For decades, teaching writing has not been theoretically or conceptually connected to teaching language; university literacies have been studied and considered within linguistic contexts of course, but not **in terms of** those contexts as themselves the object of attention. The assumption has been that writing courses are in, and are wholly linked to, English and English studies (in fact, there is a very complicated relationship between the field of English and the field of composition or writing studies, as initially the latter was entirely housed in the former, both in terms of scholarship and in terms of teaching). In this framework, international students speaking other languages or bilingual/multilingual students from US communities were generally considered to be in the minority and needing special writing courses, typically called English as a Second Language (ESL) or similar. However, the last couple of decades have

seen increasing complication of these narratives, as US scholars have grappled with the “myth” of linguistic homogeneity in our classes (Matsuda 2006), the deep problems with terms such as “native” speaker or “mother tongue,” and the sociocultural, political, and ideological challenges associated with English’s spread around the world in scientific and business contexts.

US universities are finding themselves needing to reframe our thinking about writing instruction in English – which participants might imagine to be our “mother tongue” or our “majority language.” But even more, in terms of language itself, the notion of teaching a mother tongue English to university students who are either coming in as international students or heading out into a globalized world is quite unclear. What version of English? How to account for the resources multilinguals bring to the writing classroom that monolinguals don’t have?

In fact, in the current world situation, English is so complicated for US student writers because it is becoming widespread. Our supposed “mother tongue” is owned by many, many other people. Our students think our version of English dominates—but it doesn’t. This complicates their relationship to it. In fact, our goals as teachers have to change. We no longer seek to teach competence in that language, but competence in fluidity and negotiation. In addition, a rare question in US research is whether students learning an additional language that is not English are improving in their writing ability in an earlier language such as English. Does an English-speaking student learning to write in French become a better English writer? These are versions of language awareness that are essential to every individual’s future, and that most US writing scholars had simply not taken into account until now. Of all the challenges currently facing US writing scholars and teachers studying university literacies, the question of a multilingual, plurilingual, or more recently named translingual world is perhaps the most important, and the most potentially transformative.

Conclusion

US writing scholars and teachers have many questions challenging us for the future. We need much more interaction with other models, including models from pre-university, from other languages, and from other national or institutional contexts. We don't always know what is happening outside the US (and indeed we do not always seek to) – research from which we could learn in other countries (like the research in France or in Algeria). As we do learn it, we encounter very different disciplines (linguistics, didactics, psychology...) that could open up our thinking and research methods. As we learn that in other contexts, writing in higher education is taught at later stages (say, end of third year, or graduate) and in the disciplines, these realities makes us question our “first year transversal” model or university literacies instruction and our support for writing knowledge “transfer.” We need to *collectively* understand literacy development across time and context.

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