



## Managing Tensions in Academic Writing for Foundation Learners

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents an analysis of a professional development initiative to promote sustainable literacy initiatives in our institution (Piggot-Irvine et al., 2010). We undertook an action research project to examine the effectiveness of our teaching of a writing assessment in two different semester cohorts. 'Academic Study Skills for Nursing' aimed to help students seeking entry into a nursing programme to develop the necessary strategies and tools for managing academic study at degree level. However, it was our experience that our students do not 'seamlessly' receive the skills our course was initially designed to teach. This paper outlines literature relating to writing in higher education and compares the results of two cohorts, one receiving instruction from a 'study skills/ academic socialisation' perspective and another receiving instruction from an 'academic literacies' perspective that explicitly acknowledges the tensions students must learn to manage in academic writing. Changes made to our teaching of a report writing assessment followed an academic literacies perspective that views writing as a process of meaning-making and the contestation around meaning, rather than learning compartmentalised skills (Carstens, 2012, p. 12). Our findings challenge a normative discourse of literacy acquisition that privileges a technical and linear model which positions non-traditional students' literacy practices as deficit (Coleman, 2009).*

### INTRODUCTION

The changing context of higher education in New Zealand and elsewhere (Benseman, 2008; Haggis, 2006; Lea, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Northedge, 2005) has led to a greater diversity of learners accessing tertiary study. The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) requires the embedding of language, literacy and numeracy in all Level 1-3 qualifications so that learners will be able to move seamlessly into degree courses and eventual participation in the workforce (Benseman, 2008; TEC, 2012). Current policy for foundation learning relies heavily on the development of functional skills and competencies and a National Assessment Tool that assesses literacy proficiency, progress and gain (TEC, 2012).

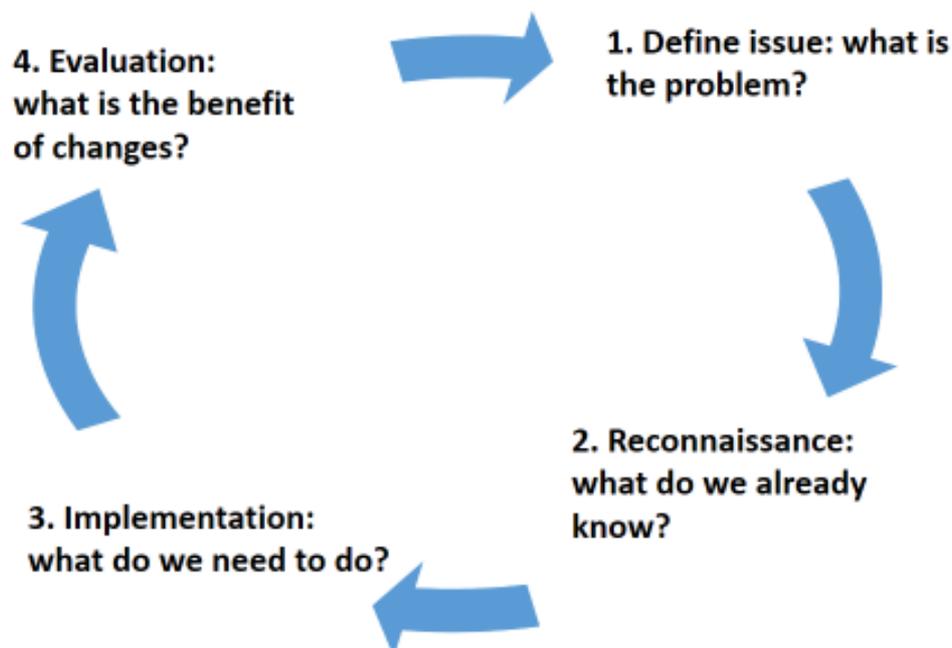
At the same time, literacy practitioners argue that there is no single concept of literacy (Hanifin, 2008). Rather, there are diverse understandings of literacies within tertiary contexts and these are still being developed (Dunham et al., 2011) but which may be widely described as 'academic literacies'. This

paper details our experience of preparing our students for understanding and negotiating the complex written literacy demands they will face on a degree level nursing programme. Employing an action research methodology, we evaluated students' responses to our teaching of the academic writing process in relation to a case study report. This particular assessment exemplifies the complexity and contradictions of the acquisition of academic literacy as it requires students to demonstrate competence in functional literacy tasks and to also engage with the more abstract academic practice of linking theory to practice.

## EVALUATING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE VIA ACTION RESEARCH

Action research has been identified as a successful way of achieving change in educational contexts. It is considered to be a circular approach with researchers acknowledging their proximity to the situation while reflecting on their practice and investigating alternative approaches (Costello, 2003). The circumstances in which action research takes place is crucial to the success of the investigation (Stringer, 2007). The process allows teachers to identify an issue, design and implement an intervention to address this issue and evaluate its impact (Piggot-Irvine, 2010). A particular strength of this approach is its collaborative nature; rather than making changes based on our own perspectives, the views of students are used to ensure that improvements are more likely to have real impact.

We hoped to promote student engagement and success through employing the action research approach.



**Figure 1.** Four phases of action research

The remainder of this paper will report our experience according to the phases shown in Figure 1:

1. *Defining the issue*: The writing demands of the case study;
2. *Reconnaissance*: The initial student survey and the literature review;
3. *Implementation*: Intentional acts of improving the writing process; and,
4. *Evaluation*: The second student survey – how successful were we in promoting an academic literacies approach to improving academic writing?

## **DEFINING THE ISSUE: THE WRITING DEMANDS OF THE CASE STUDY**

The assessment under investigation presents students with a number of hypothetical case study scenarios of a person experiencing a health crisis. Students write a report that identifies health issues and analyses potential solutions based on the insights of a human development theorist. The purpose of this assignment is to provide an assessment that introduces students to the competing demands of the practice and theory-based discipline of nursing. Students are usually enthusiastic when the assignment is introduced. However, by the end of the writing process enthusiasm has waned considerably. The final reports covered basic content but students found it hard to distance themselves from the case and make objective recommendations. Some students found it difficult to slot information into the specific categories of a report. Many reports were fragmented and the teachers and learners were unsure of what had gone wrong.

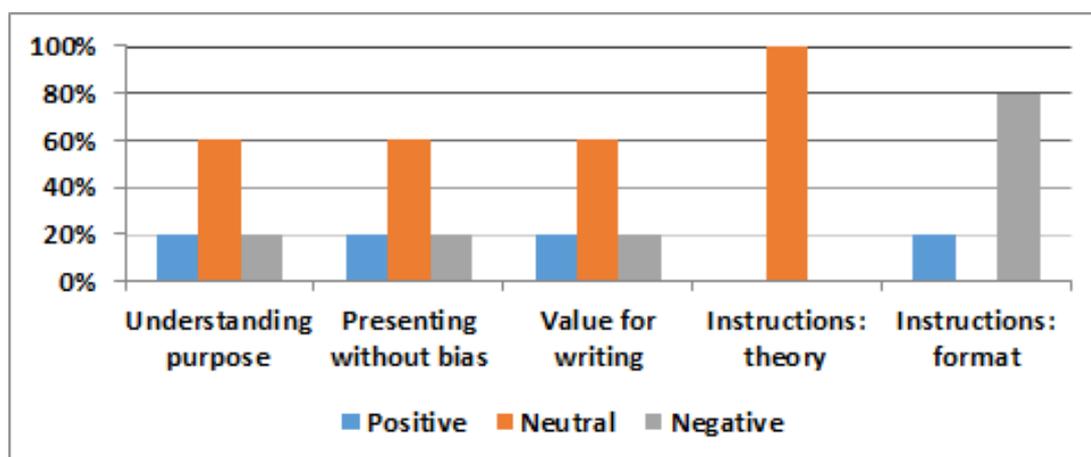
Our attention was drawn to the number of demands placed on students; for example, synthesising theory with practical observation and using the writing conventions required in an academic report. We needed to understand how to help students manage the competing demands.

## **RECONNAISSANCE: GATHERING DATA**

In order to strategise a teaching response we engaged in a 'reconnaissance' process consisting of a survey of students and a review of literature on academic writing. It was important to research the situation in advance to avoid launching into random improvements. One of our objectives was to determine the extent to which our feedback had influenced students' ability to see the gaps in their learning and to identify strategies for addressing these. It was therefore particularly important to gain a fuller picture of the student perspectives.

### ***The initial survey***

The Semester One cohort was invited to complete an anonymous survey regarding the teaching of the case study and the feedback received. The first cohort consisted of 24 students; 62% voluntarily completed the survey after they had received their marked assessment. Analysis of student responses (see Table 1) showed that these students felt unclear about certain aspects of the process.



**Table 1.** Semester One cohort responses

Students indicated lack of understanding about the purpose of a report, how to write without bias, academic writing conventions, applying theories and learning to structure a report. We were troubled to discover that only 20% were confident of the purpose of the report and that only 20% indicated that the instructions helped them understand the format of a report. Where a neutral response to a question was given, it was assumed this revealed a lack of clarity or understanding.

The overwhelmingly negative response to the report writing instructions forced us to reconsider our teaching approach. We were, however, confident that we had laid sufficient groundwork in our teaching; we facilitated their understanding of writing conventions with plenty of scaffolding, including explaining the importance of analysing a ‘theory’. Several highly structured handouts were provided, including a template, and students were required to engage in a peer review process. The ambivalence to the report revealed a great deal about student perceptions even though 97% of them passed this assessment. An investigation of the literature on how to improve academic writing helped us form a picture of how we might more successfully engage the Semester Two cohort in this particular assessment.

### ***Models of writing support***

Lea and Street (1998) differentiate three interrelated approaches to the acquisition of academic writing conventions: academic study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies. Our intervention to improve the teaching and learning of our writing assessment led us to consider the advantages and disadvantages of all three.

#### ***a) Academic study skills***

The first approach has students learn generic skills via additional ‘study skills’ courses or consultation with learning support advisors (Haggis, 2006) that they can transfer to a range of academic writing contexts. Generic support is the mainstay of learning support units in institutions of higher education and is popularised in a range of ‘student study guides’, such as Cottrell (2003), Tamblyn and Ward (2006) or Turner, Ireland, Krenus and Pinton (2008). The emphasis is on discrete, compartmentalised skills, such as grammar, spelling,

essay writing, referencing, and note-taking. The introduction of *The Smart Study Guide* equates the skills used while driving a car to the study skills required at university: 'Just as a skilled driver judges the correct pressure to apply to the accelerator or brake, so the skilled learner will know which learning techniques to use and when' (Tamblyn & Ward, 2006, p. viii).

Many of the technical skills students need to learn are generic and in our experience students do benefit from exposure to these discrete skills. Indeed, our course incorporates aspects of a 'study skills' approach, reflecting the belief that new and under-confident students in general benefit from clear guidance. However, by themselves they do not capture the complexities of academic writing (Haggis, 2006). Lea and Street (1998) and Lillis (2003) argue that knowledge is not a set of skills that can be transferred across all subjects; such an assumption ignores the diverse ways in which knowledge is created within disciplines and experienced by students.

#### *b) Academic socialisation*

The second approach calls for students to learn more than a simple set of skills by incorporating a psychological dimension. An academic socialisation approach involves students learning the required and acceptable norms and practices so they become socialised or comfortable in using them. Students then are invited to share the norms, techniques and conventions of academic writing as members of an academic community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Our course reflects aspects of this model, encouraging students to 'play the academic game' as a means of taking charge of their own thinking. This transmission model can be empowering for many students; however, it is questioned by Lea and Street (1998) for neglecting to consider the power relations between lecturers and students. Students often resist empowering practices when they require them to assimilate to suit university requirements in order to succeed (Lea & Street, 1998). The academic socialisation model also assumes that the academic community conforms to homogeneous rather than the reality of contestable literacy practices (Gourlay, 2009) which are often complicated and ambiguous within and across disciplines. Those who do not observe and absorb the practices demonstrated are viewed as deficient as *they* have failed to become appropriately socialised.

#### *c) Academic literacies*

The third approach takes as central the position that writing can never be a transparent medium of representation (Lea, 1998; Lea, 2005; Lillis, 2001; Lillis, 2003). Learning to produce academic writing occurs within a set of practices which are not neutral and therefore difficult to acquire through simple study skills or academic socialisation approaches. This perspective acknowledges the need to address specific skill issues in student writing but views the acquisition process through a different lens. Literacy is reconceptualised in the plural, taking into account the various modes of being and becoming literate. This literature explicitly addresses the changing landscape of higher education and an increasing diversity of students, calling for a wider understanding of knowledge and curriculum design (Northedge, 2005) to help all students feel connected and visible. Improving writing must move beyond simple provision or transmission of techniques to those who are lacking (Lea & Street, 1998; Scalone & Street, 2006).

Moreover, our research findings were consistent with the critiques of the academic study skills and academic socialisation models. We identified common writing issues for students, which led us to consider the potential of an academic literacies perspective to scaffold academic writing skills in nursing.

### *Common writing issues for students*

Whilst an academic socialisation model assumes that students will be able to 'decode' the academic discourse, students do not move seamlessly forward in the acquisition of writing skills (Lillis, 2003). Writing for academic purposes 'constructs and constitutes knowledge in specific ways which frequently conflict with adult students' other experiences of constructing their own world knowledge' (Lea, 1998, p. 157). To be successful, students must conform to dominant 'monologic' pedagogies (Lillis, 2003) that negate the life experience of the student by elevating academia. Writing practices such as essay criteria, referencing and plagiarism require students to subsume their identity into formal rules through which they are judged and measured.

There is growing evidence that a number of students have difficulty understanding these formalities (Haggis, 2006), and that the formalities themselves become 'roadblocks' in their engagement. Academic writing places competing demands on students (McMillan, 2000). For example, formal writing criteria require authors to write themselves out of the text by the use of passive and impersonal language. Writing in a passive, objective voice can make writing a dry and difficult experience for many students (Whitehead, 2002), requiring an on-going 'switching' (Tett, 2009) between their own and the dominant vernacular. This is complex, especially for beginning writers who must learn to differentiate between the voices of academic authority and the voice of their own experience (Bayham, 2000). The overall effect can disengage the student from the material.

Students find it hard to manage the boundaries between learning theory and applying it in their own writing. Even in practice-based disciplines that elicit personal reflection on a real-life experience, Gimenez (2008) found nursing students avoided using their clinical experience as evidence in their writing as it was too difficult to shape this personal source of evidence to fit academic writing conventions. Whitehead (2002) also reports on the struggle nursing students face in learning to write academically. Giddens and Lobo (2008) note this contradiction persisted with their post-graduate level nursing students. Also, in relation to nursing students, Simpson and Courtney (2002, p. 94) comment that the ability to produce good academic writing is dependent on 'the ability to step outside of everyday reasoning and to be "playful" with future possibilities', a stance that students struggle to take up when they are overwhelmed by imposing writing demands.

Formal writing demands cause further confusion if students face conflicting perceptions of writing principles across disciplines, or between different courses or instructors. Gimenez (2008) found students received conflicting information from lecturers on their nursing course over which features of their writing were most important; some emphasised content, others surface features such as referencing and essay structure. This is a good example of attempting to reduce academic learning to a set of simple, learnable skills (Haggis, 2006, p. 530). Rather than assuming that writing practices exist in a relatively stable environment, an academic literacies perspective argues

that attention be given to the processes by which content is continually formed, reformed and contested (Gourlay, 2009; Haggis, 2006; Wingate, 2006).

#### *Potential ways to scaffold academic writing skills in nursing*

Lloyd (2007) advocates improving student writing in nursing by making the process of writing explicit to students. Hoffman (2008) identifies a need within nursing education for students to clearly understand the purpose which lies beneath the content knowledge. This process-oriented approach locates writing as a complex, socially-situated set of meaning-making practices (Gourlay, 2009, p. 182) not owned by experts who transfer skills to deficient learners (Lillis, 2006). Situated learning recognises that knowledge and skills are best learned in contexts that resemble real-life (Wingate & Dreiss, 2009). Burke and Hermerschmidt (2005) argue that pedagogies need to reposition students as active participants in the writing process. Lillis promotes a 'dialogical' model in which students and lecturers enter into a conversation in order to create meaning and interrupt the usual teacher-student power hierarchy.

The academic literacies literature invited us to see issues in student writing in terms of the *process* of teaching and learning, rather than inadequacies within the students or a flaw within our teaching or the assessment itself. In the next section we examine the specific changes to our practice that occurred during our action research.

### **IMPLEMENTATION: INTENTIONAL ACTS OF IMPROVEMENT**

In light of the initial survey results and the findings from the literature, we re-designed our delivery of the report writing assessment using an academic literacies perspective for the Semester Two cohort.

Students' prior knowledge was acknowledged in more depth. A variety of public reports were presented to students to analyse in groups to help them engage with the purpose of report writing; students discerned the differences between an academic report and reports they more typically encountered outside of academia.

Students were asked to make their opinions and bias visible. The need for objectivity within the report was not abandoned, but the process of voicing their personal reactions to the case, including their own opinions, was explicitly encouraged. Group work in class, for example, asked students to express, discern and critique subjective reactions to the hypothetical case scenarios. Many judgements emerged and this was useful for differentiating between the subjective and objective voice.

Other interventions were designed as on-going teaching strategies throughout the semester. A weekly on-line journal assessment was used to address issues surrounding student writing through explicit dialogue with the lecturer on a one-to-one basis. The multiple demands were intentionally reduced by assessing entries on three aspects: content, following instructions and writing expression. This allowed students to receive specific, personalised feedback on three different writing demands. The journal entries often evolved into a dialogue in which students would reply and a conversation about aspects

of their writing was entered into. This was particularly useful for encouraging students to claim their academic voice in a non-threatening manner, especially for students who were extremely quiet in class and rarely asked questions.

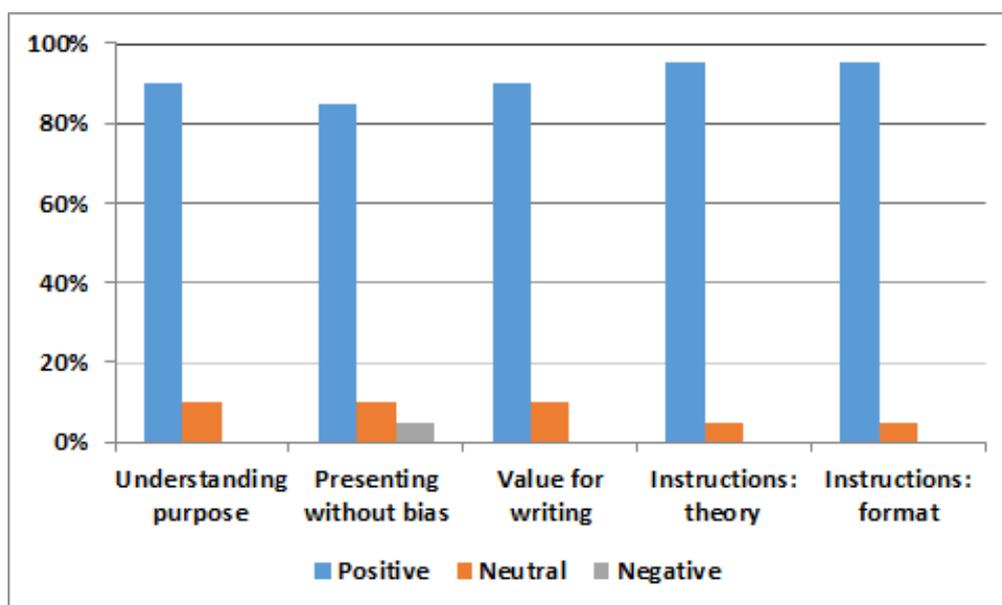
The process of dialoguing in an academic environment was also consciously modelled through the team teaching relationship. As both lecturers are experienced writers, we were able to share our own writing experiences in order to show that writing is not a 'fixed' skill. Explicitly sharing our own perspectives gave students different ways of thinking about the writing process, and themselves as emerging contributors to academic conversations, in a more meaningful way. We were careful to avoid positioning ourselves as holding all the knowledge, instead emphasising the reality of our own experience, which is that it is difficult, time-consuming and requires on-going practice.

Preparing a draft for peer review engaged students more deeply in the process through having an opportunity to be a listener in dialogue with another student engaged at the same level of enquiry. Exposing their writing to others also helped explain the interminable experience we all experience: never being fully satisfied with their work. At the same time, positioning themselves as novice 'experts' capable of assessing the work of others also helped them to develop the ability to view their own work more objectively, and with greater confidence.

In all of these activities the major changes implemented revolved around making all aspects of the report writing process explicit and negotiating the complex meaning *with* students. The widespread ambivalence in our initial Semester One survey demonstrated that the invisibility of complexities (Haggis, 2006) was a key source of difficulty for students. Bringing complexities to the fore was an integral part of the content of our teaching. We recognised that students were differently invested in the content and allowed them chances to 'vent' their personal reactions and thus overcome some of the problems of language that interfere with developing an academic voice; we took pains to discern the difference between types of reports so that students could better understand how the discipline of nursing applies theories to practical examples.

## **EVALUATION: HOW SUCCESSFUL WERE WE?**

To help us evaluate the success of the strategies we implemented with our Semester Two cohort, we asked the Semester Two cohort to complete the same survey which the Semester One students had completed when they had received their results for the case study. 60% (25 students) of the second cohort of 43 students voluntarily completed the survey. Results showed a significant difference in student perceptions of the report writing process, as recorded below (Table 2).



**Table 2.** Semester Two cohort responses

### ***Understanding the purpose of a report***

85 % of the Semester Two cohort felt they understood the purpose of the report (see Table 2) compared with 18% of the Semester One cohort (see Table 2). Knowing that students struggle to recognise different genres (Gimenez, 2008) allowed us to get them to look at a variety of reports and discuss their purpose before they began writing. We were explicit about the variety of purposes these sorts of reports would serve and linked it in to their future nursing contexts when they would become ‘consumers’ of reports. This appears to be effective in orienting students to the disciplinary context. Giving feedback in the pre-submission journal was effective for helping students attend to issues of both content and process. As expressed by one student: ‘*Case studies are similar to a puzzle, it requires an investigation of an individual, group or event in order to find a cause of a particular issue*’. This analogy shows a relaxed and indeed ‘playful’ stance towards the assignment which bred confidence in managing the assessment demands.

### ***Presenting thoughts without bias***

82% of the second cohort felt that they had presented their report without bias (see Table 2) compared with 75% of the Semester One cohort (see Table 1). Acknowledging students’ personal perspectives on each case study was beneficial for discerning the difference between their own opinions and institutional expectations to write in a neutral voice. The online journal activities allowed students to become more aware of objectivity versus subjectivity; lecturers provided regular feedback that supported and scaffolded student strategies to eliminate their personal bias without making students invisible. Students responded positively to the challenge of ‘switching’ between their own voice and adopting an academic voice (Tett, 2009) and the Semester Two students clearly felt that they had been successful in managing this tension.

### ***Value of the report for learning academic writing***

89% of the Semester Two cohort felt that the report had helped them to learn how to write academically (see Table 2) compared with 76% of the semester One cohort (see Table 1). Approaching the writing of the report as part of a wider process of constructing knowledge was clearly useful for relieving the tension between practical knowledge and academic theory that had confused our Semester One cohort. Regular feedback regarding academic writing in their journal entries seems to have assisted the Semester Two students to become increasingly aware of writing issues which they needed to attend to.

### ***Understanding task instructions: Applying theory***

More than 90% of the Semester Two cohort rated the instructions positively (see Table 2); this is in sharp contrast to the 95% of Semester One cohort who gave a neutral response on this issue (see Table 1). In response to feedback from Semester One students, we changed to a more process-oriented strategy of supporting students to make sense of how to unpack the task (Whitehead, 2002). Group work explicitly explored their subjective positions of the case studies and the theorists when the task was first introduced. In subsequent sessions they discussed and debated the theorists in depth and explored the variety of ways they might apply their ideas to their chosen case before they began drafting. Peer review enabled them to have the experience of being both readers and writers, drawing their attention to the multiple positions that a writer has to occupy when presenting to an audience. This appears to have positively influenced the ability of students to both understand and follow the task instructions.

### ***Understanding task instructions: Report format***

The Semester Two cohort response was again reversed, with over 90% of students finding the instructions for how to format the report useful (see Table 2). This was a significant improvement compared to 78% of Semester One students who reacted negatively to our previous instructions for structuring the report (see Table 1). Our awareness of the tendency for students to become overwhelmed when asked to do too many things simultaneously (McMillan, 2000) led us to slow down the process and ensure that our own assumptions did not over-ride what students needed to process. Rather than reduce the demands (which would not prepare them for their future study) we made sure to attend to technical writing aspects (i.e., sentence structure) alongside other writing demands (i.e., the difference between findings and the conclusion). The specific role of the report format for communicating clearly was investigated so that students understood the important role of each section of the report. At the same time, our on-line journal feedback on the category of instructions regularly reminded students to also attend to all categories on the marking rubric. Semester Two students seemed to benefit from this.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the anecdotal nature of the limited survey sample, some useful indicators emerge. When the Semester One cohort was taught exclusively from a study skills/ academic socialisation perspective, students reported ambivalence towards the assessment. However, the Semester Two cohort experienced something closer to an academic literacies approach that seemed to encourage wider participation and success. By explicitly drawing attention to the process of academic writing, the second cohort engaged in meaning-making and academic discourse with increasing confidence.

Having said this, we do not wish to imply that we have discovered a 'solution' to on-going literacy issues in the classroom. One of our findings is that academic literacies cannot be reduced to a set of replicable instructions for teachers to implement. In other words, literacy acquisition is a multiple and varied process that cannot be transmitted in any straightforward way, particularly in increasingly diverse classrooms. Our trial of new strategies in the classroom proved effective, however they required a significant re-orientation of the relationship between teachers and learners, and a 'slowing-down' of the curriculum to foster process over content. This attention to process allowed us to have a range of conversations with students, opening dialogue with all students in a variety of formats. It was more time-consuming but seemed to promote a deeper level of learning, as evidenced by student satisfaction and comparison of overall results for both cohorts.

This research project has led us to the conclusion that academic study skills and academic socialisation approaches are limited in their ability to meet the needs of diverse student populations. Diversity in the classroom demands a substantially different approach in order to engage all students with course content.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Proponents of academic literacies recognise the literacy demands that exist in all levels of higher education. Supporting literacy acquisition is not simply an act of remediating a lack of skills. The literature calls into question the logic of teaching and learning practices that essentialise literacy learning to fixed and measurable outcomes (Edwards, Ivanic & Mannion, 2009). We therefore would like to finally comment on some of the wider implications of an academic literacies perspective in relation to teaching and learning in higher education in New Zealand. The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission's current policy strongly supports literacy developments in tertiary education at Levels 1-3 by mandating a series of learning progressions through which students must advance to show evidence of literacy acquisition. Whilst the funding of literacy initiatives was initially based on improving *participation rates* of certain priority learner groups, the focus has now shifted to improving literacy and numeracy *outcomes* (TEC, 2010).

We seek to promote a deeper understanding of the complexities of learning in an academic context; we felt that our students benefitted from making these complexities more visible by providing an environment that allowed students to grapple with them safely. We are, therefore, troubled by the

linear approach to literacies advocated by the TEC, for it seems to align itself with a study skills/ academic socialisation tendency to remedy deficits within the student. Furthermore, students who fail to progress in a linear style can be viewed as deficit by the teacher. Both position the problem within individuals rather than the environment in which learning occurs.

At a time of heated debate over 'standards' in New Zealand education, we are concerned that the dominant discourse of the TEC seems to favour individualised solutions that might penalise low-literacy learners by ignoring the social context of their literacy development and acquisition. It may also penalise literacy educators for failing to clearly advance students over the length of a course. Although we are open to the possibilities offered by the National Assessment Tool, we remain cautious over how they will be implemented and doubtful that such a measure can provide a total solution to a much wider social and political problem.

Following Openshaw and Walshaw (2010), we agree that current government initiatives are not new inventions that have 'finally' discovered the solution. Rather, these authors note that 'debates over standards resemble overlapping, cyclical discourse where games of truth, power and knowledge are played out for particular ends' (p. 141). We feel that an academic literacies perspective, as we have understood and outlined in this paper, puts educators in the best position to keep abreast of just how these 'games of truth, power and knowledge' position literacy, literacy educators and the new literacy 'consumer' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy landscape.

An academic literacies perspective does not provide the comfort of prescriptive solutions and thus supported us to explore the complexities of teaching academic writing. Whilst our students clearly benefitted from this approach, it is difficult to implement in the present tertiary environment which is heavily influenced by deficit models. When learners or teachers are perceived as deficit, the ability for non-traditional students to succeed at tertiary level will continue to be at risk.

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