

Symposium Comments

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Bringing together Literacy Studies and Composition Studies is quite a major enterprise, involving crossing over borders between nations (especially but not only UK and USA), and fields such as New Literacy Studies (see Gee, “The New” and *Social*; Street, “The New”) along with Composition, Rhetoric, EAP and other acronyms. The contributors to the opening volume of this pathbreaking journal all take on some of the tensions and challenges such crossing poses.

A starting point, that all refer to in one way or another, is the contested meanings of “new” in the accounts of New Literacy Studies (NLS) and new approaches to rhetoric. For some, the epithet “new” in NLS refers to “new literacies,” such as the everyday digital literacies that students are likely to have encountered, perhaps more than their tutors. For others what is “new” in NLS is, in fact, the “Studies”—that is, it is the approaches to the study of literacy that are new and that we have to confront as we engage with the writing currently required of students—and of faculty—in higher education (HE). If we take the first definition, then the work of tutors is seen as particularly to attempt to link the literacy experience of their students, in digital, internet, and new media environments, with that of the literacy required in their academic disciplinary contexts. If we take the second meaning, however, then the tutors’ problems are of a more epistemological and methodological kind—rather than worrying how student writing of essays can link with student experience of internet texting, for instance, their concern is to conceptualise—or to re-conceptualise—what are the bases for learning, doing and evaluating writing in these contexts.

It is here that a further mediating field enters, that of “academic literacies” (ACLITS), acknowledged by most of the commentators here as somehow mediating the space between traditional Composition views of writing and the “new” approaches to literacy as social practice, in and out of the academy, represented by NLS. But, as Horner points out amongst others, there are problems with this mediation. On the one hand, it might lead tutors at university to believe they should privilege the home literacies of their students, leading to a kind of relativism that leaves us uncertain what actually counts in particular contexts, a concern also expressed by Graff in his concern with the “anything goes” perspective. And on the other hand, it might lead to the mistaken assumption that we can define new, plural forms of academic literacy whilst in fact maintaining the old autonomous model view of hierarchy and privilege that the participants thought they were opposing. Vieira, similarly, worries that the “NLS” perspective could lead researchers to reject the findings of work such as hers with migrants in which it became clear that literacy was being used by State institutions in order to privilege certain forms of language and culture. In such contexts, the ideological model in fact

remains latent, even when tutors have apparently adjusted to the “new” demands of the worlds in which their students live. Horner cites Bourdieu here to help us understand how we might all be subject to such pressures beneath the surface, without necessarily realising that we are.

How, then, to avoid these traps, what Bourdieu refers to as “dispositions which are impalpably inculcated?” And how might such new thinking help us to address issues in Composition Studies and not only those in Social Literacies more generally? That, in a way, is exactly the agenda of this new journal—the answers aren’t simple, if they were we wouldn’t need such a rich and complex new literacy activity. But, in anticipation of some of the papers to come, I would like to suggest some ways in which we can begin to address the issues raised by the first commentators.

My first position would be to reinforce the theoretical and methodological approach represented by NLS. Taking literacy as social practice and resisting the disposition toward an autonomous model, can have significant consequences for our work in the Academy, as we support students in their writing and indeed extend and adjust our own writings (see Lillis and Curry). Recognising that such practices are themselves social does not mean, as Horner fears, thereby taking on any “social” practice of literacy—there are of course context specific features to writing in the Academy, as in other contexts, even whilst these can also be defined as “social.” But frequently these features may remain “hidden.”

And here is another perspective I would like to suggest. Working with a group of doctoral students at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, we came to realise that, even at this stage of their career, they were being told that they needed to “learn how to write,” or at least to write for doctoral purposes. But for many of them the advice they had received when drafting texts had remained mainly formal and linguistic/ grammatical whilst when they received feedback on their actual writing it seemed that other features figured that had not been signaled explicitly. We came to refer to these as “hidden” features and we compiled a list (Street, “Hidden”) which, whilst not exhaustive, points towards the ongoing problems students may face even at this level—and indeed, that experienced faculty and researchers also face when they submit articles for publication (see Hasrati; Lillis and Curry).

Finally I would like to signal some work that has already gone on in bringing the traditions of Social Literacies and College Composition together. A SIGET IV panel (2007 in Brazil) on “genre in academic literacies” and the Writing across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) conferences in recent years have set rolling a discussion of the similarities and differences in the two traditions. A paper by Russell et al. arising from the 2007 conference, and involving authors from both traditions who have worked across the national boundaries, maps out some elements of each in relation to the other, which they hoped would set in train further discussions and cross-fertilization, of the kind now indicated by *Literacy in Composition Studies* (LiCS). The authors recognized the historical movements involved, with WAC/WID, originating in the US in the early 1970s and, with ACLITS, originating in England in the early 1990s. As they acknowledge, “Both ACLITS and WAC took their impetus from widening participation, as it is called in the UK, or admission of previously

excluded groups in the US” (396). It is the continuing widening of participation in higher education in both countries and indeed in others where colleagues are watching these responses with interest that mainly set the scene for this continuing discussion in *LiCS*. Russell et al. marked down some of the themes that will need to be pursued. They point out, for instance, that although “both ACLITS and WAC treat genre in social and cultural terms, there are fundamental differences in approaches to and development of genre theory, research, and pedagogy, which deserve fuller exposition and continuing mutual reading of each others’ work and dialog on it” (417). And they point to key concepts that will continue to be significant in the forthcoming debates, discussing for instance how each tradition takes account of genre pedagogically—the relationship between genre and learning to write, on one hand, and genre and writing to learn, on the other.

It is the exploration and development of such key themes in the fields that I anticipate will be the major focus and contribution of *LiCS* in the coming years and I look forward eagerly to the forthcoming volumes.

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