

ACADEMIC WRITING AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

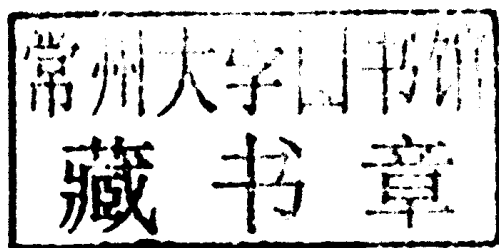
BY

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

The original idea of embarking on a research of this nature came to my mind while I was engaged in research for my MA in English at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. My research was truly interdisciplinary, yoking the resources of English literature with those of linguistics and communication studies. Peripheral to these, of course, were interdisciplines such as women's studies, cultural studies, and critical theory. I first realized the huge potential of interdisciplinary studies in language studies while pursuing my studies in TESOL at the University of Technology, Sydney.

It is also significant to note here that at the time of completing PhD, I was lecturing at the Sydney International Campus, Central Queensland University, in the capacity of a lead lecturer/lecturer with the Faculty of Informatics and Communication. Obviously there were immense advantages in associating myself with the academic community as well as the student population, especially my students, while being steeped in this research. For example, I was able to witness a significant number of difficulties encountered by students while coping with interdisciplinary knowledge in their diverse writing tasks.

This book is proposed as a knowledge resource for students, practitioners and researchers engaged in language studies in particular reference to academic writing (EAP/ESP) and interdisciplinarity in universities and colleges. Student writers may find here some useful insights into knowledge capital and assessment genres in interdisciplinary contexts. It also provides a solid framework for programs in language studies, academic literacies, foundation studies, and developmental education. Transdisciplinary institutions such as language skills centres, study skills centres, and academic support units can benefit from this book.

In general the book challenges traditional approaches to writing pedagogy while showing their limitations to cope with the new imperatives of interdisciplinarity. The book also introduces a new theory called 'critical interdisciplinarity' which presents itself as a sustainable pedagogical

paradigm to overcome a plethora of difficulties arising from the integration of interdisciplines into traditional disciplines.

By virtue of their encyclopaedic dimensions, knowledge domains relating to academic interdisciplinarity in student writing lend themselves to a wide range of future research projects. An attempt has been made here to critically explore only a tiny proportion of this inexhaustible repertoire of knowledge.

—*Dr Ranamukalage Chandrasoma*

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this book is to investigate how student writers cope with academic interdisciplinarity, and to offer remedial pedagogic measures where difficulties arise. Hence the book explores several aspects of student writing: disciplinary knowledge, interdisciplinary knowledge, intertextuality, interdiscursivity, extra-disciplinarity, linguistic capital, diverse assessment tasks, curricular issues, assessors' perceptions of interdisciplinarity, and the need of a sustainable pedagogy to cope with interdisciplinarity. Today we deal with intertextually agile students in universities and colleges as has never been before owing in large measure to the advent of new technologies of communication. Hence writing pedagogy needs to take cognizance of the nexus between this relatively new student population and the new interdisciplinary dynamics ushered in by the changes in the overall curricula.

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of student academic writing among theorists and practitioners as evidenced by the proliferation of published work in the field. Perhaps, one of the major reasons for this trend is the influx into tertiary studies of a relatively non-traditional student population, often with inadequate writing skills in English. These students include mature age students, working students, migrants from a non-English speaking background, socially disadvantaged students such as refugees, international students, and those on distance learning programs. In fact, the most prominent feature in our contemporary academic context is the student mobility from one country to another in search of knowledge, and at times greener pastures. The demographics and the mobility of these international students have been well documented in the literature (eg. Gopinathan, 1994; Ahmed & Basu, 1994; Sadlak, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Consequently, most tertiary institutions, especially universities, have introduced on-campus remedial measures in the form of learning support programs to facilitate, *inter alia*, these students' writing competencies. Student writing takes precedence over the other macro skills as it is the most important instrument in exposing one's performance and competencies in a course of study.

The corpus of knowledge student writers have to grapple with today seems to distance itself from the traditional mono-disciplinary contexts. Texts as well as the students who construct them are being continuously informed and conditioned by new values and imperatives of relatively new discursive practices. Hence, student academic writing (henceforward 'student writing') especially at postgraduate level can be regarded as a complex academic endeavour where students have to take up multiple writing positions. Analyzing student texts against the backdrop of the enormous intertextual and interdiscursive resources pertaining to interdisciplinarity is a major component of this book.

Electivization of the curricula, on the other hand, while providing student writers with a wide range of choices, has created yawning gaps between what is commonly known as prior knowledge and what is yet to be learnt in the form of new knowledges. These epistemological considerations, i.e., how disciplinary knowledge is acquired, evaluated, contested, and strategically used in texts also constitute an integral part of this book.

Also of importance in the above contexts are the often lengthy and generically diverse assessment tasks students are required to accomplish within specific deadlines. The nature and structure of assignment topics and assessment tasks have in the past two decades or so undergone tremendous changes owing in large measure to disciplinary as well as socio-economic imperatives. Student writing has several dimensions in terms of the mode of assessment, eg. examination-based, presentation-based, research-based, observation-based. This book, however, focuses on research-based writing tasks. A paradigm called critical interdisciplinarity has been proposed in the concluding chapter of this book. Pedagogical and curricular considerations play a vital role in critical interdisciplinarity.

The book is primarily based on research-oriented student writings belonging to 15 MBA students in two Sydney universities. Such writings are supplemented with their respective assessors' remarks, interviews with students and lecturers/assessors, course profiles, assessment tasks, students' prior knowledge and practices. The selected students represent identities of a broad spectrum of student population in the academy: non-English speaking, English-speaking, mature age, diverse cultural and academic backgrounds.

As evidenced by Chapters 6, 7, and 8, there are three major research strengths in this book: investigation of the culture of assessing students,

analysis of student texts, and introduction of critical interdisciplinarity respectively. These research-oriented chapters are preceded by five chapters and an introduction which provide background information relating to the overall theme of the book. While being heavily substantiated with empirical research, they also form a strong infrastructural support for the book as a whole. For the sake of brevity, I will outline the thematic structure of this book in the ensuing paragraphs.

Chapter 1 is characterized by an investigation of some prominent theoretical perspectives on disciplinary knowledge. Claims by social constructivists that disciplinary knowledge is socially constructed (eg. McCarthy, 1996) need further elaboration. This thesis argues that disciplinary knowledge is always discursively constructed and discursively consumed, too. Since our thoughts, aspirations, values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes and experiences are shaped by innumerable discourses, it is hard even to think that knowledge is not discursively constructed. Discourses do not deal with contexts; they create contexts, indeed. While providing some empirical evidence, I have explicated how disciplinary knowledge is discursively constructed.

Much of the literature on interdisciplinarity is premised on ontological considerations, too; that is to explore interdisciplinarity as an existing phenomenon merely on a conceptual or philosophical. Derrida calls these explications 'constative utterances' (1992a:30). More to the point, its relational dimensions (eg. how it affects related discursive practices) have rarely attracted scholarly attention. These dimensions are pivotal to this book in several ways: they shed light on how novel interdisciplinarity is or could be in relation to student writing; they uncover pedagogical interest, skepticism, and at times frustration; they also reveal various impediments that stymie student performance within interdisciplinary contexts, most of which are indiscriminately intermingled with intertextual and interdiscursive resources. These relational dimensions also kindle scholarly interest through intellectual debates in exploring the difficulties encountered in the disciplinary integration process. I have explored some of these issues in Chapter 2. First I open up my discussion by proposing a typology of interdisciplinarity with a review of disciplinary texts on interdisciplinarity. This is followed by an investigation of what I might call the 'applied/critical/critical applied revolution' in the academy. Here I also examine the relationship between interdisciplinarity and soft technoculture. Soft technoculture refers to a globally visible culture characterized by the integrative behaviour of three identifiable phenomena: sophisticated

software texts, predominantly electronic-based technology, and new socio-cultural identities ushered in by such technology. Without taking cognizance of these dimensions, it is hard even to be acquainted with the infrastructural aspects of interdisciplinary programs, and student writing.

Critical analysis of curricular issues surrounding interdisciplinary knowledge is the core of Chapter 3. It is obvious that several changes have been made to the curricula of most disciplines in order to ensure that students achieve what Hartwell et al calls 'expanded competencies' (2000:11). Whatever the target knowledge domain may be, student writers as well as student writing are disciplined, as they ought to be, by institutionally legitimized boundaries. If such boundaries do not exist, we might notice in student texts at least some evidence of antidiscursive textuality: that is the opposite of discursive textuality. It is worth examining what these institutionally legitimized boundaries are, and how they shape curricular changes. Hence the nexus between interdisciplinarity and discourses is also explored in this chapter. The chapter also briefly investigates the constructs of multidisciplinary, transdisciplinarity, and antidisciplinarity.

Chapter 4 is devoted to analyzing the role of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and extra-disciplinarity in student writing. Here I explore the nexus between the textual dynamics of intertextuality/interdiscursivity and student writing from an epistemology-based perspective. Intertextual and interdiscursive resources invariably embody vast knowledge domains; hence any serious inquiry into student writing should focus on issues relating to the acquisition and consumption of knowledges that are disseminated through intertextual/interdiscursive resources in a given context. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity are pivotal for discursive construction of texts within interdisciplinary contexts. These epistemological issues are central to student writing; however, much of the writing pedagogy and theory has been preoccupied with peripheral, yet significant, issues such as academic conventions, grammar-based writing strategies, generically defined textual construction, and syntax and structures. Exploration of intertextual/interdiscursive relations in order to unravel epistemological constraints is vital for any investigation into student writing (Fairclough, 1992).

I also explore in Chapter 4 the ways in which discourses are disseminated through extra-disciplinary texts. Extra-disciplinarity here is considered to be an essential part of interdisciplinarity since student texts are often

conditioned by extra-disciplinary texts. Extra-disciplinary texts process (eg. hereditary texts, media texts, paramedia texts) include all texts other than disciplinary and interdisciplinary texts which mediate student writing. Hereditary texts are texts that are cherished as traditional wisdom (eg. adages, fables, parables, proverbs). Social actors inherit such texts through an untutored process as part of their cultural capital. Media texts include newspapers, magazines, television, and the Internet. Paramedia texts (eg. pamphlets, brochures) are produced by special interest groups (eg. refugees, human rights activists, environmentalists).

In Chapter 5, I investigate contemporary disciplinary/ interdisciplinary dynamics of business studies. Several useful interdisciplinary knowledge domains within business studies are critically examined providing an analysis of the disciplinary evolution of each domain relating to postgraduate programs in business studies. I have investigated the significance of disciplines/interdisciplines such as cultural studies, law, psychology, information technology and communication. This chapter acts as a foil to the analysis of student texts in Chapter 7.

Some influential theoretical and pedagogical perspectives on student writing are examined in Chapter 6 under four categories: skill-based, text-based, discourse-based, and epistemology-based. Although there are significant overlapping between them, one could still observe an element of uniqueness in each category. This chapter also contains analyses of diverse assessment genres used for assessing students within interdisciplinary contexts.

Anchored primarily in a set of competencies and skills, the conventional ideal of student writing seems to prescribe that a student writer's success or failure depends on the extent to which he or she can adhere to grammar, syntax, and generic integrity within institutional conventions or cultures. In other words, the major focus of such approaches has been on the rhetorical and structural dimensions of texts which promote student writing as a 'persuasive discourse' (Campbell, 1972:2). Text-based approaches focus on generic structures pertaining to various text types. They also reinforce the significance of various cultures within which texts are produced. Discourse-based approaches place much emphasis on the discursive identity of students. One of the major considerations here is that students are conditioned by a variety of discourses around them. Another salient aspect of this approach is that to be successful writers, students should be

members of a discourse community (Swales, 1990; Cumming, 1998; Ivanic, 1998).

Epistemology-based approaches place much emphasis on the impact of the epistemologies of disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and extra-disciplinarity on student writing to fathom how students comprehend and use strategically diverse knowledges in their writings. Such approaches demonstrate the fact that while being engaged in their assignment tasks, students have to bear the brunt of the curricular changes introduced to most disciplines in the academy. In these environments, it is mandatory for students to take up multiple writing positions.

Selected student writings are subject to critical scrutiny in Chapter 7 which occupies a significant part of this book. This chapter is designed to explore two areas of student writings within interdisciplinarity in business studies: the technocentric and the theoretical. Technocentric assessments have a strong orientation in the use of technology and the related literature when completing assignments whereas the theoretical ones deal with disciplines/interdisciplines such as law, cultural studies, communication, and psychology at conceptual level. Such analyses are supplemented with course profiles, textbooks, references to students' prior knowledge and practices, and interviews I had with my students and assessors.

Issues such as plagiarism, the use of secondary sources, transgressive intertextuality, the discursive construction of texts, understanding of assessment topics/tasks, interdiscursivity, and extra-disciplinarity - all related to the epistemology of interdisciplinarity - are problematized in this chapter. Although not a rare occurrence, ventures into creativeness that defy adherence to prescriptive guidelines relating to assessment tasks often result in transgressive discourses or discourses in students' texts that are deemed to be perfunctorily constructed. In their attempts at coping with assessment tasks, student writers have to work with both knowledge and linguistic resources simultaneously, and these disciplinary and codified entities, which lend themselves to several dimensions, are inextricably intermingled with each other. It is also important to bear in mind that students discriminately select repertoires of knowledges prior to their writing or material production of knowledges in the form of discourses within institutional settings really begins. And this enforced desire for discriminate treatment invariably leads them to hierarchize knowledges. In these exclusively conscious academic enterprises students, more often than not, take up multiple writing positions within multiple disciplinary contexts

enveloping diverse knowledge fields. Hence, student writing is a synergized activity ('synergy is a medical term meaning the cooperative working together of different body organs to perform complex movements' (Altschull, 1995:383). Student writers are no longer engaged in academic discourses that are anchored in a specific or monolithic individual discipline; instead they cope with integrative processes often involving two or more disciplinary domains introduced and sanctioned by the academy.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 8), while discussing the implications of interdisciplinary ramifications for writing pedagogy in particular and for the construct of disciplinary knowledge in general, I have attempted to advance a theory of critical interdisciplinarity. The chapter starts with the prevailing status quo of interdisciplinarity in the academy: that is the one-directional approach based on course restructuring. The practical application of interdisciplinary knowledge in student writing is an overlooked area. For example students, as revealed by this investigation, often find it difficult to approximate the incomprehensible interdisciplinary knowledge, and to utilize such knowledge in generically diverse writing tasks. Course restructuring alone is not a remedial measure for such difficulties.

The assessment of students is also problematized here in interdisciplinary writing contexts. It is reiterated that students' achievability should always precede measurability in the process of preparing students for foreordained assessment tasks. In this chapter, there are certain echoes of the potential for critical interdisciplinarity to be an interdiscipline by itself under the rubric of education. Another issue I have raised here is the need for knowledge for specific purposes (KSP) programs peripheral to language programs to facilitate student writing at both graduate and postgraduate levels. English for specific programs (ESP) that are vigorously promoted in language and study skills centres in most tertiary education institutions do not seem to yield desired results as far as student writing in interdisciplinary contexts is concerned.

The preceding issues, I believe, have opened up new vistas for researchers, practitioners, and theorists alike for comprehending the complexities surrounding student writing and interdisciplinarity. It is worth rounding off this brief introduction with a note on some specific terminology used in this book. Breaking fresh grounds through conceptualization in any landscape of knowledge often entails the appropriation of new terminologies

and phrases since they are the tools with which writers forge their texts. In the context of this study, I have coined some terms and phrases which merit definition and elaboration in order to avoid any semantic ramifications or confusion associated with them. Difficulties invariably arise in any academic inquiry when certain terms and phrases are used interchangeably or synonymously or even ambiguously in situations where precise or near precise meanings are required. This inadequacy could also be overcome to a great extent by introducing new lexical items to replace ambiguous or vague terms and phrases. Hence, a glossary of terms and phrases, which I believe would facilitate the reader, is provided in the concluding part of this book. It is through the appropriation of new terminologies that scholars in any field of inquiry express themselves not only to elucidate new concepts but also to contest the prevailing ones.

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CHAPTER ONE

STUDENT WRITING IN THE ACADEMY: THE COMPLEXITY OF COMPLEXITIES

The complexity inherent in the academic writing process emerges from among other things the new imperatives attached to the composition of student academic texts in terms of diverse knowledge domains. Student writing occurs within a normative, if not prescriptive, framework of power and knowledge. If one attempts to define student writing, then these institutional power structures and institutionally sanctioned knowledge domains may invariably surface. Student writing may be defined as any rhetorically organized text embedded in appropriate knowledge (disciplinary/interdisciplinary/extra-disciplinary) and its interpretive potential (discourses) within 'politico-institutional' power structures (Derrida, 1992a:23) with a view to meeting the assessment criteria of a particular course of study leading to a graduate or postgraduate qualification at a university or any tertiary educational institute. By 'rhetorically organized', I refer to the manipulation of the written word (or at times the spoken word) to demonstrate, amongst other things, analytical skills, in-depth investigation, critical detachment, clarity of expression, and acquaintance with appropriate institutionalized conventions at an acceptable level as determined by various bodies of the disciplinary community. In other words, it is the strategic appropriation of linguistic resources to manipulate appropriate knowledge structures in a given academic culture. A student text, according to this definition, is also couched in appropriate discourses in the sense that it is discursively constructed using intertextual/interdiscursive resources of various discourses (disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and extra-disciplinary), which project themselves as texts. The term 'rhetorical' as I have used here also signifies the persuasiveness of student texts, a salient feature of the discourse of student writing. In fact this was also a salient feature of what is commonly known as rhetorical tradition where the importance of a text was determined not so much by its contents as by its narrative and phraseology.