

Academic literacies and PhD education? Aspirations, implementation, and implications from a doctoral workshop series

Annika Bindler, Mai Trang Vu, Magnus Olsson

Academic Resource Centre, Umeå University Library

This presentation reports on the process of developing and implementing a workshop series for PhD students at the Academic Resource Centre, Umeå University, launched for the first time during the spring term 2017. Adopting an academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) as the framework for the course's underlying principles, its design and instruction, we propose that literacy in a university setting and especially at doctoral level can be understood not only as the individual, transferable cognitive skills of writing and reading. Rather, it is an interrelated, dynamic, and situated set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes that support PhD students to acculturate themselves into their disciplinary discourses, as well as the academic community and wider social contexts.

Lea and Street's (2006) *academic literacies* model draws from both the surface features of language form (the *study skills* model) and students' acculturation into a disciplinary and subject area community (the *academic socialisation* model). However, the academic literacies model moves beyond the academic socialisation model by considering social processes (such as power, identity, and authority). This model has been used in different higher education contexts, enabling the conceptualising and reconceptualising of the knowledge students should learn and do with regards to academic writing and reading (e.g. Wingate, 2012; Castanheira, Street, & Carvalho, 2015; Guzmán-Simón, García-Jiménez, & López-Cobo, 2017).

In the particular setting of Umeå University, the Academic Resource Centre, University Library is the unit who provides academic support to students at all levels, including PhD students. From our experience as academic tutors, academic librarians and researchers working with the University's doctoral students, we were able to identify their need for support not only with thesis texts written in English but also a range of capabilities such as article reading, research communicating, information searching, and publishing. These needs have also been expressed by PhD students themselves. As a result, the workshop series "Write here, Write now" was developed and implemented by the Academic Resource Centre during March – May 2017. Informed by the academic literacies model, a number of factors were considered as we approached *writing*. Besides the focus of helping students to improve their academic English, we wished to highlight that writing is a process which involves a myriad of competence, and it is a social practice rather than merely an individual cognitive skill. Above all, we aspired to develop a course that aligns with the national goals for Swedish PhD education which are set beyond the final thesis; the aim is to educate a *critical, autonomous, creative, and responsible* PhD researcher (Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, Annex 2,

Qualifications Ordinance). The course should also be designed following the fundamental principles of teaching and learning in higher education that promote critical thinking, active learning, learner autonomy, and collaborative learning.

In our presentation, we will show how these aspirations have helped us with our attempts at defining “literacy” in PhD education at Umeå University as lying at the intersection of English language, research competence, and Information literacy. Examples of how we incorporated the intended contents and guiding principles in our pedagogical practices will be provided. Reflections on our roles as instructors and further implications regarding policy on PhD education in the Swedish context will also be discussed.

References

Castanheira, M. L., Street, B. V., Carvalho, G. T. (2015). Navigating across academic contexts: Campo and Angolan students in a Brazilian university. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 1–16.

Guzmán-Simón, F., García-Jiménez, E., & López-Cobo, I. (2017). Undergraduate students’ perspectives on digital competence and academic literacy in a Spanish university. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 74, 196–204.

Lea, M. & Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157–72.

Lea, M. & Street, B. (2006). The ‘Academic literacies’ model: Theory and applications. *Theory into Practice*, 45(4), 368–77.

Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, Annex 2, Qualifications Ordinance. Goals for third cycle studies according to the Higher Education Ordinance of Sweden (“Högskoleförvaltningen”). Retrieved 1 September 2017 from https://intra.che.kth.se/polopoly_fs/1.421819!/Hogskoleforordningen.pdf

Wingate, U. (2012). Using academic literacies and genre-based models for academic writing instruction: A 'Literacy' Journey. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 11(1), 26–37.