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Ideologies of Literacy, “Academic Literacies,” and Composition Studies

Bruce Horner

In my contribution to this symposium, I take up the call of this journal in its mission statement for “new interactions between Literacy and Composition Studies.” From the framework of competing ideologies of literacy, I explore points of intersection as well as divergence between strands of what’s known as “composition studies” and what has come to be identified as the “academic literacies” approach to academic literacy. My focus on “academic literacies” rather than the broader area of literacy studies signals at least three of my biases: first, I wish to counter the tendency to allow the cultural norm for academic literacy to go unchallenged, a tendency that a focus on those literacy practices deemed nonacademic risks maintaining; second, and relatedly, insofar as work in composition studies remains tied by its location in the academy to programs charged with the study and teaching of academic writing, those of us identified with composition cannot allow cultural norms for academic literacy to go unchallenged; and third, some of the most promising work challenging such norms can be found in work taking an academic literacies approach.

On the working assumption that the majority of this journal’s readers will identify with “composition studies” rather than with “literacy studies,” I start with a sketch, entirely partial, of the “academic literacies” tradition. That tradition grows out, and represents a powerful segment, of the larger research tradition of language ethnography identified with the work of such figures as Brian Street, David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič that has come to be known as the New Literacy Studies, or “NLS” (see Street, “New”). To delineate some of that tradition’s key contours relevant to grasping points of useful intersection between the academic literacies approach and composition, I begin with a quick review of Street’s now well known concept, and critique, of the ideology of autonomous literacy (Street, *Literacy*). Much of the work of Street and his colleagues and students has been directed at exposing the ideological character of the autonomous model of literacy, in at least three interrelated ways. First, it demonstrates that individuals whom that model defines as illiterate in fact display behaviors that can reasonably be identified as literate. In so doing, their work places what does pass for literacy *tout court* according to that autonomous model in the context of a plurality of other, largely unrecognized literacies, hence the NLS tradition’s trademark insistence on use of the plural form literac-ies. In other words, their work has contributed to broadening the range of actors and activities that can be recognized as “literate.” Second, their work demonstrates that, contrary to the ideology of

the autonomous model of literacy, the set of actors and activities which that ideology does recognize as “literate” is neither homogeneous, uniform, discrete, nor stable in character but rather a constantly shifting set of unstable, internally various, fluid, and heterogeneous practices—“social practices” but, importantly, “social” in the sense of “social historical” involving change and vulnerability to transformation (see Lea and Street 159). Hence, Lea and Street distinguish the “academic literacies” approach from not only what they term the “academic skills” approach but also the “academic socialization” approach. Third, in demonstrating the invalidity of the autonomous model’s claims for literacy, their work demonstrates that the model is ideological not only in the sense of being at variance with the facts on the ground—i.e., as a set of “un-grounded” beliefs—but also in the sense of working in the interests of some and against the interests of others—for example, those whose literacy is refused recognition. In other words, the autonomous model is powerful in claiming an autonomy for literacy that hides its ideological character, purporting to offer literacy as an ideologically neutral phenomenon—a gift to the unfortunate, who can thence be blamed for failing to make appropriate, grateful use of it to improve themselves. By contrast, what Street calls the “ideological” model of literacy takes the ideological character of all literacy and its study, and hence takes conflict, as inevitable givens.

The “academic literacies” approach builds especially on the second and third of these forms of critique. As the insistent use of the plural form by those taking this approach suggests, academic literacies scholars have demonstrated that the specific form of literacy with which literacy *tout court* has often been conflated—i.e., academic “essayist” literacy—is “it-self” not singular but plural, notwithstanding claims to the contrary by those charged with its/their inculcation and evaluation (see for example Lea and Street). One effect of this work has been an alignment and overlap of at least some of the research taking an academic literacies approach with strands of work in writing in the disciplines (WID) highlighting differences in the kinds of writing practices valued and engaged in by specific disciplines, and with work on “English for Academic Purposes” (EAP) and “English for Specific Purposes” (ESP). However, in keeping with its view of literacy practices as not merely “social” but “social historical,” work taking an “academic literacies” approach differs from significant strands of work in WID, EAP, and ESP in its rejection of the normativity of these various literacy practices and, instead, its subjection of these to critique for what they disallow, including students’ literacy practices not granted institutional recognition *as* literacy practices, and by its call for exploring and valorizing the potential transformation of academic literacy practices by, for example, considering alternatives to them (see Lillis and Scott 12-13).

My account so far might suggest that the academic literacies approach arises out of a theoretical construct—the ideology of the autonomous model of literacy (and its converse, the ideological model of literacy)—which was then applied to the specific case of academic literacy/ies. A full account of the development of the “academic literacies” approach is beyond the scope of this contribution. However, it’s worth recalling that the development of

an academic literacies approach emerged at least in part as a response to teacher-scholars' encounters in higher education with new populations of students with a far greater diversity of language and literacy practices than previously, as a consequence of the massification of higher education in the UK and elsewhere (see Lillis and Scott 7-9). Like their counterparts in the U.S. facing students admitted under open admissions programs who, as Shaughnessy put it, seemed like "strangers in their own land," these teachers began to question the norms of academic literacy they had been charged with inculcating. While (like counterparts elsewhere) not all teachers have responded in this way—some instead attempting simply to better identify academic writing practices and then induct students into them—a significant minority has adopted the explicitly ideological stance now identified as an "academic literacies" approach.

I am suggesting, then, several overlaps between the work of those taking an "academic literacies" approach to academic writing and the work of at least some compositionists: the recognition of a plurality of kinds of literacy, including a plurality of kinds of academic literacies; an insistence on the ideological character of all literacies and claims about them, including their relative value; the genesis of that recognition and insistence in teachers' encounters with students, and student literacy practices, previously excluded from higher education; and a desire to explore ways by which academic literacy/ies might be transformed to counter noxious power relations advanced by dominant ideologies of academic literacy as "autonomous"—a single set of stable, discrete, internally uniform, politically neutral skills. But the identification of the overlapping positions themselves can lead to neglect of important differences in the local conditions of work and the history and effects of those conditions. Within the space of this symposium, I'll restrict my attention in what follows to the effects of two linked differences in such conditions on the work identified with either and both, and one similarity in those conditions.

The two linked differences on which I'll focus are in the institutional "homes" of those taking up such work in either language education or "English studies," and the research methodologies deployed to study academic writing. Lillis and Scott have noted that "teacher-researchers have drawn on the available and influential paradigms in their specific geo-historical contexts" (9). In the U.S., those contexts include first-year composition, the common location of writing courses and programs in departments of English, and their staffing by those trained in the research traditions of English studies. Given such a location, it is not surprising that, as Lillis and Scott note, the paradigms that predominate in U.S. studies of writing, a.k.a. "composition," are drawn from theories from literary, rhetorical, cultural, and post-colonial studies (9). This has led to a pronounced focus on "the text," with problems, policies and solutions defined in terms of texts: errors, organization, format, conventions, genre, even "mode." Scholarship in this vein tends to take the form of competing "readings" of student (and other) writing, often derived from the practice of the "close reading" of literary texts (see, for example, Bartholomae, "Study," "Inventing"; Lu and Horner; Miller; Salvatori; Shaughnessy). At its worst, this textual bias can lead to overlooking significant features of the immediate and larger sociohistorical contexts in which specific texts emerge that might account in contradictory ways for the textual features under study.

Conversely, the institutional location of many of those teacher-scholars taking an academic lit-

eracies approach in departments and programs of language and education has led to an emphasis on practice over text (Lillis and Scott 10-11). Such an emphasis draws on research traditions associated with anthropology and the sociology of knowledge, and typically takes the form of empirical studies in language ethnography: as Lillis and Scott put it, “the observation of the practices surrounding the production of texts—rather than focusing solely on written texts—as well as participants’ perspectives on the texts and practices,” with the concept of *practice* used to link language with context and culture (Lillis and Scott 11). This focus risks neglecting the ways in which writing mediates language, situation, and context, the potential of intervention in these through writing and writing pedagogy, and an overstating of the role of context in writing as determinative. It is this risk that has prompted cautions such as Gee’s reminder, in response to work in New Literacy Studies emphasizing the situated character of literacy, that “[s]ituations (contexts) do not just exist . . . [but] are actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted, and transformed moment-by-moment through ongoing *work*” (190).

Of course, the specific limitations which the research methodologies of specific institutional locations make teacher-scholars inhabiting them prone point both to the limits of the “local”—here understood in terms of disciplinary and institutional “home” and larger sociopolitical context—and to the potential of translocal research. As this journal’s mission statement makes clear, those limits, and that potential, are broadly recognized. What I will now offer here, as a kind of heuristic, is identification of a feature shared by both: the tendency to evacuate the temporal dimension of both “text” and “context” through their location in primarily spatial terms. As suggested by the quotation from Gee above and my reference to writing’s mediation of language, situation, and context, neglect of the temporal dimension of literacy acts can lead not merely to a stabilizing of text or context at odds with their always emergent character—the unavoidable effect of a synchronic focus requisite to some kinds of analysis—but also to the paradoxical fetishizing of the features of what has been stabilized that, paradoxically, engenders conceptual dilemmas for the project of contesting the dominant ideology of the autonomous model of literacy and the power relations it perpetuates. So, for example, a focus on formal features of “the text” and conventional textual modalities can lead to making a fetish of specific deviations from what are thought to be formal features of academic writing: by changing these features—for example, by mixing languages, or composing in a manner recognized as “multimodal”—it is hoped that academic writing can thereby be transformed. Thus a change to a specific textual object is equated with changes to a practice.

The seemingly tautological nature of this belief—change writing to change writing—is an effect of the ideology of the autonomous model of literacy and its restricted definition of what constitutes “writing,” and thus works to sustain that ideology’s treatment of literacy as in fact autonomous. As Street has recently cautioned in response to shifts of attention to a plethora of newly identified “literacies,” “such a shift may take us back to earlier autonomous approaches, both with respect to the view of literacy as skill and to the notion that each communicative practice has its own ‘affordances’ or determinations” (“Future” 32). Each literacy can come to be understood as capable by itself of producing specific effects without the labor of writer and readers. The effort to counter the fetishizing of conventional academic literacy can thus simply lead to additional, even complementary, fetishes that, as in the treatment of literacy—or academic literacy—as autonomous, occlude the labor of reading

and writing. Texts, so conceived, are treated as stable and discrete rather than, as Raymond Williams has observed, merely “notations [which] have then to be interpreted in an active way” (*Problems* 47).

Williams makes this observation in arguing for the need to shift analyses from “isolating the object and then discovering its components” to studying “the nature of a practice and then its conditions” (*Problems* 47). It would thus appear to be aligned with the emphasis given by those adopting an academic literacies approach to literacy practices rather than to textual artifacts. However, that shift itself can falter when it then objectifies sets of such practices and conditions, rendering them stable, internally uniform, and discrete through locating them in terms of space but not temporally as the always emerging products of actions. Such spatialization can then contribute to fetishizing specific “local” practices and contexts as in themselves producing specific effects, romanticizing of these as “local” (now understood as an honorific), and to neglecting the interplay of the “local” and “distant” (or “global”) as well as the inevitable relocalizing of the global and globalizing of the “local.” Attribution of autonomy to the “global” is then complemented with attribution of autonomy to the local as well, with equally problematic results. For example, as Hull and Schultz observe, there is then a tendency to “build and reify a great divide between in school and out of school . . . relegate[ing] all good things to out-of-school contexts and everything repressive to school,” or, alternatively, treating “non-school learning as merely frivolous or remedial or incidental” (3).

In either case—fetishizing specific, ostensibly “alternative” textual forms (within the medium of alphabetic print or using other media *as* alternative to conventionally alphabetic print texts), or fetishizing specific literacy practices and contexts alternative to those identified as “academic”—the “new” in New Literacy Studies, applied to academic literacies, can come to be understood as a modification not to the ways in which literacy is conceptualized and studied but to the forms of literacy themselves, now approached as autonomous rather than ideological (see Street, “New” 28). Thus in place of approaching invocations of any literacy as inevitably ideological, efforts are directed at identifying new literacies and literacy practices as constituting breaks *from* the ideological: an instance of making a fetish of what dominant ideology leads us to recognize as “the new” as a means, in itself, of accomplishing social change.

We can account for the conflation of new conceptualizations of writing with new forms of texts and with practices that appear to deviate from academic norms in at least three ways. First and most obviously, it is testimony to the hegemonic power of notions of literacy as, in fact, autonomous. For, after all, the ideology of the autonomous model of literacy is not something to be simply shucked off. Rather, as Bourdieu cautions, an ideology of language “has nothing in common with an explicitly professed, deliberate and revocable belief, or with an intentional act of accepting a ‘norm.’ It is inscribed, in a practical state, in dispositions which are impalpably inculcated, through a long and slow process of acquisition, by the sanctions of the linguistic market”(51).

Second, the fact that an ideological model of academic literacy emerged in response to the arrival in higher education of populations who themselves deviated from the cultural “norm” for students has encouraged conflation of textual forms and literacy practices with specific populations and their “home” cultures, understood and located in purely spatial terms as discrete and distant, thanks to the broader and more powerful ideology of monolingualism identifying language with

social identity (see Gal and Irvine). Dominant ideologies of language and literacy have predisposed teacher-scholars to then focus on and treat as new/different from the “academic” those literacies identified with locations likewise seen as new/different.

Third, historically, the fact that the emergence of new literacy technologies has made newly visible *as* technologies those literacy technologies that previously had been taken for granted as, and equated with, literacy has led to a conflation of an exploration of these new technologies with breaks from the autonomous model of literacy, while leaving intact the ideology supporting that model. Pluralization of literacy forms, technologies, and practices understood within and accommodated by the framework of the ideology of the autonomous model of literacy can then substitute for radical challenges to that ideology. So, just as multilingualism in many ways can represent a pluralization of monolinguist beliefs—leaving intact monolinguist conceptions of languages as stable, discrete, internally uniform entities linked to specific social identities likewise conceived as stable, discrete, and internally uniform (see Makoni and Pennycook)—a recognition of the legitimacy of new literacies, including new forms of academic literacies, can pluralize the old autonomous model of literacy while leaving intact its ideology of literacies as stable, discrete commodities by definition autonomous “with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (Marx 164-65).

To crudely characterize the phenomena I have been attempting merely to sketch, we might say that those taking an academic literacies approach have brought their attention to vernacular literacies outside the ideological center of academic literacy—a prevalent focus of traditions of language ethnography—to their reconsideration of academic literacies, whereas composition teacher-scholars have begun with a focus on academic literacies which has then broadened to address literacies beyond the academy, which have then come to be valorized as alternatives to the academic literacies which have traditionally been their object of concern. Given the long history of the denigration of subordinated groups as “illiterate” effected through invocations of the ideology of the autonomous model of literacy, it is not surprising that in both cases, teacher-scholars have directed their efforts at defending the legitimacy of the texts and practices ascribed to these groups as, indeed, meriting to be identified as “literate”—i.e., as evidence of intelligence, thought, logic, care, and so on. And such efforts continue to be necessary and valuable in the face of ongoing claims that these subordinate groups suffer from a culture of illiteracy, victimhood, and so on for which literacy, understood as autonomous, is offered as cure.

But in making these defenses, we need to be careful not to buy into the ideological framework responsible for that denigration in the first place. We need instead to find ways to focus on the labor of these groups as they continuously rework, and thereby renew, literacy, texts, practices, and contexts—whether deemed “academic” or otherwise. To avoid seeing ourselves as giving others something called “literacy,” as the autonomous model encourages us to do, we should not resort to seeing ourselves as givers of the honorific of “literacy” to a broader range of forms and practices. Instead we can join these others in the active work with literacy in which they have always already been engaged.

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NOTES

¹ For a far more thorough account of the “academic literacies” approach on which I draw heavily here, see Lillis and Scott. For the formative description of this approach in relation to others, see Lea and Street. For other examples of works identified here with that approach and the tradition out of which it arises, see Barton and Hamilton; Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič; Ivanič; Ivanič et al.; Lillis, “Student” and *Student*; Street, *Literacy*; Turner; Wingate.

² Note that this pluralization does not mean approval of the application of “literacy” to every conceivable activity, as in “emotional literacy,” etc., in which “literacy” is used as an honorific to give more status to specific kinds of activity or knowledge (see Street, “Future”), nor does it signal that every use of the plural form constitutes alignment with the academic literacies approach (see Lillis and Scott).

³ This is in concert with critiques of literacy ideologies by such figures as Deborah Brandt, James Paul Gee, and Harvey Graff.

⁴ In composition studies, Berlin’s “Rhetoric,” and the debate responding to Hairston (see Trimbur), mark the shift toward recognizing not merely the “social” but the “ideological” character of academic literacy.

⁵ Lillis and Scott also point to the influence of sociocultural theory on U.S. teacher-researchers addressing WAC/WID.

⁶ For a different account of the text/context relation in recent research, see Lillis, “Ethnography.”

⁷ Recall that commodity fetishism “reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves . . . autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (Marx 164-65).

⁸ The pluralization of literacy to literacy practices, or literac-ies, may merely multiply the contexts acknowledged. For an alternative perspective directly addressing the temporal dimension of literacy contexts, conventions, and practices, see Tusting.

⁹ On these risks and neglected possibilities, see Street, “New Literacy Studies” 41-45. On seeing language as always local practice, see Pennycook.

¹⁰ On such efforts, see Watkins, *Work Time* 235.

¹¹ The power of that ideology is such that when the writers were demonstrably not from distant locations, teachers resorted to paradoxical formulations to render them so, as when Shaughnessy characterized native New Yorkers attending the City University of New York as “appearing to have come from a different country . . . true outsiders,” “strangers” (*Errors* 2, 3). On this phenomenon, see Fox, “Basic,” and Soliday, “Politics of Difference.”

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