Students researching the academy:

An ethnography of academic writing

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Background

- Change in student body at universities
  - Historical perspective
  - Culturally different backgrounds
    - Generation 1.5 (Harklau et al., 1999)
    - Differing expectations
Student background

- Reproductive, analytical, speculative
  (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997)
- Exam oriented – reproductive
- Analytical
- “When I am writing a seminar paper I always feel quite helpless even totally at a loss. Although after reading a lot of papers of professionals, I still have no view in my mind. Up to now I just accept the information from reading passively and could not construct knowledge initiatives”

Academic literacies

- Zamel & Spack 1998)
  “It is no longer possible to assume that there is one type of literacy in the academy”
- Literary practices and norms evolve from the context in which they occur
- Literacies part of academic discourse communities
Not just grammatically correct text
Many influences on text production (Johns, 1997; Samaraj, 2004)
- Cultural
- Institutional
- Disciplinary
- Individual

Examples of assignments
- Linguistic analysis
- Course design
- Critical literature review
- Research project
- Discursive essay
- On-line reflections
- Journals
Graduate Unit for Credit

- Targets graduate writing
- Includes treatment of theory – graduate attributes
- For international and NESB students
- Elective unit 6 credit points
- Emerged from funded project to address academic skills in Faculty

Ethnography of writing

- Students investigate writing as insiders
  - (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996)
- Investigate various influences on text:
  - Expectations, values, epistemological beliefs
  - Institution, peers, individual
Students as researchers

- Consider writing task
- Consider views of academic tasks, knowledge
- Use context analyse as frame work
- Use documentation and interviews to provide data
- Tie this together with theories of writing

Theory put into practice

- Process approach to writing (Badger & White, 2000; Lea & Street, 1998; Leki, 1998)
- Genre approach to writing (Flowerdew, 1993; Paltridge, 2001; Swales, 1990)
- Cultural influences (Angelil-Carter, 2000; Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Connor, 2004)
- Purpose (Swales & Feak, 2004)
- Audience (Ede & Lunsford, 1984, Johns, 1983)
- Expectations and conventions (Creme & Lea, 2003)
- Critical issues (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2002)
Academic discourse community

- Swales’ 6 defining characteristics
  - Common goals
  - Mechanisms of intercommunication
  - Genres
  - Participation provides feedback and information
  - Specific lexis
  - Threshold level

- Consider social communities – eg church, club
- Apply to academic context
  (Johns, 1997)
- Hierarchy within academic discourse community
Form peer support network
Collaborative groups
  - Searching resources
  - Interpreting assignments
  - Researching the academy
  - Uncovering expectations

**Context analysis**

- A framework for analysing academic writing
  - Setting
  - Content
  - Purpose
  - Audience
  - Expectations
  - Shared knowledge
  - Relationship to other texts
(Paltridge, 2001, 2006)
Examples of tasks

- What is the text about?
- What is the purpose of the text?
- What is the setting of the text?
- What is the tone of the text?
- Who is the author of the
- Who is the intended audience of the text?
- What is the relationship between the author and the intended audience of the text?

- What rules or expectations limit how the text might be written?
- What shared cultural knowledge is assumed by the text?
- What shared understandings are implied in the text?
- What other texts does this text assume you have knowledge of?
- How is the language of the text influenced by each of these factors
  (Paltridge, 2006)
Sample tasks

- Text analysis
- Research project
  - Based on context analysis

Conclusion

- Focus on setting
- Helping at risk students
- Positive feedback