

Troublesome Citations: Academic Literacy in a Community of Practice

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Abstract

Faculty can define “academic integrity” not as an absence or prevalence of cheating, but as “academic literacy” and create learning material that will help students to write within an academic community of practice. This paper explores the theory of students as adult learners who are negotiating with threshold concepts in terms of the genre of “research writing” that is the primary means of communication within the university as a community of practice. The paper offers solutions to implement across the curriculum and suggestions about how to help students to grow from the pre-liminal space that they occupy as academic writers. Finally, the paper discusses the faculty’s role in helping students move from pre-liminality toward liminality and progression toward mastery of the social practice of academic writing.

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Keywords: academic integrity, research writing, pedagogy, communities of practice

Although the university stresses academic integrity, especially in regard to preventing plagiarism through the fair, accurate, and correct use of outside sources, faculty concur that undergraduate students are not sure how to synthesize or document the sources that they have brought into their written work. Students know from classroom directives that they must create papers that look a certain way — the way that APA (American Psychological Association) papers look. In order to provide a framework for redressing the problem, the university can rephrase it: “The research paper” is the primary means of communication among people in the academic community, and undergraduates — as pre-liminal communicators who understand only some aspects of the genre — might have difficulties understanding how to write and create the research paper as a message that communicates what other writers have said about a subject and what they themselves have to say. Then, faculty can grasp the problem: Students have to gain literacy as participants within the academic community. Faculty can teach “academic integrity” not as an absence or presence of cheating, but as “academic literacy”; that is, as the ethical way that students and scholars communicate, share ideas, and create new knowledge through discourse.

McCabe, Butterfield, and Treviño (2012) have found that many contemporary students do not think that plagiarism — narrowly defined here as “copying language from another printed source to use in one’s own paper” — is tantamount to academic dishonesty. About a decade earlier, McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2001) found that students in 1993 defined “plagiarism” more loosely than students had in 1963, although the incidents within their study groups numbered nearly the same.

Beyond copying language verbatim, students in several studies did not recognize that paraphrased or summarized material must be cited, as well (Power, 2009; Yeo, 2007). Speaking to the problem of academic literacy's lack of a place within the university curriculum, Power (2009) found that instructors warned students against plagiarism during the first week of classes, but typically did not offer students any further instruction about using sources.

The academy exists, in part, as a means of managing knowledge, and having students consult and learn from published sources is part of that management project. Within the academic community, messages that transmit ideas are the currency of knowledge, and those messages comprise rhetoric — the interplay and contest of different ideas. Rhetoric is epistemic (Smith, 1998), and rhetorical methodologies dispense knowledge to students in order to teach students their disciplines' purposes and the big questions that academic fields of study seek to answer.

Thus, education is more than skills transfer; it is the capacity to participate in a conversation centered on theories, concepts, and facts. The university could express its highest purpose in the solid language of learning objectives centered on rhetoric-as-epistemic: "Given a problem to solve within one's area of educational expertise, be able to communicate a solution using one's knowledge of how to craft messages for audiences and the ability to synthesize new ideas from information exchanged with and learned from others via intellectual exchanges made through reading, speaking, and listening."

Having students participate in learning through research asks that they have the ability to create proper in-text citations and a References page in order to give credit to authors whose works they have used, argued against, and used as support for the ideas they communicate in their educational projects, which are part of the project of higher education. An "academic literacy" approach to teaching students how to use sources as messages for ideas asks that faculty give students strategies for examining source material, promote an attitude in favor of learning, and teach the capacity to transfer the material that students have learned, both from class to class, plus, more importantly, to the world outside the academy. Teaching the use of sources as the communications-based foundation of our community of practice and teaching APA as the language that we use to communicate ideas will help students to understand the proper use of sources as a threshold concept within our community of practice.

Community of Practice

Wenger and Trayner (2015) define a community of practice as a group of people who interact regularly in order to share a passion or concern, and they become better at it as they interact on a regular basis. One of the key markers of a community of practice is the "domain": the shared area of interest, and, it follows, a shared commitment to that domain, which results in "a competence that distinguishes members from other people" (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Another pair of markers is the community and the practice. In the community, members communicate about their practices in regard to the shared interest; the practices are learned through concentrated communications and messages that become shared resources.

Practices are the "tricks of the trade," and a committed community meets regularly to communicate what they have learned and to add to the repertoire of tricks while learning from it. A community of practice is formed.

Any classroom can become a community of practice whose members are committed to performing research, learning from sources, and drafting their own messages about the fields they are studying. Research projects offer fertile ground for cultivating a community of practice around the practice of research.

Weber-Wulff (2014) uses Charles Babbage's 1830 declaration about these means of misusing research-based ideas. Interestingly, Babbage talks about nineteenth-century science as a community of practice whose members — "the initiated" — knowingly commit academic misdemeanors and frauds:

[t]here are several species of impositions that have been practised [sic] in science, which are but little known, except to the initiated, and which it may perhaps be possible to render quite intelligible to ordinary understandings. These may be classed under the heads of hoaxing, forging, trimming, and cooking. (as cited in Weber-Wulff, 2014, p. 17)

Babbage's effort to define terms for "ordinary understandings" show him as a translator, stepping outside of his community of practice in order to warn outsiders about scientifically unsound, yet oft-used "tricks of the trade" that he has learned from his community of practice. Some of Babbage's tricks are common among undergraduates who have not absorbed the methods of research as a threshold concept for entering the academically literate community of practice. In terms of undergraduate student-writers who need more conversation on using sources with peers in their community of research practice and classroom instruction from faculty:

- *Forging* is making up information to go into a research project;
- *Trimming* is manipulating information by getting rid of parts that are not useful to a research hypothesis or thesis;
- *Cooking* is selecting only information that backs up what one already believes.

Cousin (2006) sums up all of these acts of copying, plagiarizing, hoaxing, forging, trimming, and cooking: they are the “product of ritualised [*sic*] performances rather than integrated understandings” (p. 5). The challenge for faculty in this community of practice is to help students bypass the stage of creating products that are ritualized performances evidenced by a naive or uninformed use of research.

Threshold Concepts

A question from faculty members is “How can we ensure that students make progress out of their pre-liminal understanding of research as ‘collecting sources to shove into a paper’ and connect its methodology and methods to their learning process in every class they take?” The first level of helping students to achieve literacy within disciplines is to consider the threshold concepts that are important in their fields. Meyer and Land (2006b) write that threshold concepts are “‘conceptual gateways’ or ‘portals’ that lead to a transformed view of something” (p. 19) and go on to describe the discursive nature of threshold concepts: “The acquisition of transformative concepts...brings with it new and empowering forms of expression that in many instances characterise [*sic*] distinctive ways of disciplinary *thinking*” (p. 20). Discovering those threshold concepts in disciplines requires that faculty work back to an emergent understanding of important ideas: How did one think about one’s major as an undergraduate? What did undergraduates learn that opened minds to a new state of comprehension, to a new way of interacting with the knowledge of one’s discipline? By questioning one’s own practices and interviewing one’s colleagues in order to ask them to recall their pre-liminal states and how they mastered threshold concepts in their fields of study, faculty can come into touch with the important concepts that help to unfold a discipline for students.

Meyer and Land (2006b) offer several examples of threshold concepts in different fields. They quote a professor of medieval history who claims that a threshold concept in his discipline is getting students to understand how business had to be transacted in person — even by the king himself — in medieval European societies, “...impressing upon students how little could be done in this society, even by people of power, without them actually getting on their horse or

whatever and going and seeing someone else, and dealing with and impressing people face to face” (p. 20). Absorbing that idea, one can understand how vital personal, physical relationships were among people and how important verbal communication was in medieval Europe, where a person’s word truly was his or her bond — a concept that has lessened in importance in contemporary society, where people have virtual relationships with others whom they have never physically met, written contracts drafted by anonymous attorneys are binding, and verbal, face-to-face agreements can have limited value.

Threshold concepts are, at once, abstract, yet fundamental apprehensions of ideas that are crucial to comprehending the basics of a field of study. They build a foundation that allows students’ understanding of their disciplines to expand, giving them the capacity to create new ideas and concepts of their own that are grounded by an advanced comprehension of what their disciplines accept as given truths. APA is the language for using and citing the sources that researchers use to show the path that their understanding has followed, and having one language to use helps to bring all writers, in every discipline, into the academic community of practice.

Pre-liminality and Liminality

Akin to Shanahan and Meyer’s (2006) description of economics students’ remaining at a naive level of understanding about the basic, yet necessary concept of “opportunity cost” from freshman year until graduation day, undergraduate student-researchers-writers can stay at a naive understanding of research. In this naive position, research to students can mean looking for sources that say something that support one’s preconceived viewpoint on a topic; finding one or two sources and pulling out some quotations to use so that sources simply exist in the paper; and/or finding a source that the student understands well enough to mimic in tone and structure.

The university stresses APA, at its simplest, as a means of documenting sources and preventing the most egregious type of plagiarism: copying-and-pasting language and taking unattributed ideas. Yet APA is a doorway to the methodology of research as the communication of ideas among scholars in a discipline. Since the undergraduate classroom is the first realm where the language of research as a discipline is required of students, APA as the *lingua franca* of academia is a threshold concept for the majority of students. Meyer and Land (2006a) write, “A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (p. 3). If faculty treat the proper APA use of sources — including reading,

note-taking, and writing about the process of engaging with academic writing — as a threshold concept toward academic literacy, the university can achieve the goal of helping students to become academically literate by applying the dual concepts of students as participants in a community of practice and liminal learners on the threshold of understanding concepts that are vital to their practices as academics and lifelong learners.

Land, Cousin, Meyer, and Davies (2004) describe “liminality” as having several conditions:

- A *transformative* state that engages existing certainties and renders them problematic, and fluid
- A *suspended* state in which understanding can approximate to a kind of mimicry or lack of authenticity
- An *unsettling* — sense of loss

Students experience liminality in terms of a transformative state, where they must take the writing abilities that they bring to their university experience and transform them into models of academic literacy, in terms of researching sources and writing with APA documentation. Students move from their transformative state into a suspended state, where they mimic the academic writing that they encounter, including mimicked or even copied-and-pasted APA citations, but not synthesizing the source material that they are quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing. Finally, students know that they are not wholly academically literate through just using APA, and they are unsettled by the understanding that research is more than forging, trimming, and cooking.

Faculty can help students through the liminal phase. By promoting research, including its documentation, as a concern within the committed community of practice that defines the university, faculty can help students to progress from a liminal state with their knowledge to a position of academically literate participants in the university’s project of managing and communicating knowledge.

Curriculum Developments and Instructional Strategies

Spinuzzi (2003) writes about the ways in which people use their own agency to solve problems, reflecting back to Aristotle’s notion of *techné*, based on the philosopher’s observations about the way that master craftsmen are able to use their own judgment in order to “bend the rule” through experience and expertise in order to serve a larger goal. If a learning objective is that students become fluent with the APA language of the academic community of practice, then faculty can make space in the curriculum for students to become

able to act under their own agency to practice the forms of research and documentation that comprise APA, the language of their community of practice.

Integrating an instructional design process to how faculty guide their classrooms can offer steps to take in ushering students through liminality and threshold concepts to become academically literate participants in their community of practice. The steps in an instructional design framework are pre-instruction, presentation, participation, assessment, and transfer.

Pre-instruction: APA Crib Sheets

A task that faculty can work on with students is the creation of their own APA reference citation “crib sheet,” drafted by students and corrected by the instructor. The goal is to have the student create a list of APA reference citation types that s/he is likely to encounter in his or her writing for the class. Thus, students would create their own artifacts for research writing and begin to become fluent with the genre of source citation, a fundamental vocabulary item within the language of research.

Presentation: Response Papers

In order to give students an opportunity to use their APA crib sheets, the majority classes should require students to do research in one specific library database (Points of View), read articles that have opposing points of view on important topics, and write in response to the intellectual challenge of considering deeply opposing perspectives and situating oneself as a reader, researcher, and respondent who writes as an academically literate user of texts.

By integrating response-based reading and APA-cited writing into their classes, faculty can move student writing away from a liminal state, where students mimic research writing as a genre. In this exercise, students will

1. engage in a research process to gather articles on a subject that is important to them and — importantly — that they are thinking about in terms of an audience which they will address through their own writing;
2. read published essays that have conflicting, oppositional points of view to one another and, probably, to some of the student’s preconceptions;
3. write response essays that describe their;
 - 3.1. ideas about their topics when they first approached the Points of View database;
 - 3.2. reading and note-taking processes as they read the introductory articles in Points of View;

- 3.3. how they expanded their understanding of threshold concepts through
 - 3.3.1. the process of doing library-based, academic research;
 - 3.3.2. the experience of encountering various perspectives on the topic that challenged their opinions;
- 3.4. what research process they used as they sought any further peer-reviewed information on their topic;
- 3.5. what they learned through;
 - 3.5.1. doing library-based, academic research;
 - 3.5.2. engaging with ideas on an important topic and reading and digesting oppositional points of view.

The Points of View database available through the library contains discussions of topics that can be tailored to any course of study. With their self-created APA crib sheets in hand, students can read and take accurately cited notes to use in their papers — which means that they will be working at the level of participants in a research-oriented community of practice.

Participation: Discussion Boards

The online course shell can become a place where students find support for their confusion as they encounter and move through their liminal states. Faculty can use discussion board questions, in particular, to elicit talk about any confusion. Faculty can ask questions that encourage students to record their problems with creating APA crib sheets and the research and reading processes as they engage in a dialectical approach to their learning through the Points of View response paper assignment.

The goal of facilitated discussions about students' intellectual growth into a liminal state where they begin the process of mastering the research-writing process is to avoid what Cousin (2006) warns against: "if students are stuck in a pre-liminal state for too long, they may resort to mimicry or indeed plagiarism to get them through the course" (p. 5). Online discussions should ask students to write in a low-risk genre, which is posting on the discussion board, about any confusion they have about the intellectual process of research and writing and to talk with their classmates about shared struggles.

The discussion board, in this iteration of participation, becomes the location of the classroom as a community of practice. Students come together as committed researchers and writers, sharing tips and "tricks of the trade" to better the practice of the entire group. More advanced students who are mastering parts of the research process can offer their ideas to students who

are still at the pre-liminal or threshold levels, and the community enhances the learning of all participating students and empowers the group in their work.

As many faculty know, the classroom is becoming increasingly globalized. Students might not come from cultures that share Western concepts of textual ownership. Teaching academic literacy allows faculty to not only focus on the proper way to use sources, but it opens a perspective for students to learn from one another about how to enter into academic discourse and the exchange of ideas within a discipline. Teaching academic literacy to international students gives them the ability to move from pre-liminality and mimicry of academic texts to a more full participation in the discourse, lending their ideas from different backgrounds to the overall conversation.

Assessment: Research Papers

Students' self-created APA crib sheets and research can go on to work hand-in-hand throughout their academic careers. Sequenced classes within disciplines allow the curriculum to take students on a journey. Students can research, read, respond, and revise their exploration and response papers from the Points of View database into fully researched and articulated, twenty- to twenty-five-page research papers. As students move from their pre-liminal state in their chosen fields of study to emergent experts in their areas of special interest, their written work will show their level of increased literacy in the academic community of practice.

Transfer: Broadened Research-writing Assignments

In order to help students gain literacy with the genre of research writing, assignments in course shells can be designed to take students to databases within EBSCOhost that offer more peer-reviewed material that is aligned to disciplines. The various databases in EBSCOhost offer the option of searching by journal; therefore, assignments can lead students to specific journals that are at the forefront of academic disciplines. Students can become academically literate by devising search terms that find the results that they need — another step toward overall literacy within the research genre of writing.

Faculty can engage in the community of practice as gatekeepers and guides by checking every written assignment for evidence of the vocabulary of academic literacy: correct APA citations and a synthesized use of source material that was used to create new ideas — rhetoric as epistemic (Smith, 1998). Indeed, student writing should be subjected to the same detailed, careful overview of research documentation and style as writers who submit their essays to journals for publication. The university can back that effort by

including standardized rubrics in every class, setting out the same criteria for grading APA documentation throughout the institution, keeping in mind that the APA citation is the vocabulary for the university's community of practice and research methodology.

Conclusion

Engaging with APA as an academic language is a threshold concept that students come to grips with. Through a better grasp of the grammar of research, students will become better researchers, more in touch with the methodology of research and ready to cross the threshold and become more capable of researching in their chosen major fields. They can use their knowledge, gained through the classroom as a community of practice, throughout their lives.

Through their education, they will know how to research databases and sources, synthesize information, invent and develop ideas, and write cited essays, which will all contribute to the types of writing that they will have to master in their careers.

Envisioning the university classroom as a community of practice where committed participants learn the vocabulary, methodology, and methods of finding and creating knowledge through research is a laudable goal. In achieving it, the university will educate graduates who can transfer the knowledge that they have gained from their community of practice to pursuing their careers — and engaging with the world.

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