

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

USING A LANGUAGE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM APPROACH IN FIRST-YEAR HISTORY STUDIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

This presentation is built on the following premises:

- * reading and writing are directly linked skills and are not discrete - they can not be seen, or taught, as separate skills;
- * writing forms part of the process of learning. The interactive nature of writing requires the writer to interact with the text and examine the ideas in it (Applebee cited by Boughey, 1993: 4);
- * the development of reading skills is an accumulative process: these skills can not be sufficiently developed by programmes which operate outside of mainstream teaching;
- * academic disciplines each have a specific discourse;
- * almost all matriculants are underprepared for university study (ex-DET students in particular);
- * problems of learning are not simply those of a student-deficiency - Prof. Peggy Nightingale revealed that her own research had shown that teachers have been complaining about the poor ability of students since the times of the Greek philosophers. We must therefore conclude that students are no 'worse' than they have always been;
- * students have developed receptive as opposed to productive learning skills. The method of teaching history in schools is characterised by the transmitting of authoritative versions of history;

- * future access policies at institutions are going to increase the student-staff ratios. It is unlikely in the present economic climate that staff numbers will increase in proportion to the increase in student numbers.

The presentation draws largely on the work done by Luckett and Nuttall at the University of Natal (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993). They describe the History 100 course at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), a course designed as a broad survey course for the History major, in which a number of historical skills are taught as an integral part of the course. Much of their research is based on the practices of educationally disadvantaged students in History 100.

2. HISTORY HAS A SPECIFIC DISCOURSE

The argument for introducing a language across the curriculum approach to studying history begins with the premise that History, like any other, has a specific discipline discourse. History as a discipline differs from any other academic discipline in terms of the types of evidence it uses, the procedures it employs and the way in which argument is both generated and reported. Academic texts used in History form part of the discourse and first-year students are largely unfamiliar with both the language and genre of these academic texts. Historians will all mutually understand the conventions and constraints of the genres they operate in. The issue is for students, particularly first years, to understand and become familiar with the conventions and constraints so that their writing will be recognised by the members of the communities in which these genres occur (Hart, 1994: 6).

In addition, research has also shown that where there is insufficient cultural common ground between reader and writer, confusion results. The writers of academic

texts selected for study are often culturally removed from the readers, who are then disadvantaged.

This historical discourse is made more problematic by the fact that historical discourse has no easily identifiable jargon and uses everyday language and a narrative form (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993).

3. NEED FOR 'SCHEMATA'

All academic texts imply some form of discipline-specific knowledge and this knowledge is stored in what linguists refer to as 'schemata'. 'Schemata' are defined as 'abstract knowledge structures' (Carrell (1988: 53 in Luckett and Nuttall, 1993: 128). These 'schemata' can be seen as a number of patterns or text structures (Boughey, 1993: 30). These schemata are used to assimilate new knowledge and are culture-specific, thus second-language speakers of English are further disadvantaged by not having the schemata necessary for the storing of the discipline-specific knowledge.

4. 'INEFFICIENT' READING STRATEGIES

Students therefore come to rely on other strategies and 'schemata interference' takes place in the form of

'inefficient' reading strategies (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993: 128). These strategies can include text-dependency, losing the global meaning of the text (by myopic translation) or simply guessing the meaning of the text (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993). Boughey (1993: 5) cites Devine (1988) in explaining this 'inefficient' reading strategy: readers often find themselves caught up in the language of the text and fail to arrive at any adequate construction of meaning. Boughey (1993: 2) also points out that the lack of background knowledge (content schemata) of the reader in the reading process often results in poor or non-comprehension.

In addition, second-language speakers often misinterpret reading problems as being purely linguistic and thus seek to improve their language competency in the second language (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993). This improvement often does little to remedy the reading problems which exist. The result of these 'inefficient' reading strategies is often a "patchwork" of excerpts from readings held together by a very thin narrative thread'. (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993: 127).

Van Zyl (1993: 52) tables the differences between good writers and unskilled writers in terms of procedures in the following table:

	GOOD WRITERS	UNSKILLED WRITERS
CONTENT	Probe for analogies + contradictions. Form new concepts. Re-structure and re-organize old knowledge.	Express network of ideas already formed and available.
TEXT	Larger + richer set of images of what text looks like. Wider range of lexical choices. Awareness of stylistic options.	Focus exclusively on correctness
RHETORICAL PROBLEM	Define audience. Define desired effect. Create voice. Construction of meaning to have desired effect. Clear goals.	Bogged down in topic.

Attempts to develop these necessary schemata (which contain information and rhetorical structures) are either neglected or taken for granted by teachers and

academics, and it is only through sustained involvement in a particular discipline's cultural milieu that these schemata can be obtained.

5. NEED FOR INNOVATIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

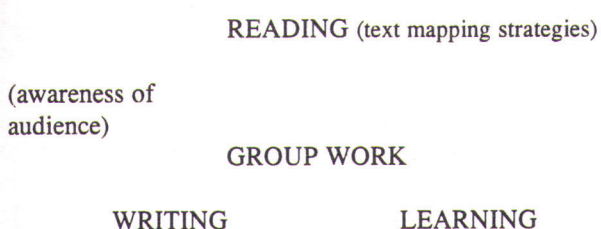
The suggested methodology is thus one that uses innovative teaching strategies and weans students away from the reproductive school textbook syndrome. These strategies are necessary in order to deal with the ever increasing number of students who are underprepared, as well as to attempt to adopt a model of innovative teaching practice, rather than one of student-deficiency.

One such strategy is the use of reading theory that utilises an interactive approach. In such an approach the reader uses graphic, syntactic and semantic cues in combination to understand a text and make predictions and hypotheses about the content (Luckett and Nuttall, 1993). Luckett and Nuttall cite consensus in the literature that inefficient readers use only one of the modes of processing rather than a combination, as efficient readers do.

6. A CASE FOR WRITING/LANGUAGE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Thus arises the case for a language across the curriculum approach to studying History. Boughey (1994) and others draw a cognitive link between writing and learning. She quotes Applebee (1984) in summarising this relationship as being dependent on four characteristics of writing. These characteristics include the fact that written text provides the reader with devices which assist in exploring the relationships between ideas, and the active nature of writing which requires the writer to interact with the text and to examine the ideas within it (Boughey 1994: 4). (When we talk of 'language' in this regard we talk of academic literacy, rather than linguistic competence.)

The following diagram outlines the tripartite relationship between reading, writing and learning:



Such an approach to writing to learn makes use of the process approach to writing and the use of 'scaffolding'. Hart (1994: 4) cites Coes (1986) in describing the stages of the process approach: generating, drafting, reformulating, editing and publication. 'Scaffolding' is a strategy for providing support and guidance to students. Hart argues that

scaffolding 'serves to make hitherto inaccessible genres more transparent to students [by] providing them with explicit guidelines ... scaffolding serves to initiate students into genre requirements' (1994: 8).

Students need to develop an understanding of the schemata through reading the genre of history and attempting to write in that genre. A deliberate attempt to teach students about the genre of History (particularly at first-year level) is necessary for the future success of the student. Because research has found that students who lack knowledge of the way in which information is conventionally organised in any language often have problems in writing in a coherent and structured fashion in that language, it is necessary to teach text structure overtly (Boughey, 1993). She also cites research (Armbruster et al 1987) that shows that such overt teaching improves writing as well as comprehension (ibid.). Text mapping strategies, which make use of representing reading content in visual display (boxes, circles or connecting lines, tree diagrams, etc.) can be used to teach text structure overtly (Carrell (1988: 249 in Boughey (1993: 6).

Developing the argument of Carrell (1988), Boughey argues that if students have some knowledge of the language in which the text is written (in this case English is the language of learning), knowledge of the way in which texts are conventionally organised can compensate for a lack of linguistic knowledge and will allow readers to make predictions and hypotheses about the text (ibid.).

The introduction of numerous writing tasks is also an approach to the problem. Students need to be given more opportunities to write, and they need to be given more feedback on their writing. Such writing tasks need not be entire essays. Writing short pieces once a week and receiving feedback on that writing will be more valuable than writing an extended essay (completely incorrectly) once a semester.

Professor Peggy Nightingale, in a workshop, provided the following suggestions for writing tasks:

- * the 'one-minute-paper'
- * case studies
- * peer critique (in writing)
- * dialogic journals
- * reading logs (written responses to the reading of secondary texts).

Nightingale also showed that a change in the target audience could also facilitate exploratory writing. In such an exercise students are required to explain a given concept to persons other than the lecturer who assigned the task. Such a shift of audience often provides fresh insights in student writing.

The Writing Tutorial Programme, which we hope to institute in first-year History at this University, is an attempt to address the need for a writing across the curriculum approach in teaching history. It is a programme, initiated by Academic Support, which will work in conjunction with the subject lecturer in replacing the prior system of 'practicals' in history.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Hart (1993) makes it clear just how important the control of written genre is when he quotes Martin (1989: 50) as saying that it 'is very much tied up with

the distribution of power in all literature cultures'. 'If we are to take seriously the question of equality of opportunity in our education then we need to look carefully at the content and practice of our writing curriculum' (Hart, 1993: 4). Van Zyl (1993) places the responsibility at the door of the lecturer when she says that 'lecturers' complicity in creating the "pathology" of poor student writing points to a serious need for lecturer conscientization before we can hope to improve our students' writing skills' (1993: 57).

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Against the background of the Eastern European experience of Communist rule since 1945 the Czech writer Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* has this observation by a historian: "The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was".

Another character in the book says: "The struggle of man against power, is the struggle of memory against forgetting".

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