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Reading and writing from textbooks in higher education: a case study from Economics

Paul W. Richardson*
Monash University, Australia

Reading and writing at university is infused by the cultural context of a particular discipline or field so that academic literacies are located, described, interpreted and studied in disciplinary contexts. This study explores the roles and functions textbooks have in the disciplinary culture of Economics in the academy, where there are many introductory-level textbooks that are designed to formalize and standardize disciplinary induction. It uncovers how students learn to read and write in Introductory Economics, particularly when the textbook is positioned as an authoritative, canonical text, and interprets the ambiguities, unresolved tensions and anxieties concerning plagiarism that often accompany reading and writing from the textbook. Further, it scrutinizes teaching and learning from the learner's perspective to reveal the complexity of the linguistic and disciplinary demands in the form of unfamiliar discourses, genres and literacy practices a student must accommodate to be recognized as a participant in the disciplinary culture of Economics.

Introduction

Across a range of disciplines and fields, large, glossy textbooks are available to a highly competitive, discriminating global market in higher education. Apple (1991) and Luke (1988) have explored how the textbook publishing industry and the artefact of the textbook are fundamental in the distribution of 'legitimated' knowledge to school classrooms. In the context of higher education, a study guide, overhead transparencies and/or PowerPoint slides, and a bank of sample examination questions invariably accompany modern introductory textbooks in a range of disciplines, all of which are designed to persuade the increasingly 'time-poor' university teacher to adopt the textbook. However, these pervasive technologies promote a pedagogy that impacts negatively on student engagement and learning. This article illuminates the struggles, difficulties and confusions students experience with reading and writing when introductory-level courses rely heavily on a textbook.

*Faculty of Education, Monash University, Victoria 3800, Australia.
Email: paul.richardson@education.monash.edu.au

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Theoretical perspectives

The study is grounded in a view of literacy that extends well beyond the traditional notion of an ability to read and write; it takes the perspective that literacy has no meaning 'apart from the particular cultural contexts in which it is used' (Gee, 1994, p. 170). Indeed, the article demonstrates that academic literacy(ies) cannot be narrowly perceived and defined as a set of general skills of reading and writing, which once acquired can be seamlessly transferred from one context to another. We should expect, then, that reading, writing, speaking and listening would play significantly different roles in different social contexts, performing different social actions (Brandt, 1990) in a dynamic process of sustaining and progressing disciplinary tribes and academic cultures (Becher, 1989). Similarly, the primary and secondary discourses we have acquired and learned, and the discourse communities to which we already belong, impinge significantly on the ways in which we engage with new discourses and discourse communities (Becher, 1989; Swales, 1990; Russell, 1991; Gee, 1996). Who we perceive ourselves to be, and the cultural values and models we live by, irrevocably constitute literacy embedded in contextualized cultural performances. From this perspective, student reading and writing is configured as 'a context-making rather than a context-breaking ability' (Brandt, 1990, p. 39), and is not seen as merely technical, instrumental and transparent media of representation. Indeed, they become highly contested social practices (Lea & Street, 2000).

Until relatively recently little attention has been paid at the undergraduate level to the way the discursive practices of a field are embedded in disciplinary activity systems (see Russell, 1997). In effect, we have taken these discursive practices and activities for granted. The university subject Introduction to Economics can be conceptualized as an interdependent activity system that is historically conditioned, object-directed, mediated by discursive tools and dialectically enacted by participants. In this sense, it only comes into being when recreated and executed in micro-level interactions in communities of practice mediated by and through the artefacts and the 'rules' of the discipline of Economics. In this case study the textbook frames all of the activities and events embodied in the lectures, the tutorials, assignments and examinations. These activities and events are a gloss on the textbook, requiring the textbook for the interpretation of their meaning and sense making.

Research into student and professional writing has highlighted the importance of disciplinary context (Herrington, 1985; Nelson *et al.*, 1987; Bazerman, 1988; Walvood & McCarthy, 1990; Langer, 1992; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Prior, 1998; Dias *et al.*, 1999), and drawn attention to the 'disciplinary specificity in writing and knowing' (Stockton, 1995, p. 47). Detailed accounts of the discursive and literacy processes which specific disciplines bring into play at the undergraduate level, as a means of engaging, recruiting and inducting new members, have often highlighted the pedagogical barrenness of much undergraduate teaching and learning, and pointed to an inability of university teachers to explicitly articulate or openly explore the discursive and literacy expectations of their professed discipline. My concern, then, was to document the experiences of undergraduates and to understand how particular

students perceive, engage with and participate in the social, cultural and literacy practices of introductory-level economics.

Method, data sources and analysis

The larger study (Richardson, 2000) from which this article is drawn provides an interpretive ethnography that critically illuminates the literacy and learning experiences of a group of first year undergraduates in their encounters with the discipline of Economics. Through an analysis of lectures, tutorials, textbooks and reading and writing assignments, the study exposed the complex and often unrecognized language and disciplinary demands, and their significance in influencing the students' ultimate academic success.

This article focuses on data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with staff and students over a two-year period at Australia's largest university. Data were gathered from a range of sources using an interactive-reflexive research process (Erickson, 1986), drawing on a methodology developed from naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and influenced by critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996). Data included field notes, lectures and observations from one tutorial group, individual student interviews, group student interviews, individual interviews with teaching staff, attendance at staff meetings, collection of drafts of student assignments, final student assignments, course documents, the course textbook, commercial textbook study guide, textbook computer disks and copies of examination papers. All lectures and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed before transfer into NUD*IST, a computer program designed to assist with the analysis of qualitative data. Data analysis was framed by discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) and utilized constant comparative coding, derived from grounded theory to develop an inductive analytical approach to examining the richly textured unstructured data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

The following questions guided the research:

- How do these students construct themselves as students of Economics?
- How do they construct the cultural model for success in this instructional and disciplinary culture?
- How does reading from academic texts become part of the personal resources upon which students draw when completing a piece of writing in an academic discipline?
- What agency do these students see themselves having in the instructional culture?
- How are the discourses and genres of the discipline instantiated in the discursive practices of the instructional culture?

Thirteen students volunteered for in-depth interviews, together with four staff members. Students were interviewed on two occasions, with each interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. The staff members were also interviewed at least twice, with each interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. There were 156 students enrolled in the first year, and 189 in the second year of the study. Over the two years of

the data collection, considerable time was spent in informal discussions with academics lecturing and tutoring in the course. I have relied on the words, metaphors and images invoked by the participants in an effort to capture and interpret the meaning they themselves ascribed to their experience, and which characterized their participation in the literacy, social and cultural practices of introductory Economics.

The role of introductory textbooks

Researchers from various fields and disciplines have increasingly turned their attention to the role that textbooks play in the induction of students into the content, beliefs, values and methodology of their respective disciplines (see Morawski [1992] in Psychology; Love [1991] in Geology; Myers [1992] in Biology; Klamer [1990] in Economics; and Lynch & Bogen [1997] in Sociology). However, while textbooks are central to a discipline, they are rarely, if ever, at its 'cutting edge' (Platt, 1996, p. 33). Textbooks carry forward confirmed bodies of knowledge (Kuhn, 1970), often reifying and codifying statements as facts; yet, this 'second-hand' information on which they rely also causes academics from all disciplines to 'jest about the deceptions and inaccuracies, made for the sake of clarity, simplicity, or profit' (Morawski, 1992, p. 162). Of concern, however, is that once these 'facts' are established in the standardized textbooks, their status as fact is confirmed and can remain uncontested for a considerable length of time (Harré, 1990). As a consequence, even when students may be asked to read these textbooks with a critical eye they must first take on board the received authoritative knowledge of the textbook.

In higher education critical reading is a common requirement of subjects and disciplines. Yet Swales (1993) and others have alerted us to the potential reading problems that may accompany textbooks, particularly where it is an objective of the course to ensure that students read critically. Unfortunately, student readers of Economics textbooks have to contend with several concurrent and often irreconcilable problems. These texts are linear in organization, and so introduce new terminology, concepts and ideas sequentially, with each new term or idea being dependent to a significant degree on terms and definitions elaborated earlier in the text. Students rarely read these textbooks in this way, and may even skip whole sections when completing a one-semester course. So while the textbooks may be well designed and very comprehensive for use in a whole-year programme, students undertaking a one-semester course are invariably directed to read only those parts of the text relevant to the topics on which the course is focusing. As a consequence, the students' level of knowledge may be too vague and poorly grounded to allow them to easily read the texts so that they have to move far back into the text to seek clarification (Hewings, 1990, p. 35).

Even though textbooks advance the production of a disciplinary core curriculum, they also tend to facilitate pedagogical assumptions that construct students as consumers to be filled with disciplinary knowledge, methods and practices. Thus, Swales (1993, p. 224) argues that the pedagogical consequences result in a paradox:

'The better textbooks are at transmitting a canon of knowledge (one good), the worse they are at fostering critical reading (another good)'.

Operating as they do on the periphery of the culture of Economics (see Russell, 1997), students at the introductory level are not able to read like 'insiders' or expert players in the discipline simply because they lack the fund of special information, 'relevant claims' and 'received opinion' with which to make specialized meaning from the texts (Dillon, 1992, p. 39). The result is, as Anderson *et al.* (1977, p. 378) contend, that many students can acquire 'a large amount of information and a number of concepts and principles in a piece-meal fashion, without integrating the new learning into existing knowledge structures, and without understanding the *Weltanschauung* of contemporary economics'.

Textbooks in Economics

Traditional textbooks are the cornerstones of introductory level Economics curricula and pedagogy in higher education, providing what Helburn (1986, p. 28) calls 'a consensual lens and an officially defined interpretation of reality'. A feature of Economics as a discipline in the academy has been the number of remarkably similar textbooks written for the introductory-level market place in higher education. These textbooks manage the discipline's image as a 'science', promoting the notion that economic knowledge is created through the application of scientific method which begins with assumptions and proceeds to build an economic model that is tested within these parameters for its predictive value.

Rarely is it acknowledged that the 'facts' and 'laws' of Economics are discursive constructions, that economists in essence tell each other 'stories' about the economy derived from different assumptions and resulting in different competing economic models, policy outcomes and interpretations of history (see McCloskey, 1995). Thus, the economy is constituted by a set of 'discourses that provide the economic concepts, modes of analysis, statistical estimates, econometric methods and policy debates that constitute the different analytical understandings of the economy' (Brown, 1993, p. 70).

Textbook authors make up dummy-run exercises and examples to fit a construction of economic life derived from models which are nominated as having universal validity, objectivity, realism and social acceptability (Milberg, 1988, p. 53). As a result, the economic models and graphical representations contained in introductory textbooks often ignore the 'facts of everyday life' (Bell, 1988, p. 138), and cannot easily address contemporary social issues or account for the complexity of economic activity in the real world (Lewis, 1995). Questions concerning the role of government, social welfare, unemployment, distribution of resources and income, and the like, are extraneous to the economic models students at the introductory level consider and need to learn to manipulate. Hence, students are often 'alienated from the study of economic theory because they feel that the assumptions of economics are unrealistic and, as a result, that the theory cannot be used for the formation of economic and

social policy in which many of them are interested' (Papps & Henderson, 1977, pp. iii-iv).

According to Heyne (1995), an insider critical of the discipline, even when an individual academic may have concerns about the usefulness of the content in the introductory text, other pressures from within the disciplinary culture of the academy intrude. There is the assumption that a standard set of topics will be taught in the first year, and that unless these topics are taught, academics risk criticism from their colleagues and students alike for failing to teach material upon which the next level subject is founded. Further, Heyne (p. 150) explains the quality assurance mechanisms that the disciplinary culture of Economics provides for the induction of potential new members into the disciplinary community: 'Teachers present what appears in the textbooks, the textbooks offer what the teachers expect, and the teachers expect what has been in the textbooks for as long as they can remember'.

The result is a discipline that portrays itself as ideologically and methodologically harmonious, with introductory textbooks affording students a narrative of the patient evolution of the discipline founded on only those 'significant' theorists whose contributions have been taken up into the mainstream (Klamer, 1990). In this regard, the pressures from the disciplinary community of Economics have tended to approve and promote a transmission model of pedagogy founded upon textbook knowledge positioned as rarefied and authoritative. However, there is a growing body of literature from within the academy that acknowledges these shortcomings and is promoting a revision of pedagogy and curriculum, and challenging how undergraduate Economics is conceptualized and constituted. The nature, content, style and presentation of textbooks are central to this debate (Aslanbeigui & Naples, 1996; Becker & Watts, 1996; Skousen, 1997; Becker, 2000).

The data

The shock of the textbook

Early on in the ethnographic fieldwork, my attention was repeatedly drawn to what seemed, from my foreign disciplinary perspective, a peculiar obsession among the lecturing staff with the selection, place and importance of the textbook. In lectures and tutorials, students were exhorted to read the textbook. At the beginning of lectures the assembled students would be asked, 'Have you done the reading?' The textbook was positioned as central in preparing for and reviewing topics covered in the lectures. In this cultural and disciplinary context, the textbook took on a level of importance and assumed an authority similar to that exercised by devotional texts in the course of religious observance. More significantly, it is also reminiscent of the use of canonical texts in training novices for religious orders. Despite the wealth of other printed materials made available to students, the textbook emerged as, and remained, the most important and revered of texts among the teaching staff and, after a very short period of induction, among the students as well.

The initial and abiding impression of the textbook from the students' perspective concerned its size and weight. Despite the weight and the difficulty of carrying around all of the textbooks for four subjects in a Business Studies degree programme, students quickly realized that, together with its size and weight, the textbook also represented the essential keystone in the overall structure of the course, as the following student comments illustrate:

> I wouldn't like to try to get through the subject without it, just by attending lectures, because one complements the other basically. (Pauline, interview 1)

> I mean, it's virtually a Bible because everything's based around it … everything you do is directed from that book. (Renee, interview 1)

> The Economics textbook [was] mainly important to me, because most of the subject I learn from there. (Iwan, interview 1)

Both successful and unsuccessful students were equally able to recognize that while other components of the course were useful, the textbook was *the text* that had to be engaged with and the content learnt. However, being aware of the importance of the textbook and the role it was meant to play did not ensure that a student would necessarily acquire the resources to pass the course.

While the academic staff wanted their students to become attentive, critical and perceptive readers and writers in their discipline, they also expected students without undue difficulties to read their way into the canon of knowledge, methodology, beliefs and values enshrined in the textbook. The text was so promoted by staff that students perceived it as privileged. From numerous staff comments in lectures and tutorials, students were dissuaded from reading other books, except for other textbooks, and were not referred to other readings or journal articles.

From the students' perspective the refrain 'Have you done the reading?' mediated almost every contact students had with teaching staff. In this context, 'the reading' referred specifically to the textbook. Lectures and tutorials were begun with general requests for students to indicate, by raising their hands, whether they had undertaken the assigned reading before the lecture or tutorial. The expectation that students would 'do the reading' from the textbook was carried forward and reiterated by every member of the teaching staff. Students who had not completed the reading before tutorial groups were on occasions even asked to leave. Comments, commands, inquiries and 'threats' punctuated teaching events:

> Before I go any further: how many people have done their reading? … No skin off our nose if you don't do the reading … (Lecture 2)

> All right, now how's the reading going? How many people have not read up to or through chapter 4, please? (Lecture 4)

> Now the rule will be if you have not done the tutorial exercise [derived from a textbook reading], you'll be asked to leave the tutorial. (Lecture 6)

> I can see how many people haven't been into their textbooks, Chapters 7 and 8, because you would already have come across this diagram, so you wouldn't have to be able to, you wouldn't have had to copy it down … (Lecture 8)

Despite the overwhelmingly explicit emphasis on the need for students to independently read the textbook, members of staff exemplified unsophisticated views of reading. This is not to say that all of the faculty members were insensitive to the problems students faced in reading their way into the textbook. It was a great frustration to the teaching staff that students appeared not to be doing the reading for tutorials and lectures; a matter often raised and discussed informally over lunch and in corridor chat between staff members. I have used the word 'appeared' deliberately in the last sentence, because the evidence I gathered from students indicated that while all of them attempted to 'do the reading', not all of them were effective in the reading they were doing.

'Use your own words': the danger of other people's words

The ambivalent nature of students' disciplinary alignment and the problematic nature of student reading in order to write are most graphically illustrated in the academy's rules regarding plagiarism. Writing in the academy is infused with notions of originality, creativity, authorship, intellectual inquiry and Western writing practices. When written assignments were being prepared for submission, the issue of plagiarism was repeatedly highlighted and emphasized by the lecturing staff, and therefore loomed large as a spectre of concern for all students in the course. For students, the problems of avoiding plagiarism are often more complicated than academic staff acknowledge. Undergraduate students in the disciplines find themselves in a double bind when they are expected to come to terms with a fixed canon of content knowledge and to reproduce that knowledge in their own words (Pennycook, 1996).

The explicit requirement to use 'your own words' was reiterated in the lectures, course materials and printed subject guides. This criterion was also identified in the assignment questions as an aspect of the assessment of a student's success. The phrase 'in your own words' signalled a tension that existed between learning the words and concepts of others from textbooks and lectures and then somehow making them over so that they seem the students' own. These tensions and anxieties are inherent in the way that words and language are learned in the market place of discourses and social interaction. As Bakhtin (1981, pp. 293–294) observes:

> [T]he word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.

In the university context, this whole process is interwoven with a requirement to sort and rank students. What students write and how well they write in order to demonstrate their learning is critical to the grade they are awarded and their subsequent progress in the disciplines and through the credentialling system of the university.

While the academics gave careful consideration to the setting of assignment and examination questions, they nonetheless anticipated that students would already

know how to write before coming to the course. The processes of learning new discourses, new content knowledge and being able to express these in 'their own words', as if they are indeed their own, was not seen by academic staff as tricky to negotiate, complex or particularly difficult. As the textbook was *the* linguistic and textual model that students were encouraged to use when writing assignments and examination answers, it was the cause of considerable anxiety, indecision and confusion for students. The following comments reflect the anxieties of the participants:

> I tried to put in as much … sort of Economics as what I could but since I mean, I haven't really ever done anything before, so I didn't have a really good idea … what sort of terminology and that sort of stuff to use. (Linda, interview 2)

> [W]ith a definition they've really—they've obviously looked at it … very closely and probably for a very long time and come up with the very best definition that they possibly can … how can you reword it? So, yeah, I sort of—the suggestion from other people was, well … if you really feel that you can't sort of reword it into something that it maybe needs to be simpler or something … just in your words, all you can do is write it down as it is and reference it … Dangers of plagiarism, yeah, for sure. (Arnold, interview 1)

> I didn't want to make it sound stupid, one has to use the right terms and … but at the same time you didn't want it to sound like you were copying from the book, so it was really hard because you had to give them both … [Y]ou had to make sure it was in your own words but use the right terms. (Michelle, interview 2)

The line is not easily drawn in the sand between 'common property', that is, concepts and ideas that did not require acknowledgment, and those that did require a footnote. Pauline's response to my question, 'How did you avoid plagiarism from the textbook?' echoes the response of other students:

> Oh, you get really paranoid about that! Just everybody who's spoken to us has said … 'It's stealing, it's cheating, we don't like cheaters here!' … Yeah, it's quite hard … it's scary, because it's so important and you know how important it is but it is sometimes you're reading things and you think, 'Where's the line between common property and their ideas or their words come into play?' And it's hard, but here's hoping! (Pauline, interview 2)

Pauline had just completed the first assignment at the time of this interview and was awaiting her results. Like many other students, she remained unsure of whether she had acknowledged sufficiently to avoid being called a 'cheater', and whether she had used enough of her own words to meet the requirements of the tasks. I turn now to examine this same student's, albeit successful, struggles when reading for and writing answers in response to the first assignment, and how she wrestled with the problems of writing in her own words while appropriating the ideas and words of others without plagiarism.

Pauline: a case study of reading-to-write Economics

Pauline had a long-standing interest in Economics before becoming a student at university. Her case provides a richly revealing illustration of the role that writing can

play in learning, uncovers the struggles that even successful students have in making critical decisions about how and what to write in response to prompts, and signals how difficult and intimidating it can be to write from a textbook for an audience that already knows what it is you want to say. By examining Pauline's drafting processes for answers to one question in the first assignment, the case offers insights into her thinking, writing, and learning processes by exposing the false starts, diversions, digressions and realignments she works through in producing *her* written text which is linguistically and discursively firmly grounded in the textbook.

Rather than retrospectively working out from marker feedback on the first assignment how to manage her alignment with the discourses and genres required of her, Pauline made extensive use of the drafting process with which to think through the concepts and problems she encountered. By reading, writing and drawing successive diagrams she documented her progressive fusion with the discourses, genres and textual practices of the discipline, and along the way registered the subtle shifts in her self-perception and identification that took place as a result.

Question 1 of the first assignment focused on the concept of opportunity cost and required students to define the concept, illustrate the answer with a diagram, and provide a 'real life' example. The question read: '*Use a relevant example and diagram to explain the relationship between scarcity, choice and opportunity cost*'. An answer of 300 words for the value of 15 marks was specified. Pauline's explanation of what she did in completing this task is revealing. She located a definition of opportunity cost in the textbook, and then explained the concept. Yet, when we examine some of the drafts of Pauline's answer to the question, it becomes clear that her recall of what she did conceals a more complex process. The shifts in focus, alterations and changes in wording between one of the earlier drafts and the final draft indicate the way in which she sets up an intertextual dialogue with the textbook, the lectures and her lecture notes, and how she massages the words of others. As the following quotation reveals, Pauline articulates a connection between her reading, writing and learning and she is attuned to her own cognitive processes:

> I find that when I write I can communicate what I understand, what I think more effectively than when I speak, so to me writing is the preferred medium anyway … [W]hen I read my chapters, I take notes, I don't highlight … I take the notes that I think are important from the reading and then when I write them out it … it lets you understand that you do know what you're thinking and what you're talking about and I found that—like, I'd have written an answer and I'd re-read it and I'd think, 'No, no, that sounds confused, you know, that's not what I mean,' or I'd read it and I'd think, 'No, that's just wrong' and just do it again. (Pauline, Interview 2)

Pauline generates her drafts and acts as her own reader/reviewer, all the while interrogating the question to ensure she is meeting the explicit requirements, not just in terms of content but also word length and the other requirements. She astutely observes that even though members of the teaching staff know the answers to the questions set for the assignment, her task as a student is to demonstrate that she also knows the answer. As she observes:

> I guess you have to write like you're writing to someone who doesn't know or who doesn't know what you know I guess is more to the point. (Pauline, Interview 2)

It is in the actual changes she makes to the drafts she writes that we can see how Pauline is assessing her success or not in coming to terms with the demands of the assignment task. The opening paragraph of an early draft answer to Question 1 reads:

> The foundation of economics is that human wants are unlimited, while the resources available to satisfy these wants are limited. This means that choices must be made as to which of our wants we shall satify [*sic*], in doing so we must sacrifice the opportunity cost of satisfying a want and can be measured in many ways, for example time, or goods and services.

By the time she writes her second draft the first sentence has been altered so as to index a reference to the textbook as her source, and to ensure that she shows the relationship between wants and resources. She does not mention the term scarcity, an explicit requirement of the question set. The paragraph now reads:

> The fundamental fact of economics as described in *Economics* (1992) is that human wants are unlimited, while the resources available to satisfy these wants are limited. This means that choices must be made as to which of our wants we shall satisfy, in doing so we must sacrifice the opportunity cost of satisfying a want and can be measured in many ways, for example, time, or goods and services.

In the final draft of this opening paragraph Pauline makes further changes and corrections. The first sentence is altered to show a relationship between human wants, resources and scarcity, and she corrects the publication date for the textbook. The second sentence, which has been stable over the two earlier drafts, is now broken into two sentences so as to emphasize the notion of sacrifice and to clarify the definition of opportunity cost. The paragraph reads:

> The fundamental fact of economics as described in *Economics* (1994) is that human wants are unlimited, while the resources available to satisfy these wants are limited, this in turn, leading to scarcity. This means that choices must be made as to which of our wants we shall satisfy, in doing so we must sacrifice the opportunity to satisfy another of our wants. This sacrifice is referred to as the opportunity cost of satisfying a want and can be measured in many ways, for example, time, or goods and services.

Pauline has made only subtle changes but these reveal the intertextual 'voices' at play as she fashions a text from the words of others that acknowledges the authority of the textbook and yet allows her to display, in her own words, a grasp of the concept of opportunity cost. This same process is replicated for other questions.

In speaking of her answer to the whole question Pauline reveals the degree to which she is conscious of writing to someone whom she must assume does not know what she knows while being careful to adhere to the required word length of the question. Even when she believes she has completed the task, there are further changes just prior to submission of the paper:

> Question 1, which I thought that I'd done and I thought that I'd done really well, I then went back when I'd printed out what I thought was pretty much a final copy, I went back and read it and scrapped a whole paragraph and added a couple of small words to another

> one and another couple of sentences to the bottom of another one and felt that that was much better. (Pauline, interview 2)

Further, Pauline's case graphically illustrates that, while we might examine different drafts of a student's work, as we have done here, to better understand compositional processes and learning, we do not always tap the struggles that a student is experiencing in coming to terms with the ideological dimensions of the task and the discipline's interests as authoritatively inscribed in the textbook. These fundamental struggles are not necessarily indexed and registered in written drafts.

While Pauline provided me with a number of drafts of her answers, these were only made available after she had made some quite critical decisions. Essentially, she began 'writing' her answers long before she had embarked on the drafts provided. Of her drafting and compositional processes she observed:

> I read the questions a lot, because as we did each lecture I could see—I started to formulate in my head … the answers to the questions and as we did the tutorials and I did the reading, then I started to draft the answers. Sometimes I'd draft the answers before I'd done enough work and then I went backwards. (Pauline, interview 2)

The drafts she did provide me with represent her revisions after she had decided not to use as her 'relevant example' the opportunity costs of the State Government's decision to locate a casino and a Grand Prix racing car track in the centre of the city of Melbourne, Australia's second largest city.

The text that follows is taken from a second interview conducted in the sixth week of the course, following submission of the first assigned paper for the semester. Pauline's account of how she chose a 'relevant example' with which to illustrate opportunity cost discloses further aspects of her ideological alignment with the discourses of the Introductory Economics classroom. Pauline gave careful thought to the relevant example she would use to illustrate the concept of opportunity cost. As she says:

> *Pauline*: The biggest problem I had was trying to choose my example—my real-life example of opportunity cost, because there were so many to me and they were all so good that I—and I don't think that you got the best couple of drafts because I think I threw them out before you asked me; but I actually started to do drafts on a couple of things. One was the opportunity cost of using Albert Park as a Grand Prix site, because it's … very prominent in the news about this … but it was just so overwhelming and so complex that I thought, 'No, I'm just going to get myself into trouble', so I had to pick something that was more simple.
>
> *I*: Right, so it was just a more straightforward sort of way of looking at it?
>
> *Pauline*: Yeah, and the other one of course was the casino, because the social cost of the casino to me is one of the biggest opportunity costs of having it there. But I didn't want to start getting into a case where I'm getting on my soapbox about it because that wasn't what the question wanted to hear anyway. So, that was the form I had with question 1—so I just had to dissect it, define those points and then see how …
>
> *I*: And choose an example then that became quite apolitical in a sense?
>
> *Pauline*: Yeah, well see that's my fault probably because I'm so opinionated. (Pauline, interview 2)

Pauline grasps the concept of opportunity cost—scarce resources once allocated to one area cannot be spent on another—and her new way of conceptualizing the world makes her ask, what are the opportunity costs of the casino and the Grand Prix? As thoughtful and as interesting as her answer might have been, her perception is that this is not what 'the question wanted to hear'. Indeed, the assignment question is asking for something that is much simpler to achieve, and does not require this level of engagement with social and political issues. When asked about her final choice of example, the following exchange took place:

> *Pauline*: The cotton shortage and so the continuing consumption of cotton goods would lead to less consumption of other goods.
>
> *I*: Oh … and a much more straightforward case?
>
> *Pauline*: Much more straightforward—no chance for me to get in there and say what I think. (Pauline, interview 2)

She was able to go directly from an article in the newspaper reporting a worldwide cotton shortage, to an illustration of the consequences of materials shortages in the textbook. Using the identified cotton shortage as the example, she then neatly displaced the example from the textbook with the details of her 'relevant' real-life example chosen from a newspaper article.

The relevance of the case study

A process, such as the one described above, encourages replication and transcription of solutions reached by imitating examples already worked in the textbook. Pauline has learnt one of the 'rules of the game'. Her role as a learner and writer in this disciplinary context is to read and reproduce, not to hold strong opinions about complex social issues, which are not raised or addressed by the textbook or the course she is doing. In completing Question 1 of Assignment 1 she has learnt to choose examples that fit the assumptions, concepts and theoretical model set out in the course and the textbook. She has also learnt to tame her intellectually engaged, questioning mind, so as to avoid trouble by fitting in to the beliefs and practices of the disciplinary context within the academy. Her written answers go through a number of iterations and she wrestles with the concepts, the diagrams and the language until she makes them *seem* her own. It could be tempting to portray this as a simple model of transmission and absorption of information, but this explanation does not reflect the complexity of the struggles going on.

The content, concepts and terminology which students are expected to learn often seem to them so aptly expressed by textbook authors that they have no words of their own in which to register them when they are required to demonstrate their understanding in writing.

Faced with the dilemma of writing from but not copying an authoritative textbook, some students not surprisingly reported that they adopted the strategy of going to the library to find other introductory textbooks and copying bits and pieces from each. There are many of these introductory textbooks, all of which are similar. The students

then used these words, phrases and sentences to form a pastiche, which they hoped was accurate in terms of content and meaning, without being too close to the words of the course textbook. As might be expected in the context of the academy, students mostly write in response to prompts from the lecturing staff. Lecture notes, notes from the textbook, notes from the tutorial sessions, assignment questions and examinations are written as part of reading in order to write. Writing, then, is undertaken so as to demonstrate reading, alignment with the discourses and content of the subject, and is essential in ranking students.

When it came to writing answers to assignment questions, students felt themselves wedged between a rock and a hard place. How could they express in their own words that which was more effectively expressed in the textbook? Until the first assignment was graded and returned, students were left wondering whether they had trespassed beyond the boundaries of 'common property' and whether their own words had been sufficient to demonstrate their alignment with the discourses of Introductory Economics.

Conclusion

Reading and writing at university is generally undertaken in the cultural context of a particular discipline or field. Academic literacies are embedded in, described and studied in a disciplinary context and students are disciplined through participation in and alignment with specific disciplinary and ideological practices (Bazerman, 1994). In a number of disciplines textbooks are central instruments in this process.

Textbooks, by their very nature, represent authoritative, received knowledge that students are expected to learn rather than challenge. In Economics, textbooks are central to the pedagogical and epistemological processes, in that they introduce students to concepts, assumptions and models, scaffolding students as they learn to tell and retell the received 'stories' of Economics—opportunity cost, supply and demand, monopoly and so on. In positioning the textbook as an authoritative text on which students are expected to rely, the teaching staff unwittingly generate concerns and fears among students when writing in Introductory Economics. The concerns and fears about plagiarism that framed their writing were either confirmed or alleviated when their first assignment was marked and returned.

Learning to read and write Economics is not simply a matter of manipulating diagrams and retelling received knowledge. It is also a matter, as Freedman and Medway (1994, p. 5) argue, of learning the 'social processes by which the world, reality, and facts are made' in a specific disciplinary context. In the absence of other advice and models, students used the textbook and other 'superficial' instructions to assemble texts that met the specifications of the assigned tasks. However, we have also witnessed the struggles, resistances and dilemmas that students have in coming into contact, and sometimes conflict, with the values and beliefs of the disciplinary community. Ideologically, these communities can be uncompromising in their requirement that participants conform.

Introductory Economics is located at the outer edge of the activity systems of the

disciplinary community of Economics (Russell, 1997). So it is that student writing at this level has more to do with 'doing school' and getting a grade than knowledge making in the discipline. Even so, getting a grade by writing in a way that marks out a student as a sympathetic participant in the discourses of the subject is an essential achievement. The evidence from this study would suggest that while introductory textbooks are designed to induct students into various disciplines and their academic literacy practices, they may create considerable learning problems for students. There is no reason to believe that this is peculiar to Economics. It is clear, though, from this study that learning to read and write introductory-level Economics is more difficult than disciplinary insiders would ever imagine it to be.

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