Reading to Be: The role of academic reading in emergent academic and professional student identities

Moira Maguire
Dundalk Institute of Technology, moira.maguire@dkit.ie

Ann Everitt Reynolds
Dundalk Institute of Technology, ann.reynolds@dkit.ie

Brid Delahunt
Dundalk Institute of Technology, brid.delahunt@dkit.ie

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Abstract

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of academic reading, much research tends to focus on academic writing. The role of academic writing in the development of academic and professional identities is generally accepted. In contrast, the role of academic reading has been less visible in the literature, and when discussed, it tends to be conceptualised as a generic skill.

In this paper, we explore the role of reading in emergent academic identities in undergraduates. We reflect on research with our own Nursing and Midwifery students that highlighted the role of reading in the development of 'writing capital.' Drawing on this and wider evidence we explore how, through academic reading, students begin to recognise, and then participate in the scholarly conversations that construct knowledge within disciplines. We argue that academic reading, like academic writing, is a complex ongoing process that involves multiple transitions, rather than a skill that can, and should, be mastered early on. We contend that educators need to consider how and where academic reading is addressed within academic programmes. Moreover, we suggest ways to make room for it within our curricula and engage students in conversations about the nature of scholarship within their disciplines.

Keywords

Academic literacies, academic reading, critical thinking, professional identity

Cover Page Footnote

Introduction

The importance of academic literacy practices and their impact on academic success is well recognised, however while academic writing is often the focus of both inquiry and intervention, academic reading is relatively unexplored. In research on our students' academic writing development, we have been struck by how inter-twined academic writing and reading are. In this paper, we draw on a re-analysis of a small body of qualitative data from a study of our students' development of authorial identity to explore the role of reading in emergent academic and professional identities.

Academic reading is different from everyday reading: it is focused, complex, challenging and discipline-specific (Faizah 2004; Sengupta 2002). It is integral for academic development and research shows a strong correlation between reading proficiency and success in undergraduates (Brost & Bradley 2006; Cherif et al. 2014; Fatiloro Oluwayemisi et al. 2017). There is an expectation by academics that students will 'immerse' themselves "…in the culture of the discipline…" (Hermida 2009, p. 21), and engage with a large number of assigned readings often from discipline experts. Students who meet these expectations tend to actively participate in class discussions and write well (Lockhart & Soliday 2016; Sappington, et al. 2002). Conversely, researchers agree that lack of engagement in reading is associated with poorer academic performance and development (Bharuthram 2012; Ngwenya 2010).

The Academic Literacies Model

The Academic Literacies model (Lea & Street 2006) has been particularly influential. It has drawn attention to reading and writing as social practices, situated within disciplines, institutions and learners' lives. The model acknowledges "…both epistemological issues and social processes including power relations among people, institutions and social identities" (Lea & Street 2006, p. 369). The academic literacies model has included a strong focus on practice rather than text (Horner 2013), however, work under this umbrella has been primarily concerned with writing rather than reading or other discourse practices (Lillis & Scott 2007, p. 7). Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of academic reading, comparatively little attention has been paid to reading (Young & Potter 2013, pp. 2-3).

A small body of work has explored reading from the perspective of academic literacies (Mann 2000, pp. 297-317) and other work has begun to explore multimodal practices, including those mediated by digital technologies (Lillis & Scott 2007). Mann's work is particularly interesting in exploring the meaning reading has for students. She presented case studies of four undergraduate students. Her findings demonstrated the complexity of academic reading, linked, not only to how students perceive a reading task, but how they see reading in general and what it means, to them, to be a student. Her findings showed that, unlike the largely private activity of reading for pleasure, academic reading is made public through writing. This was experienced as potentially threatening by some students. Further, academic reading, unlike reading for pleasure, is 'work', done to satisfy external demands rather than internal needs. This has significant implications, making academic reading a much more problematic experience than reading for pleasure.

Other work also suggests that the private nature of reading contributes to its relative invisibility. While academic reading and writing are fundamentally interwoven discourse practices, for students, academic writing becomes public, to at least some extent, as it is read. Given the dominance of written assessment in many higher education systems this means that writing is made public and

contributes to evaluation in a way that reading does not. Hill and Meo (2015, p. 854) argue that "...academic reading tends to be misrecognized: firstly, as a self-evident or 'natural' precursor to writing; and secondly, as an essentially individual phenomenon". This invisibility means that reading tends to be viewed as a cognitive activity rather than understood, like academic writing, as a social process.

Academic reading is challenging

The invisibility of reading is of concern as it is clear that many students find it challenging and underestimate its importance (Lei et al. 2010; Sappington et al. 2002). New, unfamiliar, academic demands are recognised as an exacting aspect of the transition to higher education for many students. Students are expected to engage in a range of complex discourse practices, including reading, that require sustained effort and practice. There is often an assumption that students are prepared for this engagement, particularly in reading. However, this assumes a congruency between the literacy habits that the students have and those that they are expected to acquire. This congruency does not always exist (Hill & Meo 2015). Although lecturers may assume that students are ready-made readers and that reading skills develop naturally (Douglas et al. 2015, p. 255), evidence indicates that this is not the case for many.

Students do not always complete the reading required. Several studies have demonstrated this (Aagaard et al. 2014; McMinn et al. 2009), with Berry et al. (2011, pp. 36-37) reporting that only approximately 20–30% of undergraduate students did so. Evidence suggests that there are four primary reasons why students do not engage with required reading: 1) unpreparedness, 2) lack of motivation, 3) time constraints, and 4) an underestimation of reading's importance. Students that feel unprepared may give up when faced with challenging texts (Brost & Bradley 2006; Lei et al. 2010; Ryan 2006). Conversely, Chong (2016, pp. 20-21) suggests that non-engagement with academic reading among undergraduates may be a matter of choice – students may prioritise other demands on their time. Many students cope with significant demands in terms of work, travel and caring responsibilities. This has a direct impact on the time they have available to engage in reading (Berry et al. 2011; Perna 2010). Motivation may also be a factor. For example, extrinsically motivated students are more likely to engage with assigned readings if they are associated directly with course work and a grade (Lei et al. 2010; Marchant 2002; Ryan 2006). Lecturers who make their subjects interesting can promote students' interest in reading (Hoeft 2012, p. 9). Furthermore, motivation to read is increased if the reading reinforces the reader's concept of self. Alternatively, if the reading challenges identities, or if the risks seem higher than the potential benefit, then perseverance is less likely (Klauda & Wigfield 2012; Schwanenflugel & Knapp 2016).

Academic reading in a discipline is a complex social practice that requires both effort and practice. As Bhrathrum and Clarence (2015, p. 44) point out, this process is likely to be much faster and more straightforward for those students for whom the new literary practices are familiar or congruent. This is particularly true as, just as is the case with academic writing, academic reading expectations are often tacit and difficult to articulate, highlighting the need for more explicit support and instruction. Further, these new literacy practices may explicitly conflict with existing identities and be experienced as alienating (e.g. Ivanič 1998). For example, South African research draws attention to tensions between academic literacy practices and racial identities (O'Shea, McKenna & Thomson 2019, p. 7) and the privileging of English as the language of the academy (Hill & Meo 2015, p. 849). However, research also suggests that even when new literacy practices challenge existing identities, they are not always experienced as alienating and may be embraced (Everitt-Reynolds, Maguire &

Delahunt 2018; Tapp 2014). Taken together, this evidence points to complex relationships that merit further exploration.

Academic literacies and disciplinary identity.

Academic writing plays a key role in the development of an academic identity and is a fundamental aspect of becoming a student. As Wingate (2007, pp. 394-395) argues, 'learning to learn' in higher education involves understanding the construction of knowledge within a discipline. Students use writing to demonstrate their positions with respect to discipline specific knowledge and norms (Hyland 2012; 2015; Lancaster 2016; Nelson & Castelló 2012). However, the relative lack of attention to the role of reading in this is surprising as students generally write about their reading. Indeed, both reading and writing impact identity in intertwined ways. As Park and Schallert (2019, p. 2) point out "The writing process shapes authors' identities and the produced text influences readers' identity formation". Yet reading tends to be viewed as a generic skill (Bharuthram & Clarence 2015, p. 48) rather than a disciplinary discourse practice, worthy of both instruction and enquiry.

Despite the relative lack of research, evidence does support the notion that academic reading plays an important role in the construction of a disciplinary identity. For example, Park and Schallert (2019) analysed the role of disciplinary discourse practices in the development of professional identities among graduate educational psychology students. Students at different stages in their studies were interviewed, some twice, about specific discourse practices, including academic reading, and the impact of these on their professional identities. The findings strongly supported the notion that disciplinary discourses are key tools used in the development of a professional identity. Those students earlier in their studies emphasised reading while those at a later stage were more focused on writing. Interestingly, this was less true of a minority of students who did not see research as being part of their future professional lives. For these students there was simply less motivation to focus on writing as they did not envisage it playing a major role in their professional futures.

Other research also highlights the importance of academic reading to graduates in their professional lives. Weller (2011) explored new lecturers' readings of higher education research and research in their own disciplines. She found that the lecturers' responses to the texts were framed by their own academic identities. These determined how they positioned themselves in relation to the texts. She makes the point that, in terms of professional development, reading is generally more important than writing. Discussing new lecturers, she highlights the importance of a scholarly approach to teaching. Those adopting this approach use the pedagogical literature to enhance their own teaching practice, but they do not necessarily write about it and indeed, even if they do, writing is secondary to the main goal of practice improvement. Although Weller was concerned with academic staff, the same is true of professional development in most fields. Reading is undertaken to inform and enhance professional practice – this is the basis of evidence-based practice. This kind of reading is explicitly recognised and 'counted' in many continuing professional development frameworks and thus is explicitly identified as a central discourse practice within these professions and disciplines. Despite this, reading remains 'taken for granted' and little time is devoted to supporting students to read critically within their disciplines (Bharuthrum & Clarence 2015, pp. 52-53) even though academic reading will be an important aspect of future professional practice for many of them.

In the next section, we draw on research with our own Nursing and Midwifery students to reflect on some of the ways in which academic reading impacts on the development of academic and emerging professional identities. This study was ethically approved by the DkIT School of Health and Science

Ethics Committee. This research explored the development of authorial identity and has previously been reported in full (Everitt-Reynolds, Maguire & Delahunt 2018). It was based on interviews with 13 undergraduate students (drawn from years 1 to 4) of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Studies programmes. The semi-structured interviews explored students' perceptions of themselves as authors and their views and opinions of academic writing. They were asked to reflect retrospectively on their academic writing experiences through the course of their studies. These interviews were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step framework. The original findings demonstrated that reading is a significant enabler for our students and contributes meaningfully to the development of what we term 'writing capital'. This writing capital allows students to demonstrate their competence as emerging health professionals in line with disciplinary expectations.

Writing rather than reading was the focus of the original study, which identified 'writing capital' as a key theme. As reading emerged as a significant enabler of this 'writing capital', we sought to explore this in more depth, specifically focusing on the contribution of reading.

In this paper we report on a re-analysis of a sub-set of the original transcripts, that explores the contribution of reading to the development of writing capital. This is in keeping with Ruggiano and Perry's (2019, p. 2) assertion that this kind of re-analysis is appropriate when pertinent data emerges in an initial study yet is not the main focus of that study. All 13 original transcripts were reviewed, with specific attention to reading. Following this, 6 were selected for further exploration. These were selected based on rich data in relation to reading and were predominantly drawn from interviews with 3rd and 4th year Nursing and Midwifery students. These were examined to address the question: how does academic reading contribute to the development of writing capital?

Reading to develop writing capital

Our original analysis focused on writing and 'identity' in writing. It became very clear that academic reading was central to this process and that, for our students, reading and writing were intertwined. Their reflections on aspects of reading provide a first-hand account of how they evolved from struggling readers and writers to active, engaged and purposeful learners and meaning makers with a deliberate textual identity commensurate with their perceived professional identities. The students generally expressed the view that, although reading and writing are intrinsically linked, in terms of learning, academic reading is the bedrock of writing as without reading they would have little to say.

> *'No it's not easy because I think you do improve with time and if you take time and if you, yeah if you take time to read and its practice makes perfect and it does, it does.'*

> *'That's what is fascinating you can actually get better even though it is intimidating...I don't think the writing is really...but the research definitely is ...the important thing.'*

> *'Reading I think it's your base and that's what actually takes longer. When you have an essay to write or something to deliver you are going to do the writing bit probably at the end but you need to spend a good few weeks to gather...and reading and then you can think about it, you can let it for a while and then...you*

know the way, you will have ideas and stuff and you can come back but I think the reading, the research, I think it's just your foundation because you are not going to write something not having your arguments set up… '

Students described how getting to 'grips' with reading directly impacted on their writing and learning. Some explained that their writing in the early years was all about describing the literature, but as they progressed they found that they could consciously interact with texts in ways that resulted in new understandings, learning and progress in writing. Our original analysis identified this as perhaps the important component of the development of 'writing capital'. Better engagement with reading was supported by enhanced self-regulation as students learned to manage meeting their academic demands more effectively. A further factor was feedback on their writing, however this is outside the scope of this paper and we have discussed this elsewhere (see Everitt-Reynolds et al. 2018).

'When I'm reading something I do two things. Not only do I take the idea from this thing I read but I also watch how the text is actually constructed and how things are linked together. That means I watch as well the skeleton of the things I'm reading itself and I take ideas from that. You get used to the …. the structure of the phrase, the wording, everything is just you understand better as well, you understand the point. It's very linked like your understanding, your reading and your writing is actually very linked.'

For these students, their progress in writing was best understood in terms of the development of their critical reading and thinking skills. This development involved a shift from passive reading to actively interacting with texts and questioning the contributions of these to disciplinary knowledge, their inherent biases and argumentative stances. As with writing, this process was complex and continuously negotiated throughout their studies.

'My confidence has grown in what sort of research to read and where to get it from and being able to recognise what could be an argument in that… what I mean about this critical analysis that I could say, Well this person's definitely veering down this road, so great I've got that. Then I'll see something else and I'll say, Oh this person's veered down that road the opposite road to the other one. So my confidence has grown now'.

'I suppose you're taking information and you're weighing up what's good and what's bad, what's relevant and what's not relevant'.

'I'm making sure that every piece of research that I'm reading, if there's something in that piece of research… I would be jotting down on a piece of paper what I want to take out of it …'

By their final year, many of these students had developed a clear sense of themselves as writers with something to say. This was closely aligned with choices they made in their reading and writing. Students described how, for them, their authorial identity was intrinsically linked to the literature they chose to present and discuss in their writing. Such decisions were guided by their critical reading and thinking. Of significance, they presented relevant readings in a considered yet neutral

manner. In this, they demonstrated knowledge of disciplinary specific topics while deliberately choosing to remove *the self* from their writings, congruent with disciplinary expectations. This is how reading and writing were used to construct their professional identities.

> '*Like from reading it and from seeing what I had taken from the literature, what I had taken from the literature would be what I deem to be important. It's what I want to say about the literature...*'

> '*...when the reader reads my work, the research that they are reading is the research that I've decided to give them to read, because most of the subjects that you decide to write or that you will be writing about there will be hundreds of articles out there about them, good and bad… So I suppose I am … there is a part of me in it, in so much as those are the pieces of research that I have chosen for you…*'

These students also highlighted the symbiotic relationship between the development of professional identities and their academic reading. Their professional identities were based on their internalisations of what it means to be a practicing nurse or midwife and their experiences and expectations of how they currently, and will in future, inhabit and negotiate this space. Most of their reflections reveal that, for our undergraduates, the notion of the evidence-based practitioner had become firmly ingrained in their belief system and ongoing and sustained readings are a fundamental part of this.

> '*I suppose maybe I'm looking at it more from a professional point of view, from a nursing point of view, … I'm looking at it [*reading*] now as if I'm part of this*'

> '*Well you have to be able to read... like you have to be able to develop points, you have to be able to understand what's new in the literature because especially with nursing there's always new guidelines; new protocols; new ways of doing things so you have to go back reflect on all that and then use those new points. There's no point in getting a book that's from the 90's or the early 2000 - 2001 because things would have changed drastically like I'd use an awful lot of articles because I feel the articles are up-to-date and they have relevant information in them.*'

Emergent identities: The role of reading
These findings highlight the importance of reading to these students. They echo Krashen (2016, pp. 117) who suggests that we learn to write not by writing itself, but by reading. As students' 'know how' and 'know why 'in terms of reading and writing develop and they get to 'grips' with academic literacy practices, there is a clear shift in terms of both their approaches and understandings. They describe becoming actively engaged in deeper and more meaningful reading and they make purposeful and deliberate choices as a result. de Brun (2019, p. 5) discusses how reading is an active, purposeful and layered process involving the reader interacting, making connections and judgements about the text and applying information from other sources to aid understanding. This is analogous to the activities clearly described here with students suggesting that, for them, reading is about the use of judicious analytical skills in the examination of texts, looking at supporting evidence and the strengths and limitations of arguments and counter arguments therein.

From a disciplinary perspective, academic reading plays an important role in enabling students to become familiar with the ways of thinking, being, doing and writing in the discipline (Hermida 2009, p 21). It is evident, that for these students, reading and writing were initially frustrating and challenging. However, with increasing knowledge and confidence they could clearly articulate what they were striving for in their literacy practices. This is very closely aligned with their perceptions of disciplinary academic practices, values and beliefs. As Abegllen, Burns and Sinfield (2019, p. 9) explain, most disciplines have epistemological practices that students need to learn, model and embrace, in order to become full community members. While the role of academic writing in identity construction is well recognised (e.g. Ivanič 1998) academic reading had a significant impact on our students. Moje and Luke (2009, p. 415) ask how does literacy matter to identity and how does identity matter to literacy? It seems that for our students their identity and 'voice' are mediated by what they read and internalise in disciplinary and professional discourse and, in turn, what they craft and produce is mediated by this identity. Hence, as described in their narratives, relevant readings are presented in a considered yet neutral manner with the 'self' deliberately absent. This is how reading and writing are used to construct professional identities that privilege absence over presence and allow our students to demonstrate their competence as evidence-based practitioners.

Taken together, the evidence considered indicates that students can read themselves into 'being' a member of a disciplinary and/or professional community and that this is a complex and gradual process that extends well beyond graduation, to inform professional practice. We have discussed the experiences of some of our own students who have engaged successfully with new discourse practices, however this is not the experience of all students and this has clear implications, both for academic success and future professional identities. With this in mind, the place of reading merits more explicit consideration in our curricula. In the next section we discuss some ways to do this.

Making space for reading in the curriculum

As we have discussed earlier, the private and somewhat invisible nature of academic reading may lead to it being taken for granted as a skill, rather than viewed as a literacy practice. Making reading more visible and explicit is important in challenging this. An important first step is to engage students in dialogue about literacy practices that interrogates both their expectations and those of their lecturers and of the wider discipline. While it is important that this dialogue starts early, it should not be limited to the early stages of a programme. Evidence clearly indicates that, rather than a skill acquired at an early stage, academic reading, like academic writing, is a complex practice that continues to evolve. It is therefore important that we engage students in ongoing conversations throughout their studies.

In order to support academic reading, an important first step is to examine its place within our curricula. We have previously argued that we must make space for academic writing within our curricula (Delahunt, Maguire, Everitt- Reynolds & Sheridan 2012), however, to be successful this also necessitates making space for reading. An important question, at the level of an individual programme, is, what are the messages, intended and unintended, that our students are getting about reading? A good place to start would be to ask students themselves. As noted earlier, there is a relative paucity of research on academic reading. With some notable exceptions, (e.g. Mann 2000) there is little on students', particularly, undergraduate students', perceptions and experiences of academic reading and its meaning in their lives. More research in this area would illuminate the different approaches students take to their reading and the complex ongoing social processes of reading situated within disciplines and institutions.

Consequently, it is worth considering what making reading 'visible' in the curriculum would look like in practice. Gourlay (2015, p. 406) has argued that contemporary models of 'student engagement' tend to emphasise particular forms of student activity that are interactive and observable, such as group work, interaction with staff and so on in a way that risks constructing solitary thinking, reading and writing as passive or even problematic. Making space for silent reading and thinking explicitly demonstrates that these activities are a valuable part of disciplinary and professional practice. Rhead (2019), inspired by the research on writing retreats (Komhaber et al. 2016; Papen & Thériault 2017), devised and delivered academic reading retreats in order to expose the hidden nature of reading. Such communal reading endeavours could make visible to students the process of reading for identity development and disciplinary learning.

We also need to examine where, when and how academic reading is explicitly addressed in a programme. As noted earlier, lecturers often assume that students enter higher education equipped to read academically. This often means that the 'how' and the 'why' of academic reading are only explicitly addressed, if at all, early in the first-year and/or as part of generic study skills support. Even if academic staff do recognise the need to scaffold academic reading, they may not feel confident to do so. Just as is the case with academic writing, it is often very difficult for academics to make explicit the tacit knowledge of disciplinary specific discourse. Wingate (2019, p. 2) has advocated the development of "…an academic literacy (reading and writing) pedagogy that is capable of transforming the current student support provision…", that draws on the methods and techniques of genre-based approaches in conjunction with the insights offered by the Academic Literacies approach to embed academic literacy support for all students. Another potential model is offered by Writing in the Disciplines (WID) (McLeod 2012, p. 54). This approach, originating in the US, embeds discipline-specific writing instruction into degree programmes (Riedner, O'Sullivan & Farrell 2015, pp. 8-10). A central plank of WID is support for academic staff to integrate the development of writing into their disciplines. This professional development is key to ensuring that staff feel confident and supported in discussing literacy practices within their disciplines. Extending the focus to explicitly consider academic reading would help to build capacity among staff at an institutional level and engage more students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the role that academic reading plays in the development of disciplinary and professional identities. This was prompted by our previous work on academic writing and the realization that, although academic reading development is acknowledged as central to the development of 'voice' and identity in writing, it has received considerably less attention in literature than academic writing development.

Certainly, for our students, academic reading was challenging, even frustrating, but with competence and confidence came a definite shift as students sought to consciously and deliberately engage with disciplinary texts in an active and critical manner. By their final year, many had developed a clear sense of themselves as readers and writers: this was evident in the purposeful choices they made in their readings and how this was then portrayed in their writings. In short, for our students their authorial identity was deeply aligned with critical reading and their reading and writing were both instrumental in constructing a professional identity. However, although they could articulate what choices they were making and why, reading still emerged as an onerous and demanding activity. This could largely be due to the fact that many aspects of this interactive and iterative process are invisible and until students are immersed and can internalise disciplinary discourse many implicit

norms and conventions remain elusive. Considering that academic reading is instrumental in the construction of academic and professional identities, it is now time to make explicit aspects of academic reading that heretofore have remained relatively invisible for students. We suggest that it is time to open a conversation about making space for reading in the curriculum.

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