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# Stating the obvious: Teaching the “third language” from the bottom up

Maria Freij & Lena Ahlin

## Abstract

This paper takes the position that there are features of academic language that are intricately tied to an academic practice. We discuss academic language as the key to 1) Belonging in the academic community; 2) Becoming a writer with a scholarly identity; 3) Understanding writing as a meaning-making practice; and 4) Performing scholarly practice and -identity (adapted from Wenger, 1998).

As we see it, student needs are often related to the subskills of not just academic writing, but to an overarching approach to academic practice. We argue that it is increasingly important to teach explicitly this “third language” and focus here on identifying some of the most pertinent aspects of academic skills. We find that our students need to be able to, as we have argued elsewhere, “approach writing in a manner that makes explicit the connection between *practising* and *practice*” (Freij & Ahlin, 2014 p. 43). By making explicit expectations and subskills or micro-objectives of academic practice, we are more honestly inviting students to participate in the scholarly environment. Our primary interest lies in how the teaching–learning dialogue may be shaped to improve students’ independence, and we see that a crucial component of that climb is to make visible the steps of the ladder. We support, then, a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach in the quest to equip students more aptly for the tasks at hand.

Finally, we suggest that we, and our students, may benefit greatly from a curriculum that constructively aligns not just subject-specific content, but one that also integrates subskills related to

writing and reasoning into courses and programs more systematically.

## Introduction

Finding consensus on what it means to master a language seems an impossible task—the outcome of such a discussion would depend entirely on the context and would include a hierarchy of needs on behalf of all those involved in this context. Thus, such a task is then by default highly specific and context-dependent. Without an understanding of what is required in a specific situation, we are unlikely to perform to expectation.

So what are the expectations? To a degree, expectations are subject-specific, purpose-specific, and task-specific, but there are features of academic language that are a consequence intricately tied to an academic practice. Here, we will discuss academic language not just from a point of view of producing the end result, often in the form of a traditional subject-specific essay, but academic language as the key to 1) belonging in the academic community; 2) becoming a writer with a scholarly identity; 3) understanding writing as a meaning-making practice; and 4) performing scholarly practice and -identity (adapted from Wenger, 1998).

As teachers of English we are used to guiding our students through the pitfalls of English grammar and vocabulary in their second language, but in order to be successful, our students also need to master the rules of academic language. Though theoretical knowledge sometimes translates into practical application, we find that the metadiscussion we as lecturers attempt is not always possible. Instead, student needs are often related to the subskills of not just academic writing, but to an overarching approach to academic practice. We find that it is increasingly important to teach explicitly this “third language” and will focus here on

identifying some of the most pertinent aspects of academic skills. We argue that a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach is favourable in the quest to equip students with the skills necessary for academic success.

This article focuses on the need to make explicit such understanding to our students in order that they may be able to “approach writing in a manner that makes explicit the connection between practising and practice” (Freij & Ahlin, 2014, p. 43) and views academic language as intricately linked to other academic skills. It is simultaneously the prerequisite for academic success and the result thereof.

Similar discussions are occurring in many different fields, but within English, the focus on subskills was recently raised during the National Essay Writing workshop in Växjö, during which Diane Pecorari at Linnaeus University raised some excellent points about the many subskills, or ‘micro-objectives’ involved in the essay-writing process. Pecorari was careful to clarify that the examples she included in her presentation were in no way a complete list—in the same vein we make clear that what we have made the focus of our discussion here is for the purpose of illustration only: our ambition is not to present a complete list, nor answers to the questions we raise, but to highlight what we perceive as a need to look at writing procedures, processes, and methods in ways that will better equip our students with the skills needed to meet the learning goals. We argue that by making explicit expectations and the subskills or micro-objectives therein entailed, we are more honestly inviting students to participate in the scholarly environment. Our primary interest lies in how the teaching–learning dialogue may be shaped to improve students’ independence, and we see the making visible the steps of the ladder as a crucial component of that climb. Here, we want to highlight how just a few of Pecorari’s examples can be further problematised and suggest that we, and our students, may benefit greatly from a curriculum that constructively aligns not just the

content that is subject-specific, but that we integrate subskills related to writing and reasoning into our courses and programs more systematically.

### Obvious or opaque: On taking things for granted

In HKR's mission statement, diversity is a key word. Our students come from different social and cultural backgrounds, and their age, interests, and abilities, also vary a great deal<sup>3</sup>. The statement makes it clear that the multiplicity of perspectives represented in the classrooms at HKR is an asset, and while we agree with this observation, we would also like to suggest that this diversity presents certain pedagogical challenges. A heterogeneous group of students means that the students' educational backgrounds vary; which in turn means that their previous knowledge both of the subject that is being taught, and of the specific kind of discourse through which the content matter is transmitted and (re)produced, is likely to vary a great deal<sup>4</sup>. As teachers, we can/must not take for granted that the students have already acquired this competence, nor must we think that they can acquire it automatically via teaching of the specific content area. Academic language proficiency should be thought of as a construct that can and should be explicitly taught—it is the framework within which all knowledge at the tertiary level exists and ought to be made explicit and taught explicitly. It is a language

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<sup>3</sup> "Vi är stolta över våra studenter och den mångfald de representerar. Högskolan arbetar mycket med breddad rekrytering, och mångfalden yttrar sig bland annat i kultur, familjebakgrund, ålder, intressen och förutsättningar." (HKR, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting here that current research on academic language focuses mainly on elementary school (grades K–12), which seems to suggest that this topic is addressed well before students enter tertiary education. However, we must not assume that all students are actually prepared for the demands of a university education. Cummins (2008, 1984, 1980); Haneda 2014; Lindahl and Watkins (2014), Nagy and Townsend (2012), Bailey and Heritage (2008), Moore and Schleppegrell (2014), Schleppegrell (2004).

with special conventions that the students need to learn in order to gain access to the scholarly community and build their own academic identity. What, then, do we mean by academic language? Haneda (2014, p. 127) notes that various definitions of the term have been given, ranging from word choice to the structure of the text. In addition, she observes that Cummins (1979) was the first to make a distinction between cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which refers to the cognitively demanding language typically used in the academic setting, and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), which denotes the everyday language we use for various social purposes. While this dichotomy has been questioned by, for example, Bailey (2007), who argues that everyday language is no less complex than academic language, it still seems relevant to posit that there is a fundamental difference between our everyday language and the language required in academic settings. This is true of both oral and written language, but our focus here is on written academic language.

While our focus in the following discussion is on writing, we could perhaps add here that our understanding of academic language, the “third language,” goes beyond the words on the page. In our understanding, it encompasses the continuous process of acculturation into academic practice that the student negotiates.

We posit that though we may not assume that our cohort’s competence is at the required level at the beginning of their university studies, the persisting absence of such skills at the end of a program of studies is indicative of the need for a culture shift when it comes to teaching: a gradual building and integration of academic skills needs to be explicitly implemented and systematically integrated into courses and programs. A genuine focus on progression within short- and long-term perspectives means that students are given the opportunity to hone and fine-tune the skills that they absolutely need to meet the learning goals.

As Kirby et al. (1996) argue, the academic context can be thought of as a separate culture, “with language as one of its central features” (p. 143). They go on to describe academic discourse as “information focused” and “decontextualized”, which means that “information is expressed in isolation from supporting cues in the environment, using complex syntactic structures and specialized vocabulary” (p. 143). This means that specialised language skills are needed to understand and produce academic texts. Nagy and Townsend (2012) explain, “Academic language is specialized because it needs to be able to convey abstract, technical, and nuanced ideas and phenomena that are not typically examined in settings that are characterized by social and/or casual conversation” (p. 92). This cognitively demanding language, which is characterised by informational density and abstractness, is further differentiated from social language through, for example, a greater frequency of Latin and Greek vocabulary; morphologically complex words; nouns, adjectives and prepositions; and grammatical metaphor, including nominalizations (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 93).

In addition, Nagy and Townsend (2012) make the crucial point that the function of this highly specialised language is to help us think differently:

because academic language conveys the abstract, technical, and nuanced ideas and phenomena of the disciplines, it can help one think in the requisite abstract, technical, and nuanced ways. Academic language, therefore, is a tool that promotes a kind of thinking different from that employed in social settings. Learning academic language is not learning new words to do the same thing that one could have done with other words; it is learning to do new things with language and acquiring new tools for these new purposes. (p. 93)

In other words, the language we use informs the way we make meaning of the complex ideas and tasks we encounter as part of academic life. An awareness of how language form relates to meaning is an integral part of teaching English as a Second Language, but we must not forget that the same kind of explicit instruction is needed concerning the third language, and that this type of instruction is needed across the disciplines. Cummins (2014) argues for the explicit teaching of academic language through “the integration of language and content whereby teachers incorporate explicit language objectives into their instruction in subject matter across the curriculum in order to draw students’ attention to the ways in which meaning is constructed through language” (p. 147). This means that regardless of which discipline we are working within, we need to recognize the need for active engagement with language as a meaning-making activity, and let this inform our pedagogical choices. We believe that writing plays a key role in this process and that it should be seen as an integral part of scholarly assignments. Writing should not only be worked with in connection with term papers, and so on, but it should be seen as a meaning-making activity.

### **Bottom up: Making explicit the subskills**

Let us take a closer look at a concrete example: the Bachelor’s degree paper/level-III essay typically written at the end of a three-year-study program. Among other things, this assignment requires the student to contextualize her study; to put it in the framework of a broader field of research. In order to do this, the student needs to be able to carry out a number of tasks. First of all, she needs to find relevant literature; read it and understand it; take a critical stance toward it; relate contributions to the literature to each other; discern that which is relevant to the new work, and finally relate ideas from the literature to the new work (Pecorari, 2014)

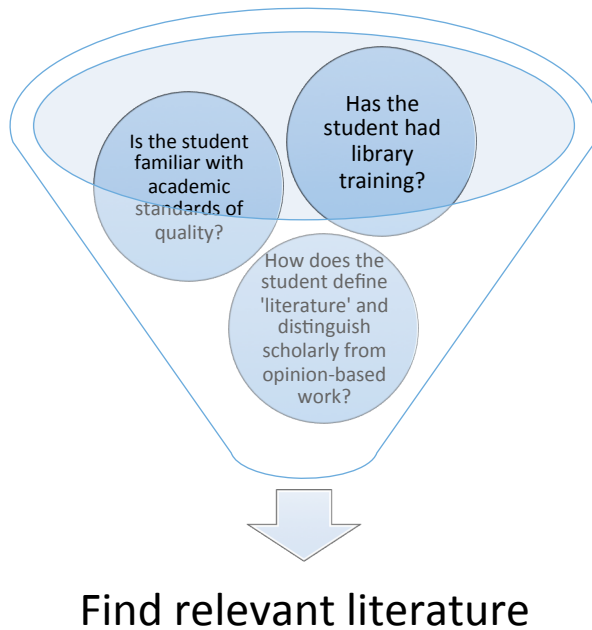


Pecorari primarily relates these subskills to source management, which is an essential part of academic writing. She observes, “A piece of writing which failed to take note of what has already been done on a topic would be fundamentally unacademic” (Pecorari, 2013, p. 62). Academic texts need to be ‘transparent’ in that it must be possible to discern where the information in the piece came from: the author of the paper at hand, or somebody else’s work. In this sense, academic texts are “multi-voiced” as “the voice of the writer is joined by the voices of the authors of the sources he or she cites” (Pecorari, 2013, p. 62). The student must manage this polyphony of voices and yet give her audience a sense of her own contribution, for example, through the choice of reporting verbs indicating the writer’s extent of agreement with the source she is quoting from. If the students choose to introduce the quotation using the verb “claim,” as in “Smith claims,” she simultaneously suggests that the information that follows may be the topic of dispute among scholars. Should a more neutral verb, such “note” or “observe” be used instead (“Smith notes/observes”), the implication is that the writer agrees with the proposition of the quoted source and/or that the facts stated there are uncontroversial (Pecorari, 2013, p. 124). This brief example serves to illustrate not only that several subskills are subsumed under the heading “contextualisation,” but also that the learning objectives can be broken down into specific subskills that should inform our writing pedagogy. This is what we mean by saying, somewhat provocatively, that we may need explicitly to state the obvious: first we need to be aware of how many subskills our students really need to in order to perform the task of the learning goal to satisfaction, and then we need to make sure that we give them ample opportunity for practice.

By acknowledging that ‘contextualisation’ is a multi-faceted task involving a range of subskills, we are taking the first tentative steps to making explicit the rules of the game. To problematise this further, we note that subskills may themselves (need to) be

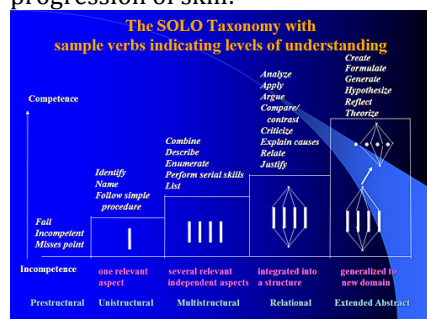
broken down, and that where such a process ends is a matter for debate. To exemplify we have used Pecorari’s illustration above, specified further what the subskills may entail, and asked questions that we find of particular relevance:

**Figure 1: “Find relevant literature”**



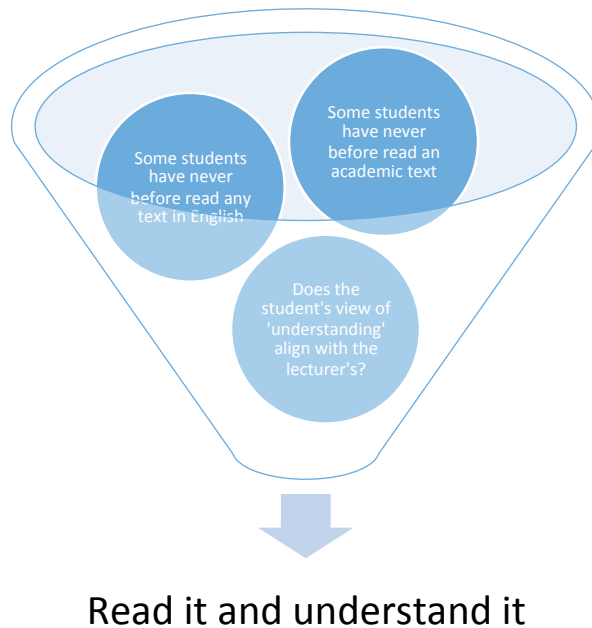
The most basic of the tenets proposed by Pecorari is the ability to find relevant literature. Arguably, the ability to ‘find’ falls under the SOLO Taxonomy’s<sup>5</sup> Unistructural skills (identify), and should thus be among the easiest tasks for students to complete. Still, we know that few students come equipped with knowledge of database searches and the peer-review process; of inter-library loans and even the added layer of Scholar to the Google search. Whose task is it to ensure students receive library training? That students are made aware of the LearningResourceCenter support available? In addition, the word ‘relevant’ means more is required than first meets the eye; there are many aspects of assessing relevance that we need to make explicit. If students are new to the field, how will they know the most well-renowned journal, author, or study? How will they be able to search using keywords if they do not know what methodology they will use, or that has been used, or should have been used? How will they know that some studies age with grace, whereas others are irrelevant as soon as a new paper on the topic is published? At work already here are complex considerations that correspond to the SOLO taxonomy’s relational level, and these abilities, though prerequisite for a pass mark (See Freij & Ahlin, 2014), thus involve critical abilities and knowledge about many aspects of the academic culture that we often take for granted. Finally, here, the word ‘literature’ may appear straight-forward, but experience tells us such is not the case. Just as the teacher of English literature is likely to approach

<sup>5</sup> The SOLO Taxonomy (Biggs N.D.) is a very helpful tool in identifying the progression of skill:



differently the works of Alice Munro and those of Danielle Steel, the academic (regardless of field) knows how to distinguish between popular and scholarly books, popular and peer-reviewed articles, and opinion-based or scholarly websites. The word 'literature' means something else to us altogether, and we may not explicitly be defining to our students what we mean by it.

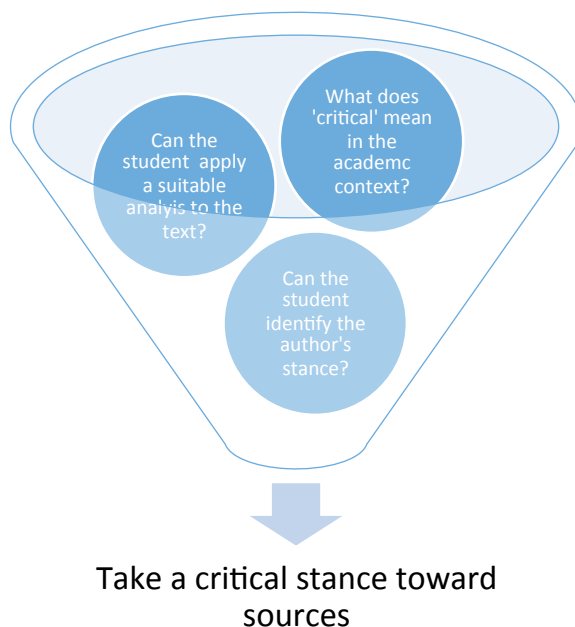
**Figure 2: "Read it and understand it"**



These are, yet again, complex and hard-to-define skills. 'Reading' to a first-year student is likely to mean something else than what it means to the trained academic. Firstly, some of our students have never before read academic text in English (or in their native tongue). Their reading is slow and arduous. They have to look up words, and do not necessarily pick up on the subtleties in tone and register specific to academic writing. Secondly, they may or may not come already equipped with reading techniques. If they are not able to identify key sentences or key words, if they do not know what to expect from what section of a research paper, they

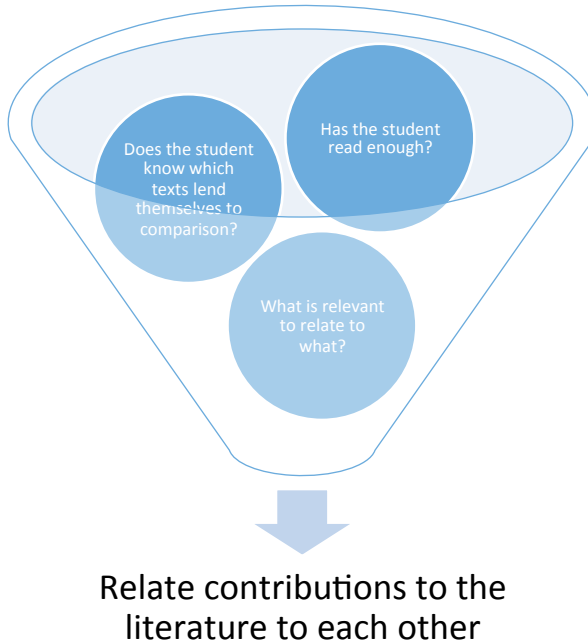
are unlikely to be reading in the manner we expect. Further, whether or not they are able to skim, close-read, take notes whilst reading, summarise, synthesise, etc., will affect the manner in which they read as well as the effects of their reading on their understanding. Other aspects to consider here is the specific purpose of reading the text at hand. What it means to ‘understand’ a text depends largely on what we are after. To make things more complicated, some texts can only be understood in relation to other texts—how will the student know in what context the text belongs? The skills entailed in understanding a text are highly complex and so are the ways in which understanding is demonstrated. Add to this that students are working in a language that is not their native tongue, and that they are not as sophisticated in their expression. In brief, we are asking them to perform a range of tasks in the ‘third language’ and access this through a second language, which is in many ways also new to them. The same argument can be made if the students are reading academic text in their native tongue, depending on whether or not the student’s competence in the native tongue extends to the academic realm. How do we ensure, then, that the student is not falling behind at this crucial stage (arguably, we are talking about a pre-production stage in terms of written output, but the production stage in terms of understanding, belonging, and identity-formation)? If students are unable to participate in these tasks, we risk losing them long term. We suggest here that breaking down tasks into smaller assignments, as Pecorari suggests, may well be a step toward more inclusive practices, whereby we make explicit the practices and expectations that are implicit in the learning outcomes. Making visible the culture into which we are effectively inviting students arguably makes the invitation a more genuine one, whereby we elevate the task of ‘cracking the code’ from the depths of a hidden curriculum to having a key position in the learning process.

**Figure 3: Take a critical stance toward sources**



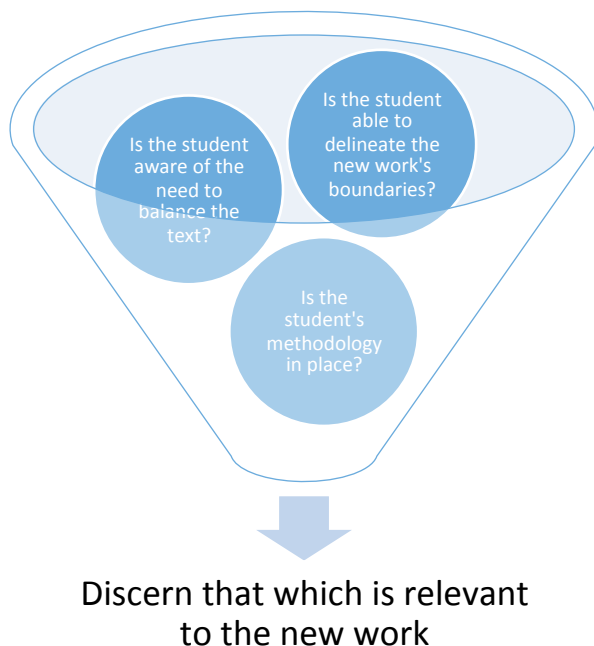
Here we note that in addition to what we have already discussed, the discourse itself may present problems for students, who often assume that a critical stance equals a negative one. Introducing students into the notion of criticism within academia may require specific attention as the academic interpretation differs widely from the general interpretation. It is also necessary to consider whether the student is firstly able to identify the critical position of the author. This is a prerequisite for the student's ability to place herself on the spectrum of criticism, yet one that we may take for granted. Analytical, reflexive, and critical skills fall under relational and extended abstract, yet demand, then, abilities to identify and name (unistructural). Notably, identifying and naming, for example, the theoretical framework and critical stance of an author of a research paper demands many higher-order skills, and as such we are not helped by assuming that such processes are basic and obvious.

**Figure 4: Relate contributions to the literature to each other**



Questions we are asking ourselves here are whether students know which texts lend themselves to comparison? On what basis do students relate texts to each other? Is it enough that they are in the same field, of similar age, of obviously differing stances?

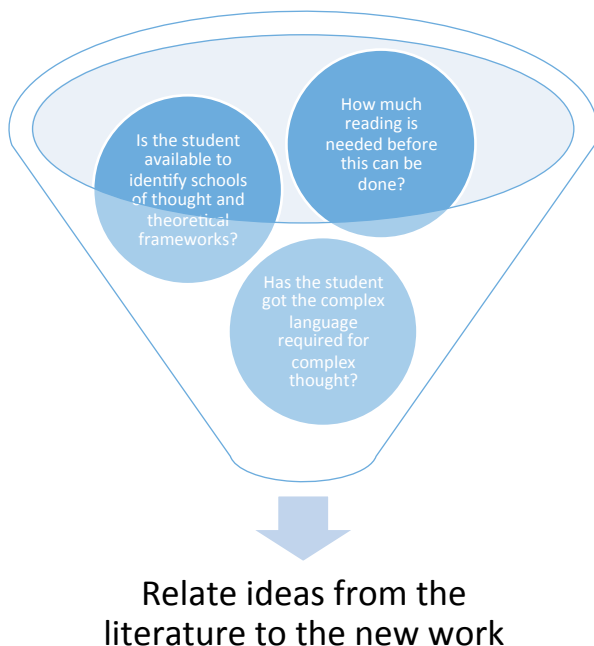
**Figure 5: Discern that which is relevant to the new work**



Is the student able to delineate the work's boundaries so that she may be able to assess the value of secondary literature? How much reading (and understanding and analysis...) is necessary before a student has a sufficient understanding of the field? The student may not be aware of the relevance of the literature until the new work's boundaries are defined: reading to identify a gap differs from reading for the establishment of a theoretical background. Depending on where the student is on this spectrum, many different processes may be at play.



**Figure 6: Relate ideas from the literature to the new work**



Is the student able to relate the ideas of the literature to larger theoretical frameworks? Identify schools of thought? Again, how much reading need the student undertake before she is confident and competent enough to put pen to paper? Until now, we have discussed the many intricate and interconnected aspects of reading and understanding and how students are learning to navigate a language and an environment unlikely to be considered safe waters. And we see students continually struggling, some are treading water, some are drowning—not many enough are able to swim with the current. Writing is inextricably linked to the production of understanding and meaning and as the practice through which socialisation into the academic community primarily occurs.

## On implementing subskills

In the pursuit of writing processes that empower students in the short- and long term, we acknowledge the presence of 'weak' and 'powerful' strategies, the former being much less likely to produce a competent text and adding little to any of the components of a social theory of writing. To exemplify, already in the 1980s, Flower had this to say of the 'the perfect draft strategy':

Here the writer starts at the beginning and writes a perfect final draft in one slow, laborious pass-through. Looking at the first paragraph as a whole, we see that instead of planning, jotting notes, or defining her goals, the writer has started out by trying to produce a perfect set of sentences. She is trying to generate her ideas and language in the flowing sequence of a finalised text. The form of the final product is dictating the form of her mental process. As inefficient as this strategy is, many people depend on it—spending hours trying to perfect their first paragraph or first page. [...] By jumping into producing finished prose before deciding what they want to say, such writers are unlikely to do either task well. (p. 38)

Flower acknowledges here that writing is a laborious process with a range of functions: she is careful to point out that the thinking process is closely linked to the writing on the page, and that therefore, producing perfect sentences in the first draft is as unlikely an inefficient a way of producing a successful text as is writing it from 'beginning to end'. She notes that 'the normal process of a writer is not a linear march forward' (p. 50).

'Powerful' strategies, in contrast, focus on visualisation techniques in the form of note-taking and brainstorming, engaging in a dialogue with the self (and others), and are those that acknowledge writing as both the path and the goal.

We suggest that the persistence of using outdated methods, such as writing an essay from “beginning to end” without acknowledging other parts of the research and writing processes may well result in a student producing *one essay*, but that such methods do not build the student’s knowledge of how to write *an(y) essay*; that is, the student may be able to meet the learning goals by passing the assessment item at hand, but has not acquired skills upon which to build for future work. As such, certain methods lend themselves more easily to structural alignment.

Pecorari (2014) has begun to outline a possible way forward by suggesting a “sequencing of micro-objectives” across the curriculum. In her proposal, the students begin, not by trying to write a complete, if short, essay, but by engaging in tasks that will prepare them for the final term paper and lead to the acquisition of transferable skills. For example, she suggests that term one includes finding a specific article at the library, providing a summary of that article and a correct bibliographic entry for a single-authored monograph. In term two, the assignment is broadened to cover finding a greater number of resources on a specific topic. An added requirement could be to move from the descriptive text that is typical of a summary to an analysis, if the student is asked to write a meta-analysis of a small number of research articles on the same topic. Finally, the student could be asked to look more critically at sources, for example, through an assignment in which she seeks to explain similarities and differences in definitions of a key term in two sources. These are some concrete examples of how to prepare students for the final assignment, the level-III essay, in which they have to identify a topic on their own, find relevant literature, prepare a correct list of a range of sources, and so on. In this suggested organisation of activities, writing is connected to *doing*, as in performing a scholarly practice.

We have previously (Freij & Ahlin, 2014) argued that academic writing can be seen in the framework Etienne Wenger's "Components of a social theory of learning" (1998), which acknowledges that learning is in turn linked to practice (learning as doing), identity (learning as becoming), community (learning as belonging), and meaning (learning as experience). In the following model we have replaced Wenger's 'learning' with 'writing': writing is thereby in turn linked to practice (writing as doing), identity (writing as becoming), community (writing as belonging), and meaning (writing as experience). In this adaptation the close relationship between learning and writing is posited, while making explicit the connection between *practice* and *practicing*. For the student navigating her way through our courses, writing is the key to *Belonging*—in the academic community; *Becoming*—a writer with a scholarly identity; *Experience*—by understanding writing as meaning-making practice; and *Doing*—whereby writing is performing scholarly practice and -identity (adapted from Wenger, 1998).

Furthermore, the breaking down of the learning goals into subskills or micro-objectives form building blocks of the process in which the student learns the tools of the trade and develops her own scholarly identity. Pecorari concludes,

Fully mastering the discursal conventions for academic writing requires a shift in perspective and identity to become someone with an audience-appropriate message to convey and a sense of the forms in which academic readers are prepared to receive it. The process which brings about that change is a process of cultivating a new identity, a new self [...] and it is a slow and gradual one. (Pecorari, 2013, p. 40)

In this quotation, it is taken for granted that engaging in academic studies not only means acquiring new skills, but that this acquisition affects us profoundly. It is in learning to write

critically, in small well-defined assignments, that one practices critical thinking. Writing is here seen as a writing-through of complex tasks; as a way of making meaning.

By way of conclusion, we would like to reflect on the practical implications of a bottoms-up pedagogy. From the overview presented above, the explicit teaching of the subskills involved in writing an academic paper may seem as a time-consuming activity. We would argue that this is time well spent, and that in the long run it may prove to be an efficient strategy that actually saves time for both teacher and student. By building a clear, task-oriented foundation, we give our students the key to succeeding in mastering the academic conventions and assuming a new, scholarly identity. Following are the vital components of bottoms-up pedagogy as we envision it:

- Academic language, understood broadly as the entire process of acculturation and learning the rules of the academic game, needs to be broken down, made explicit and integrated into the learning process.
- Well-defined exercises of limited scope can constitute arenas where the subskills can be practiced; such as writing shorter pieces across genres as a way to learn how to distinguish between, for example, descriptive and analytical writing.
- By making visible the culture into which we are inviting our students, we make the invitation to participate a more genuine one, in which the students are encouraged to reflect on and assume responsibility for their own learning process.

Along the same lines, we welcome a dialogue among teachers within and across disciplines about how to meet the pedagogical challenges our diverse body of students presents. We hope to continue not just asking questions, but also answering some of

them, and to open up for a more reflexive practice in our ways of teaching—and learning—the complexities of the third language.

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