

INTEGRATING LITERACY PRACTICES IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: PEDAGOGIC INTENTIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING

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The importance of literacy and literacy practices as an instrument of conceptual and cognitive development is well documented. Reading and writing skills have an integral role in higher education, yet the application of these skills is normally the domain of language specialists or academic support programmes and not the focus of subject lecturers. This article reports on business education student teachers' reflections of a small-scale 'read-talk-write' project. I argue that introducing a disciplinary literacy component in business education may infuse a critical-reflective approach in business education teacher training to encourage habits of reading, writing, speaking and reasoning with the intention to cascade it to school level. Data was collected by means of open-ended survey questions using content analysis. Findings suggest that content literacy instruction in business education can be applied by introducing deliberate and consistent literacy practices for students to become critically aware of and confident in interrogating disciplinary content in business.

Keywords

Business education, content literacy, disciplinary literacy, critical literacy, economic and management sciences, literacy practice

INTRODUCTION

To be employable in a modern economy, university graduates need to meet more than just the requirements of the exit level outcomes. As a result of market pressures shaped by professional boards, higher literacy levels are expected from business graduates (Jackson, 2009). Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) claim that students must be able to read challenging material and solve problems independently to meet the requirements of an increasingly competitive economy and an expanding technological society. Literacy practices become more academic particularly as students progress to higher level courses, with a more consistent message of the required reading and writing and a much clearer trajectory of the exit level outcomes (Ivanič *et al.* 2009: 1), but these authors argue that the reading and writing at all educational levels must be deconstructed and scrutinised in order to facilitate progression. For literacy practices to be relevant and meaningful, specific disciplinary literacy skills and strategies should be explicitly facilitated. Introducing literacy practices in a Business Education (BE) teacher training context can enhance the students' academic literacy skills in terms of critical reading, analysis and writing. In addition, this practice can promote critical thinking and debate (group discussion) as well as the acquisition of information processing skills. Ultimately, this practice may cascade down to classroom level.

Literacy practices offer a 'powerful way of conceptualizing the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape' (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000: 7). These authors also refer to people's awareness

of literacy, how literacy is constructed, talked about and made sense of. Business education (BE) lecturers do not normally focus on literacy practices, since literacy is generally regarded as a focus of the business communication module. Both Jackson (2009) and Ivanič *et al.* (2009) comment that reading and writing skills are reserved for the language specialist who has little expert knowledge of subject discourses. This could lead to disciplinary vulnerability and uncertainty about how to meet the particular needs of business students. For business educators, very often the main requirement is to get students to 'read for current affairs relevant to their studies' (Jackson, 2009: 70). Ivanič *et al.* (2009: 69) explain that after a review of a business administration foundation course with a unit called 'Understanding stock control', the tutor indicated that there is no literacy attached to the unit because it was 'all about numbers'. Closer inspection revealed literacy in many different aspects in the course.

The importance of reading and writing as (academic) literacy practices and literacy as an instrument of conceptual and cognitive development is well documented (Street & Lefstein, 2007; Olson, 1994). Vockell and Cusick (1995) argue that students who read from a variety of sources generally have better vocabularies and cope better with conceptually more difficult reading material than those who do not. In South Africa, the standard of reading of learners in primary school is problematic for four reasons: poor reading comprehension, inadequate reading fluency, lack of vocabulary and a negative attitude towards reading (Le Cordeur, 2010: 78). At high school and university level, reading is often viewed as an implied activity, specifically in content subjects, and if literacy support is needed it is normally relegated to the domain of the language teacher or academic support programmes.

In this article I report on a small-scale 'read-talk-write' project and the students' experiences and perspectives thereof. I argue that introducing a content literacy component in BE may infuse a critical-reflective approach in BE teacher training in the manner in which student teachers relate the disciplinary knowledge to the real world. The intention is not so much to report on the outcome of the assessment of the activities, but rather to give an account of the perceptions of students. I also reflect on the project as a pedagogical practice where a practical approach is taken to integrate literacy in a specific interactive context such as the lecture room (classroom). The written media in this instance refers to daily newspaper reading and inculcating this practice in student teachers to establish how it could be (better) employed for educational purposes, specifically for BE teacher training. I use an overarching term BE to accommodate a wider reader audience, which refers to the South African school education context and includes (student) teachers who teach economic and management sciences (EMS) in Grades 7–9; and accounting, business studies and economics in Grades 10–12.

This article is structured as follows: first, an overview of literacy perspectives in the context of BE is given. This section is followed by an explanation of the pedagogic intentions embedded in BE literacy practice. The project is subsequently described, followed by the students' reflections on the project. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

LITERACY AND BUSINESS EDUCATION

Traditionally, the term 'literacy' has been used in the singular, referring to people's ability to read and write particular forms of text (Ivanič *et al.*, 2009:19). Later definitions refer to 'literatecies' which involve gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one's culture and society (Kellner & Share, 2005; Pahl & Rowsell, 2013). Barton *et al.* (2000) present the theory of literacy as a social practice which underscores literacy practices, which is the cultural way of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives. Street and Lefstein (2007: 454) argue that 'educationalists have tended to look at literacy in terms of texts that are produced and consumed by literate individuals',

which locates literacy within wider communicative and socio-political practices. Reading, writing and numeracy skills are foregrounded in this ‘interrogation of content’ process as well as in how the pedagogical content knowledge is mediated. Having (critical) literacy in the business education classroom presents the opportunity for students to participate, discuss, argue and make assumptions about economic and business activities and informed decisions as consumers.

With regard to business lecturers there is the notion that critical reflection about business activities is embedded in the manner in which the content and pedagogy are integrated and interrogated in the module. Critical literacy is integrated when curriculum content is taught, rather than treating it as something additional to the curriculum or a separate lecture (Wolk, 2003). Wolk (2003: 102) points out that to insist that students be critically literate is to have an entirely different vision to the acquisition of these ‘technical’ skills; rather it is ‘how we see and interact with the world; it is about having, as a regular part of one’s life, the skills and desire to evaluate society and the world’. Moreover, Wolk suggests that the purpose of critical literacy is not to tell students what to think, but to empower them with multiple perspectives and questioning habits of mind. A wide range of business topics is covered in the business curriculum, but teachers seldom question the content specified in the curriculum. It is also necessary to think of how this knowledge could be augmented, expanded and accessed. The read-talk-write project is therefore proposed as an appropriate approach in BE using newspaper articles as a resource. Teaching by using supplementary reading from newspapers is an *established print-oriented pedagogy* (Kellner & Share, 2005) where concepts are demystified and revealed through critical inquiry.

A content literacy approach encompasses a learning strategy which stems from a socioconstructivist focus where reading and writing texts urge teachers to teach their students how to learn *with* texts, with the teacher as a *guide* (O’Brien, Stewart & Moje, 1995). O’Brien *et al.* (1995) suggest that reader response approaches, process writing approaches and cooperative learning groups are examples of content literacy practices. Wolk (2003) argues that teachers who enjoy reading can bring that passion into the classroom and in that way inculcate a reading culture amongst the students. In BE this cannot be a once-off endeavour, but it should rather seek to create a habit where reading, talking and writing become a continuum; deliberate, consistent with the aim of becoming critically aware.

The reasoning presented in the preceding paragraphs has real consequences for the way in which teaching and learning takes place in the sense that it is recognised that a literacy pedagogy is embedded within a particular discourse (Wolk, 2003), couched in an ideological stance (O’Brien *et al.*, 1995) and involving the (re)-prioritising of dominant vocabulary (Ivanič *et al.*, 2009; Street & Lefstein, 2007). The reading, talking and writing aspects of BE are at most times an implied activity and not considered as an explicit pedagogy given the priority afforded to the learning of curriculum content and assessment demands.

PEDAGOGIC INTENTIONS UNDERLYING BUSINESS EDUCATION LITERACY PRACTICE

As the possibilities for literacy have become more diverse and abundant, for example through websites, blogs, and print and screen literacy, so has the opportunity for creativity and making sense of texts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2013). The social media have created a platform for increased reading and writing activity which can be exploited for effective teaching and learning. Pahl and Rowsell (2013: 5) suggest that literacy as a social practice encapsulates the combining of a set of skills *with* an understanding of how we use literacy in everyday life.

The use of newspaper articles as a classroom tool is well documented (cf. Elliot, 2006; Jarman & McClune, 2010; Mysliwicz, Shibley & Dunbar, 2004; Vockell & Cusick, 1995). Popular media have long been used as a resource in teaching (Elliot, 2006: 124) and can make a major contribution to the growth in ability and interest in reading (Vockell & Cusick, 1995). Newspapers are a resource for students to read critically, to make informed arguments about business dilemmas and to look at business curricula with new lenses.

I often use current news to facilitate class discussion and in the form of summative assessment by means of an (abridged) article (which students see for the first time in the examination) on which specific content questions are based. However, I have not previously applied current news in a structured and prolonged manner such as this project. I always – albeit unintentionally – view the reading of newspapers as my responsibility mainly to stay up to date with current affairs. I then refer to the news in my teaching practice. In the course of time I came to realise that students will not read newspapers and other material related to my course if they are not specifically instructed to do so. The question arose: how does one introduce reading and especially *critical reading* to ensure that student teachers stay informed of contemporary issues in business? Critical thinking approaches and critical development fall under a number of learning perspectives in BE, such as problem-based learning (case studies or applied projects), course-content-embedded learning (discussions, debates, guided questioning or scaffolding), and approaches which underlie pedagogies such as critical theory, critical reflection and critical systems thinking (Braun, 2004: 232).

The pedagogic intentions of this study resonated with the views of Ivanič *et al.* (2009: 122) in considering the activities required of the students needed to be meaningful and worthwhile. This included a combination of content literacy strategies that would ‘target students as cognitive processes’ (O’Brien *et al.*, 1995: 453) and a critical literacy approach. The intention was to make reading and writing in BE more interactive, participatory and collaborative and to allow the students to take responsibility in the sense that these activities were being assessed. Further aims were to make the students more aware of the value of reading and writing in their everyday lives since such activities could act as resources for their (life-long) learning, to make communicative aspects of learning more explicit and visible through the tutorial discussions, and to make the reading and writing on courses more relevant to BE learning.

Ivanič *et al.* (2009: 93) argue that ‘finding things out’ and ‘taking part’ are two uses of reading and writing that could be dealt with independently, but in the data these aspects were often interdependent. Finding things out and taking part are usually leisure activities to stay informed and/or to participate in conversation socially and these activities are simultaneously embedded in learning and sense-making literacy practices. These practices include reading (the act of enquiry), writing (deliberate action with a specific outcome in mind) and reflecting (discussion about the news and having a point of view). Fang (2012) suggests that disciplinary practices such as reading and writing are best learnt and taught within each discipline, since disciplines differ not just in content, but also in the ways the content is produced, communicated, evaluated and renovated.

READING PROJECT

The students participated in four activities: 1) the reading of daily business news; 2) discussion of the news in weekly tutorials; 3) a weekly summary of the main business news for the week; and 4) a quiz every second week.

The students were divided into two groups based on their language of instruction, namely Afrikaans or English. The groups had to read the business section of either *Die Burger*

(Afrikaans group) or *The Cape Times* (English group). A copy of each newspaper was available in the library. The assessment of the news tutorials accounted for 30% of the year mark which was based on the tutorial participation, weekly summaries and the bi-weekly quizzes.

The project started with the daily reading of the business sections of the newspaper. The reading had to be purposeful, reflective and critical. Thereafter, in the tutorial sessions the students had to discuss what they had read. They were then required to write about what they had read and to submit a weekly summary based on their reading. The read-talk-write activity formed a continuum for a specified period of eight weeks. In order to put the perspectives of the students in context, a short description of how the read-talk-write process unfolded will follow.

In the tutorial session each group was assigned a tutor who was a post-graduate business student and proficient in either Afrikaans or English. Their role was to facilitate the tutorials; therefore they (the tutors) also had to read the daily newspapers. Student attendance was compulsory and a weekly attendance register was kept. The tutorials created the opportunity for students (and tutors) to hear different viewpoints, reaffirm or refute their own understanding and establish informed perceptions based on what the students had read. My role was to oversee the tutor sessions and to expand on these discussions when I saw the students in their weekly BE theory periods.

After the students had read the newspapers for the week, a weekly summary of the main business news was expected and it was assessed according to specific assessment criteria. This activity was based on Wolk's (2003) view that writing is a way to create new meaning and understanding which can be a catalyst for having one's own (informed) viewpoint.

Students were given a short quiz ranging from 10 to 15 marks to ensure that they had read the newspapers. The quiz was mostly factual recall about obvious news highlights and was intended to monitor whether students had actually read the papers as opposed to the summaries where there was no real guarantee that the students' had written them by themselves.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHOD

The research was framed within a social constructivist perspective, particularly the notion of 'assisted learning' where more able individuals actively scaffold the student's performance at a level beyond which the individual could perform alone (Hickey, 1997: 175). The social constructivist perspective further assumes that meanings and understandings arise from social encounters within particular contexts, in this instance a BE teaching and learning context.

When students' engage in critical reflection they are amendable to transformative learning which involves the transformation of beliefs, attitudes, opinions and emotional reactions (Mezirow, 2003). At the end of the eight weeks, data were collected by means of open-ended survey questions which were qualitatively analysed focusing on how students' reflect on their experience and how this project may have impacted on the way they view their learning. The students completed the questions anonymously and the ethical protocol of the institution was adhered to. Analyses comprised of close reading of the comments, extracting the most salient aspects of their experience and identifying themes that were recurrent. This was followed by a focus on comparative experiences, in line with Lucas and Tan's (2013) suggestion that whilst common themes are necessary, it is also important that the individual's unique experience is not lost.

The responses of 18 (the total number registered for the course) final-year (4th-year) Bachelor of Education (BEd) BE student teachers are reported on. BE is an elective, and not many students choose it as their area of specialisation since they are more likely to get financial aid from the government if they choose science or mathematics. The objective of the study was to obtain an understanding rather than to generalise the findings to the broader population.

DISCUSSION

The discussion centres on the main themes which were common to the students' perspectives of the reading, talking and writing activities. Some of the responses quoted in the sections that follow are translated from Afrikaans. In the students' comments they refer to EMS as it relates to the South African BE school context. As a result of this project, there are four aspects which have clear implications for teacher preparation and development in BE.

Firstly, this project raised students' awareness of business in everyday life. The daily reading activity became a catalyst for acquiring new knowledge and expanding on existing knowledge. Business concepts were illuminated by means of texts which were located within the 'real world', expanding the students' disciplinary knowledge repertoire with a contemporary component to it. All the students regarded the reading activity as useful, even though the majority of the students had not previously read the business section of the newspaper or the newspaper in general. The issue of recency of business news – something that is not readily available in textbooks – was found valuable. The positive feedback was not only on being informed about what is happening in the South African economy and globally, but also on the impact that their new-found knowledge could have on their teaching practice. Some of the comments illustrate this point:

As a future teacher I feel that I have developed a better understanding of the events that take place in the business world, how it affects us as individuals and why it is important to the EMS classroom. EMS is a subject where you need to be up to date with what is going on around you and how it affects our country and the economy.

I didn't think it can be useful to relate it to the school curriculum – now I see it as significant.

It helps to see and experience the business world – to see the bigger picture.

Most students felt that the regular reading of business news is an effective way to expand their business content knowledge which would lead to the automatic integration in the BE classroom. One student proposed that the reading of business news should be the 'lifestyle' of the BE teacher. Wolk (2003: 105) emphasises that teachers who want to teach for critical literacy should pursue and practice reading, writing and talking about it in their daily lives.

Secondly, newspapers can be regarded as a valuable pedagogical resource in BE for educators and students in higher education, and for teachers and learners in a school classroom setting. Mysliwicz *et al.* (2004), Vockell and Cusick (1995) and Wolk (2003) reaffirm the value of reading newspapers as an instructional tool. The few students who had previously read the business section experienced it differently when it was a compulsory activity, as illustrated by the following responses:

Before given this task I would often only read the headlines, to ensure that I remained current on what was spoken about on the news or brought up in conversation, for example the Oscar Pistorius case. I thought the business section was only stocks and boring information, which it proves not to be.

I did not fully understand the importance of being up to date with issues that concern us.

It makes me think further than what I initially would and every time I learn something new.

The discussion of newspaper articles is welcomed in the classroom as an active, participatory learning experience (Wolk, 2003). One student felt that while the tutorial discussions were interesting, it was mostly the popular issues that were discussed and that other 'difficult' articles were not given as much attention.

Students were asked to identify specific articles which were appropriate to specific grades for use in the school context in the senior phase (Grades 7, 8 and 9). Some students felt that it is difficult to establish the cognitive levels of some of the articles, suggesting that 'some of the articles are for the higher grades'. Critical reading also implies the ability to evaluate the usefulness of the text. When students lack evaluative skills it may imply that they are not fully informed of the curriculum content or that these skills need more attention and should have been addressed in the tutorial sessions.

Thirdly, the read-talk-write process afforded a space to become confident in discussing and thinking critically about contemporary issues in BE. The communicative aspect of literacy is underscored by the open dialogue in the tutorial sessions. The discussion was facilitated by the tutor who gave students the opportunity to share their perspectives. S/he also illustrated how certain news items could be integrated in a BE school classroom. The majority of the students valued the discussions in the tutorials and felt that the discussions had given them a broader understanding of how business works and how it related to content in the curriculum. Some even expressed these activities as 'nice' and commented that they had 'enjoyed' talking about the news in class, but also in social settings where they sometimes initiated conversations by saying, 'Did you know ...'. One student said this knowledge made her feel more 'street wise'. Ivanič *et al.* (2009: 55) point out that the social aspect of reading should not be overlooked; people read the paper with the intention of 'having something to talk about' with friends. A few students admitted that they were apprehensive and some were even negative about the project at first, but even such students enjoyed the discussions and could see the value thereof, as shown by the following responses:

I feel that I have learnt a lot from these tuts and although I was quite negative about it at the start, I enjoy them now. You get to see/hear different perspectives and therefore gain a better understanding of the content.

It is a nice period to sit and discuss the news. Everybody participated and got excited, yet serious over certain issues, even the quieter students.

It is good to discuss issues and to understand it better. It helps also to hear others' perspectives and to share knowledge.

Some responses commented on the 'ripple effect' business activities have on individuals and society. They had a critical view of affairs in the country as a direct consequence of what is playing out in the economy, as demonstrated by comments such as the following:

Yes, it does not only help at academic level, but also it helps me understand what is happening in the business world and then you automatically understand why some things are the way it is in our society.

It forces you to read the newspaper articles more critically and helps you to make your own assumptions or opinions on controversial issues.

Lastly, certain challenges, such as summarisation skills and the ability to make connections to the curriculum could impact on students' ability to relate to certain literacy practices. Ivanič *et al.* (2009) point out that personal ownership and commitment play a role when students find it difficult to relate to certain literacy practices. Some students may take longer to find value in the daily reading of news. As alluded to earlier, through reading and writing, the process of 'finding things out' and 'taking part' underscores cognitive ability and critical reflection, which can be interdependent and enlightening.

Even though most students found the writing process valuable, some students found the prerequisite word count (950–1000 words) problematic, which could imply that they lacked skills in summarising and therefore struggled to extract the most important elements of the text. One student felt that highlighting the important text in the summaries is relative since what is important to one student may not be important to another. In addition, the students found it difficult to relate certain news to the content in the curriculum. A few students complained that the tutors who marked the summaries did not always give prompt feedback. One student complained that reading the paper in the library was 'impractical' and that it was expensive to buy the newspaper every day. One of the students did not see the value in the quiz because it was all about factual recall and it seemed to be intended to 'catch out' the students.

A few students had difficulty in comprehending content and found that the reading activity was time-consuming. Some of the comments were:

Time, the lack of it. For me it is quicker to listen to the news on the radio, but that does not give you all the necessary details/articles. Also, the 'language' used in the business articles is difficult to understand and often puts me off reading them.

Sometimes not all the news is interesting to me, I normally look at the front page and if it does not attract my attention, then I would not even turn to the business section.

When students were asked whether they would prefer a big assignment instead of the news tutorials, most opted for the news tutorials. Fang and Coatoam (2013) purport that to truly demonstrate disciplinary literacy, students need to be given tasks and experiences that provide opportunities for them to read, write, think, reason, and inquire with substantive content presented in multiple genres, modalities, registers, and sources. Even though the students felt the read-talk-write experience to be time-consuming, they valued the knowledge acquired over the eight weeks. Some also felt that since this project was continuously assessed over the eight weeks, they had the opportunity to improve on their marks.

CONCLUSION

A critically literate student teacher means being informed of not only what is happening in the South African business world, but also internationally. Street and Street (1991) suggest that literacy is placed in relation to both oral discourse and written conventions which often become intertwined. There is a great responsibility on student teachers to gain a conceptual grasp of disciplinary concepts, to have concrete pedagogical strategies and techniques to create a real-life context for their learners and in so doing to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Reading the business news on a regular basis helped student teachers to participate as future educators who have become skilled in critical thinking and to make connections to society,

the economy and the environment. Being informed creates confidence in the students' ways of knowing which relate to the disciplinary and contemporary knowledge about business and current affairs. Being critically aware and having new ways of knowing allow students to challenge or reaffirm assumptions and conventions underpinning the disciplinary knowledge.

The use of newspapers is not new in BE, however, applying it in a deliberate and structured read-talk-write project in teacher training and at school level creates an opportunity for BE disciplinary, contemporary and pedagogical knowledge to be integrated. In general, the students enjoyed this project and if they continue reading the newspaper in their daily lives, they are likely to bring the news into their BE classrooms. I am, however, aware that this project was compulsory and counted towards the students' progress mark; whether they will actually keep up this activity out of free will remains to be seen.

Since this was a small-scale, exploratory study, more research needs to be done in this area. However, the findings suggest that content and critical literacy instruction in BE can be applied to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Firstly, this study illustrates that an integrated, participatory approach to reading and understanding of texts by using the teacher as a guide, as suggested by O'Brien *et al.* (1995), can facilitate content literacy. Secondly, communicative skills were enhanced by the interrogation of content and the stimulation of discussion and debate in the tutorial sessions. Thirdly, the writing activity allowed the students to take responsibility in the sense that this activity was being assessed and feedback was given to sharpen their writing skills in relation to the content. In essence, the reading, talking and writing were deliberate activities to support critical thinking. They were, therefore, relevant to BE content knowledge and pedagogy. If this opportunity had not been purposefully created, the students may not have been as informed as they ultimately were. It is hoped that the participating students have become more aware of the value of reading and writing as resources for their (life-long) learning.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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