

CHAPTER 12

Seeking an understanding of academic reading and readers in higher education

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Why study academic reading at the tertiary level?

In universities across New Zealand, and indeed the world, first year students begin their tertiary studies with excitement and trepidation. Challenges and steep learning curves exist for school-leaving first-year students both in and out of the lecture room. Amidst the many challenges of familiarising themselves with the layout, routines and regulations of their new institution, navigating complex social interactions, and in many cases setting up house and managing the daily chores for living, first-year students also face the need to quickly master content whilst also understanding and mastering the hidden 'rules' of academic literacy within their specific discipline/s of choice.

To be successful academically, first-year university students must absorb the mostly unwritten understandings about how it is, and is not, appropriate or 'correct' to read and write when studying within their chosen discipline. In order to better understand the literacy rules and conventions that exist within the various disciplines of higher education, we must understand and acknowledge literacy as a socio-cultural practice – one which occurs within a social and cultural context and which is shaped over time by the accepted shared norms, beliefs, expectations and values of the people within that context. When this is acknowledged, we can understand the discipline and its 'inhabitants' (lecturers, tutors and students) as a little community; a community that passes down traditions about how one should express oneself in written form, and how one should make and take meaning from text.

However, the understanding must not stop there. There is a need to further unpack the concept of academic literacy into its two major components, academic writing and academic reading, and an important distinction between the two must be highlighted. This difference is that whilst academic writing is a visible and observable phenomenon, academic reading is invisible both in process (of reading) and product

(understanding gained from reading). Unfortunately this invisibility causes academic reading to be frequently overlooked in the tertiary context. Academic reading is an activity which occurs in the privacy of the reader's mind, and most often while they are alone in their study space. The process of reading at university is therefore hidden, and its product is made 'visible' only through the transformation of its outcome into some form of tangible and accepted academic production, be it spoken (such as an oral presentation or class discussion), or written (such as an essay), or enacted (such as through other forms of hands-on learning and assessment).

In addition to the inherent complexity and invisibility of academic reading, there is also increasing and compelling evidence for the link between discipline and reading and the existence of specific traditions and cultures of academic reading in higher education. It can be argued that it is not only important to document the general academic reading situation within institutions, but also to clearly and accurately document the actual reading competencies required by particular disciplines, and that the theoretical constructs underlying the actions of being able to "assess, evaluate, judge or interpret in each of these areas" (Carter-Wells, 1996, p. 52) be determined and documented.

Although largely hidden and invisible, academic reading is certainly central to the endeavour of tertiary study in the Western, English-speaking institution. Within the Western world, the university can be thought of essentially as the pinnacle expression of literate culture, and a place within the wider literate culture in which a 'wise man' encodes, stores and transmits knowledge through the *written* word. This simple truth becomes of great significance when we consider the experiences and needs of the increasing numbers of students from heritages which trace back to oral cultures, and ones in which a 'wise man' stores and transmits knowledge through the *spoken* word.

Understanding the transition experiences of oral culture heritage students into the context of the literate culture's most lauded expression is certainly worthy of much deeper consideration within New Zealand. However, this chapter is not about that. This chapter seeks instead to raise awareness and make the case for the importance of academic reading in higher education, as it became apparent to me in the years leading up to and during my post-graduate study. To do so, this chapter shares the basis of the theoretical framework established in my doctoral research, and some of the thoughts that shaped it and its application.

This chapter seeks also to emphasise the need to actively seek a better understanding of the reading context of higher education in New Zealand

and of the readers who strive within these contexts, and to build up a strong research base concerning these issues, which would then be used to inform initiatives designed to achieve the dual goal of creating both 'university-ready students' and 'student-ready universities' (Soares and Mazeo, 2008) within our increasingly diverse New Zealand university context.

In discussing reading in the New Zealand situation, it is important to first acknowledge the internationally recognised role of New Zealand's reading researchers in the fields of emergent, primary, adult and remedial reading. However, there is a point during the course of compulsory education, and the associated discourse surrounding it, at which students make the move from supported 'learning to read' to independent 'reading to learn'. It is from this point onwards it appears that the research into academic reading in the New Zealand context becomes very scarce. This is problematic on many fronts, but primarily because of the vital need for evidence-based responses informed by research, theory and practice, addressing the academic literacy development needs of students and particularly in that vital first year of higher education.

First-year academic reading: the realities and the dilemma

Reading at university differs in several important ways from reading that any school leaver will have undertaken in their previous educational settings. First-year students from all backgrounds within this larger socio-cultural context enter university and are typically assigned a reading load far heavier than they will ever have previously engaged in and involving more complex texts than they will ever have encountered before. The harsh reality of reading at the tertiary level is that it involves complex authentic academic texts, and a great number of them.

What is more, the tasks which the student is required to carry out with these complex texts are difficult, and are shaped by the traditions and academic orientations of the discipline. Students will need to engage with and undertake complex and sophisticated thinking with ideas in texts which, in the majority of cases, were written for audiences very removed from the first-year school-leaving student. As if this were not complex enough, this required reading is usually engaged in by students on their own, and is most often assigned with little to no direct guidance from the already proficient members within the discipline community on how best to do it.

This causes reading researchers in both the higher education and compulsory schooling context worldwide to lament the observation of

educators acting on the assumption that if one can 'learn to read' then one is automatically fully equipped to 'read to learn' (Duke, Bennett-Armistead and Roberts, 2003). This is simply not true. Thus, all these features of the tertiary reading context combine to ensure that the required reading experience of first-year papers at university is a significant challenge for most school-leaving students and, as mentioned, is a particular challenge to students from non-traditional language and culture backgrounds.

The moral dilemma which surely arises from this has to do with 'fairness', 'safety', and the 'rules of the game'. One must question how fair is it that at the end of the largely unguided academic reading process, the student is required to produce academic text which is then subjected to high-stakes scrutiny by lecturers and tutors, and judgements about their academic and learning ability are then based (in some cases almost exclusively) on this process? In other words, how fair is it to require students to engage in a costly game whose rules are unwritten and whose referees wield power over their present and future prospects based on their judgements of the player's uninformed play? Questions of safety arise when one considers the impact of this upon school-leaving students, for whom academic reading ultimately becomes an activity "whose evaluated outcomes will – crucially – tell them something about their worth in the eyes of others" (Mann, 2000, p. 297).

Sadly this dilemma remains day after day, unquestioned and unchallenged, in tertiary institutions all over New Zealand. Once recognised though, this dilemma *should* prompt a long, hard look at the first-year and its teaching, learning and assessment practices, as well as a more specific research and practice focus on the forms of academic support and literacy development in place within tertiary institutions.

Moreover, currently, where attention *is* given to academic literacy in higher education, one could be forgiven for observing that there is an almost exclusive focus on academic writing (as opposed to reading). It also becomes apparent that there needs to be a much greater focus on the establishment of a strong local research base upon which evidence-based and strategic efforts may be built and informed actions undertaken to address the academic literacy needs of students in transitioning into tertiary study.

In this regard, it is important to note that some efforts are certainly being made towards the establishment of such a research base in New Zealand but, on the whole, these are driven largely by the aspirations, motivations, and purses of individuals rather than being supported and invested in by institutions and by government.

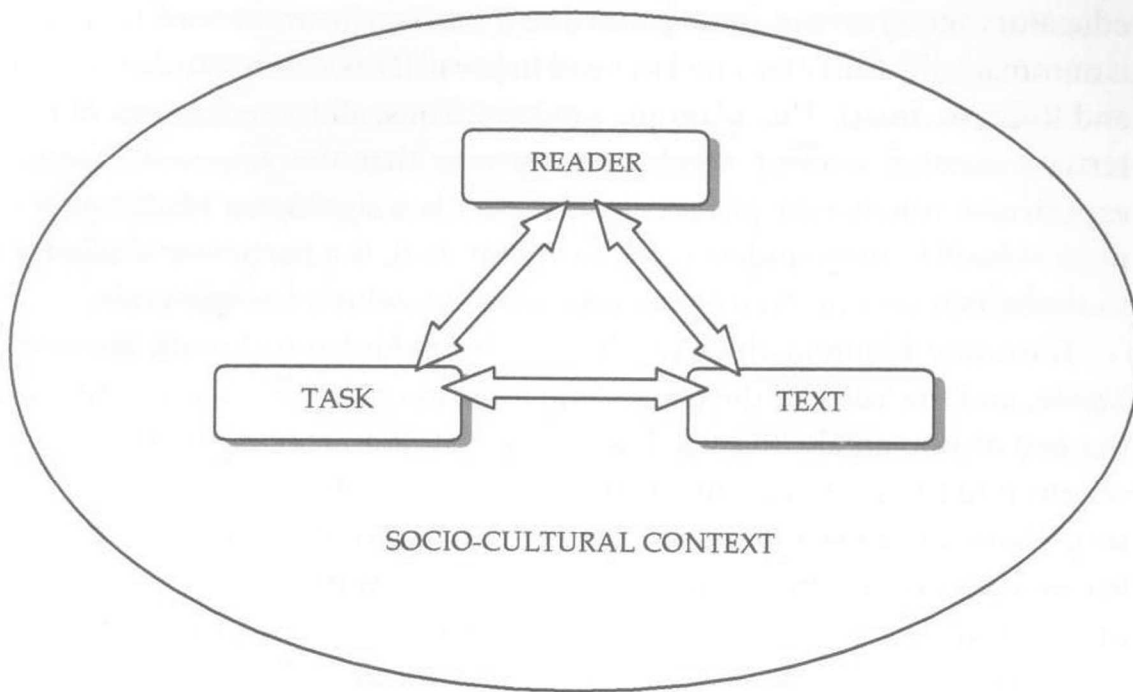


Figure 1: The Reader-Text-Task conceptual framework for investigation of academic reading in higher education

A theoretical framework for understanding academic reading in higher education

The gravity of the situation and the dilemma of first-year students became apparent to me over a decade ago whilst teaching seventh-form English and foundation-level university courses and observing the daily struggles and triumphs of school-leaving students in transition into higher education. It was at this point that I sought the body of research in this area to assist my students with this transition, only to find that in the areas of academic reading literacy, and for the Pasifika student group with which I worked, this body of research simply did not exist.

Thus, in order to begin to build an understanding of academic reading in the first year of university in New Zealand in my own research with and for Pasifika students in the New Zealand university context it was necessary to essentially begin from scratch. My research drew on models of reading internationally, built on frameworks utilised with indigenous or other ethnic or linguistic minority groups in higher education, and adhered strongly to a commitment to holism and student centeredness and the common values core to Pasifika cultures to construct a framework for this context.

This theoretical framework needed to first and foremost embody a sound understanding of the construct of academic reading and then, from this basis, provide a useful framework for building a systematic profiling system which would work safely and effectively within the New Zealand context. This profiling system would, in turn, enable two important things: (i) the holistic and systematic investigation of the academic reading context and its readers (particularly those of Pasifika descent); and (ii) an indication of the 'degree of fit' between the challenges and expectations of the tertiary context and the measured academic-reading-related characteristics of the readers themselves.

After wide reading across a range of interdisciplinary fields, a framework emerged for this purpose. It is one which posits academic reading as the dynamic interplay between the characteristics of the academic texts, the readers and the reading task which is being carried out at the time. All of which, in turn, occurs within and interacts with the characteristics of the local and wider socio-cultural context.

While the reader is undoubtedly the centre of this research, gaining an understanding of the context in which they operate is essential to an authentic understanding of them. Readers are thus best understood in relation to the texts they are reading, and the tasks they are required to carry out with these texts within the specific socio-cultural context/s relevant to them in that specific reading instance.

Thus, the understanding around which the methodology of the research is built is that academic reading is a dynamic process involving the interplay between the reader's own characteristics and the features of their context (specifically, the texts and tasks that exist within it). These inherently complex entities – reader, text and task – also interact in ways that are shaped by the unique combinations in which they exist in any particular reading scenario at any particular time. Furthermore, this will change 'kaleidoscopically' as the various features of the text, reader and task change from one reading scenario to another and the features at play interact with each other and ultimately shape the reading experience.

This framework formed the basis of my doctoral research and thesis, and informed the three-part design of the study. While I propose that this fluid conceptualisation of reading is critical to allowing us to more accurately represent the nature of academic reading in educational contexts, at the same time it does present its own very unique challenges to research, especially in terms of scope and methodological choice. This logistical challenge was heightened by the fact that each of the three main parts of the framework (text, task and reader) was comprised of separate and multi-faceted entities, and required holistic investigation.

Holistic profiling of first year texts, tasks and readers

My own pragmatic approach to the project echoes the sentiments of other researchers such as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 14), who point out that,

[w]hat is important for researchers is not the choice of a priori paradigms, or methodologies, but rather to be clear about what the purpose of the study is and to match that purpose with the attributes most likely to accomplish it. Put another way, the methodological design should be determined by the research question.

I found myself similarly emancipated and empowered by O'Leary's (2004, pp. 133–134) statement that "change-oriented research is more about a distinct set of goals than a unique approach to research or even a particular paradigmatic positioning", and ultimately, the measure of credibility that I would wish to be judged by is the 'usefulness' of this research in "facilitating, driving, or implementing" positive change for institutions and the students and communities they serve.

Accordingly, a multi-method approach was utilised, driven by the research questions, and combining a predominantly qualitative approach with the understandings drawn from quantitative measurements of reader, text and task attributes for data types that necessitate this type of handling. Through this approach the project sought to build up a rich and holistic understanding of first-year reading.

As an educator and advisor within the upper secondary and university contexts for over a decade, I have often heard it bemoaned that students were not ready for tertiary study, and whilst I agreed, I felt it necessary to ask: 'For what are they not ready?' Have we sufficient understanding of the actual nature of the challenge of the first year of tertiary study experience to be able to do more than lament their unpreparedness? For me personally, the answer to this was to embark upon this research and seek to gain a deep understanding of something that troubled me greatly. The way I chose to do so was through a series of systems for the holistic profiling of the three central elements of my theoretical framework – the text, the task and the reader.

The first of the profiling systems, compiled from an extensive review of international literature, was a system for holistically documenting the nature of academic *text* in the university context. This holistic profiling system took into account the linguistic and non-linguistic features of text and the impact these features are currently known to have on readers. In terms of the linguistic features of text, the profiling system included measures and proxy-measures for the lexical and syntactic complexity of

text. In other words, the profiling system included tools for screening the difficulty of the vocabulary used and the grammatical complexity of the sentences within the authentic academic texts set as required reading in the case-study first-year courses.

This was combined in the profiling system with the informed selection and design of tools for assessing the complexity of non-linguistic features of text. The first of these has to do with the ideas and semantic content of text. These measures seek to ascertain how densely packed new ideas are in the text, and how the ideas within any text are structured and signalled to the reader. Also included in the profiling of non-linguistic features were a range of format and design features of text, including features such as the particular font types and sizes used, the use of white space, the absence or presence (and effect) of visuals such as graphs, diagrams and other reference apparatus. All of these text features are present in some form or another within text, and to some extent will consciously or subconsciously have an impact upon the reader and their reading experience.

The second of the profiling systems was designed to gain a clear and authentic understanding of the actual academic reading *tasks* that first-year university students are required to carry out with the academic texts previously profiled. The task-profiling system involved the synthesis of data from multiple sources: document analysis, interviews, and observation. What emerged from these analyses were sets of core academic reading tasks (stated in terms of desired academic reading outcomes) that were shared across the three disciplines studied, and sets of tasks found to be special to the disciplines themselves. In practice, however, the profiling system also revealed its ability to draw out some very interesting insights surrounding expectations, internal representations of task, the stated versus the unstated, the powerful role disciplinary traditions have on shaping tasks, and how it is 'best' to carry them out.

The third of the profiling systems synthesised within the study was a system for the holistic profiling of the academic *reader*. This system comprised a combination of interviews, observations, measures, inventories, recall protocols, and self-rating tools to elicit an understanding of the following: reader history and background (as related to literacy and language), beliefs about reading, reading rate, estimated vocabulary size, language proficiency, discipline-related knowledge, attitudes and motivation, reading-strategy use and knowledge of discipline-related text and discourse. These threads draw together to create a holistic profile, usually what Besser et al. (2004) label "spiky profiles", meaning a "scattered pattern of strengths and weaknesses". Together these form the idiosyncratic configuration of that person's unique reading persona,

and play a significant role in shaping their first-year reading and study experience.

In this way, it was possible to come to possess a deep and holistic understanding of both the first-year reader and their context in the form of the texts and tasks they interacted with on a daily basis. The complexity of reading as a construct has long been recognised by reading researchers and, as Yamashita (2002) acknowledges, this highlights the importance and necessity of taking a 'multi-factor approach' to the study of reading and operationalising variables that are inherently conceptually complex. Having thus sought to understand the parts through the observation of known key components, it was then possible to systematically trace a few of the myriad of complex interactions at play within the academic reading situation.

For example, by holding the *task* relatively constant and utilising the framework, one is able to discover intricacies of the interaction between reader characteristics and the characteristics of the text at hand. In the case of vocabulary for instance, by comparing characteristics in the reader's vocabulary profile with the lexical characteristics of the text at hand in that particular reading scenario, and bearing in mind other core related profile elements (such as reading rate), it was possible to deduce why some readers struggled with some texts more than others. Likewise, the profiling of task and text revealed very likely explanations for why some readers struggled with this discipline more than others, and so on.

Indeed, the richness of the framework and profiling systems and the sheer volume of interactions at play in any given reading scenario mean that the surface has really only been scratched. Moreover, the motivation of the study demands that what is found is shared, and once shared is translated by professionals within educational contexts into meaningful and emancipating educational and literacy practices in higher education.

Utilising the framework to bring about greater awareness and the impetus and direction for positive change

In seeking a way to escape a history of blaming the reader for their 'deficiencies', this framework is also designed to have practical application in the higher education context. In addition to enabling the production of reader, text and task profiles, the theoretical framework at the heart of the research was also able to be utilised to assess the degree of fit between the current characteristics of the first-year student readers and the academic reading literacy expectations of their context.

In assessing the degree of fit, one is able to more fully and fairly acknowledge the realities of what the student does bring to the first year, and what the nature of the challenge of first-year reading is about. One is then able to constructively answer the question 'what is it that under-prepared students are under-prepared for?' Likewise, tertiary institutions themselves are enabled to self-examine and to begin to usefully interrogate and positively redefine their own teaching and learning practice.

Reading research literature has sought for some time to describe and to define the nature and differences between 'good readers' and 'poor readers.' However, in the tertiary context, given the diversity and complexity of the types of reading scenarios possible across the disciplines and levels of study involved, it seems more logical to agree with Clarke's (1980) assertion that it is unhelpful to talk about 'good readers' and 'poor readers,' but rather, it is more helpful to speak of reading behaviours themselves as good or poor depending on text and task required, and to acknowledge that most readers engage in these same reading behaviours at different times.

In this study, by documenting the nature of actual academic tasks and the characteristics of the authentic texts in the first year of the case study courses in this study, it was possible to construct an understanding of the likely characteristics of a successful reader who has the relevant range and repertoire of attributes needed, and the knowledge and skill needed to select and apply them successfully, to respond to the specific nature of the challenge at hand.

In one particular case study first-year course, these desired attributes (based on the nature of the text and task challenge) were compared against the actual characteristics of the first-year student participants as revealed by their reading profiles. This was very revealing, particularly in the light of each participant's subsequent academic performance within the course by the end of the trimester.

Through this process, particular areas of academic reading ability were able to be identified as warranting focused attention, and innovative steps towards their development both in the senior years of high school (and earlier) and in the first (and subsequent) years of university. Moreover, specific areas of teaching and learning practice were also able to be identified as deserving of attention by academics and course designers.

Final thoughts from a researcher of Pacific descent

There is little doubt that in today's world, the higher education context is dominated by information, its management and dissemination. In this context, reading remains a "durable, effective and powerful means

of accessing information”, and given the role of books in educational contexts, the importance of students being able to “read to learn” cannot be underestimated. US research suggests that “approximately 85% of all college learning involves reading, and that texts are central to learning at all levels of education” (Nist and Simpson, 2000, p. 648). Thus, success at university depends to a high degree on each student’s ability to read expository texts efficiently, and an important factor in being “literate at tertiary level “ is to be able to independently and effectively access and understand print information (Pretorius, 2006, p. 433).

Pretorius (2000, p. 6) also points out that, “even in developing countries, textbooks, particularly expository texts, constitute the main medium whereby new information and knowledge is acquired, especially in the more advanced years of study. It is only through reading that one can independently access these knowledge bases”, and this independent ability is crucial to and highly valued by the Western institution of higher education. For this reason, it is vitally important that core academic reading abilities suited to higher education be developed either prior to or early on in the tertiary study journey. Yet, few would argue that there are still a great many students in higher education who neither read effectively nor efficiently, and this is a great cause for concern.

So what does this mean for students of Pacific descent in tertiary study in New Zealand – what is its application for Pasifika? In relation to the general experiences of Pacific students in higher education, statistics indicate that Pasifika students (together with Māori students) have the lowest degree completion rates in New Zealand (Scott and Smart, 2005). Dickie (n.d.) asks whether the performance of Pasifika students should “be considered purely in terms of technical skill or should it be looked at from the point of view of culture and ideology?”

As I see it, we have much work to do in seeking to explore both the linguistic and the ideological nature of the matches and mismatches between the reading demands of the first year of higher education and the characteristics of the Pacific reader. And, having identified these, there is much work to do in setting about addressing them and ensuring greater self-awareness and willingness to engage in informed response to those identified challenges amongst all stakeholders in the education system.

Finally, having argued the importance and urgency of a focused investigation of academic reading in the first year of university study, in the hope that it will inspire similar passion and concern for this invisible side of academic literacy in higher education, I close this chapter by sharing the central Pacific metaphor which held together and gave deep meaning to my study. For decades, researchers of Pacific descent have sought to

define and bring meaning to research practice and outcomes which align with the core values of their Pacific culture, and the metaphor has proven a powerful vehicle for this. Time-honoured as well as some more recent examples include the 'Kakala' model (Helu-Thaman, 1992), *Fa'afaletui* (Tamasese et al., 1997), *Tivaevae* (Maua Hodges, 2000) and the *Vanua* (Nabobo-Baba, 2006), all cited in Helu Thaman (2009, p. 5).

For my own project and as a researcher of Pacific descent it was no different. Due to the inherent complexity of the construct of reading and its operationalisation, the central metaphor by which such a multi-faceted project was understood and undertaken was the woven pandanus fibre mat commonly found in Pacific homes. This mat is created by the preparation of individual strands and the laborious weaving together of these strands to create a durable foundation. Similarly, in this study the holistic strands of the reader, text and task profiles were individually prepared, and were then woven together to reveal insights into academic reading in the chosen context. Once woven it is possible to observe the patterning created when the strands interact. More importantly than its decorative value though, is its functional and symbolic role. It is a humble but vital furnishing in the home, covering the floor to create a pleasant and clean foundation for the family and guests to live upon. Importantly, it is upon such foundations that the elders and family members sit to engage in many long, deep-searching discussions and to make many important decisions which will affect the fate and prosperity of family and community members, both currently and in generations to come.

Echoing this, I desire that my project lay a foundation, a safe and well-constructed starting place, for discussions about academic reading literacy in higher education. I lay out this mat, in the hope and anticipation that people will come and sit upon it to engage in meaningful discussion that will inform current and future decision making and planning with regard to the equity goals and objectives of universities, and which will also stimulate the flow-on sharing of this understanding with the compulsory education sector.

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