Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 31 September 2024

We need to talk about AL: has academic literacies designed the pedagogy out of learning development?

Steven White
University of Southampton, UK

Sunny Dhillon
Bishop Grosseteste University, UK

Abstract

Academic literacies (AL) research has made significant contributions to understandings of student writing and literacy across higher education and particularly learning development. However, researchers and practitioners both within and external to the AL movement have struggled to clarify the relationship between AL and pedagogy. English for Academic Purposes researchers have highlighted the lack of a workable AL pedagogy, whilst AL researchers maintain that the model represents a design space or heuristic for thinking about practice in context, rather than a source of pedagogic prescriptions. This theoretical discussion elaborates concerns with the structural coherence of the AL model, its broadly social constructivist underpinnings and evidence base, and the impact of its ideological orientation on the pedagogy we derive from it. Underpinning these critiques is a suspicion that the interpretation of social constructivist epistemology on which AL relies to pinpoint weaknesses in the models of literacy/writing which it subsumes cannot generate a practical pedagogy. We argue that these structural and ideological tensions in the AL model help to explain confusion over its interpretation and implementation. We speculate that this singular focus on social constructivist-derived theory, though well-intentioned, does more to reinforce a particular ideological commitment than to enhance student learning.

Keywords: academic literacies; pedagogy; social constructivism; critical realism.

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the somewhat ambiguous relationship between academic literacies (AL) theory and learning development (LD) practice. AL has been widely recognised for its significant influence on thinking about writing in a range of contexts related to learning and teaching in higher education (HE), including in learning development (LD). Lea and Street's (1998) paper on the subject is widely seen as seminal; a keyword search for AL returns 83 results in the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* alone. The AL model presents a way to understand writing in universities via a 'three-level classification' of study skills (SS), academic socialisation (AS), and academic literacies (AL) (Wrigglesworth, 2019, p.7). This classification brings together distinct views of writing development in HE, each carrying implications for how writing might be taught. Each layer in this hierarchical model contributes to the whole, ultimately creating transformative 'meaning/knowledge-making spaces' which can be used as a 'design space' (Lillis, 2019, pp.7−8) for pedagogy or even as a 'pedagogy for course design' (Lea, 2004, p.739).

Although the contribution of AL to LD is substantial, it can be challenging to draw implications for practice from the model, in particular for pedagogy (Wingate and Tribble, 2011, pp.483−484; Lea, 2016, p.91; 2017; Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019, p.35). Studies have explored implications for the implementation of AL (Lillis et al., 2015a; Lillis, 2019; Wrigglesworth, 2019), but some confusion remains. In examining the foundations of AL for possible sources of this confusion, discussion of the theoretical traditions that inform it reveal a range of 'sources' (Lea and Street, 1998, p.172). Common to these sources is a focus mainly on understanding 'literacy as a social practice' (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.7), drawing on traditions of new literacy studies, critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics, and cultural anthropology (Lea and Street, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, we use the term 'social constructivism' (SC) to refer to these various theoretical influences which inform AL and which fit a definition of SC as having a 'socio-cultural strand which emphasises the situatedness of practice and a constructivist strand which emphasises the constructedness of knowledge' (Packer and Goiceochea, 2000, cited Shay, 2008, p.596). Although there is perhaps not a clear consensus on this, the term 'social constructivism' helps emphasise the AL concern with social practices and the importance of participant 'voice' within it (Smith and Baratta, 2016, p.70).

This paper explores research both within and external to the AL literature for possible explanations of the challenges in drawing out implications for AL-informed LD practice and pedagogy. In their extensive review of the AL literature, Hilsdon, Malone, and Syska (2019) note uncertainty around the relationship between component parts of the model. Other educational perspectives have gone beyond problems of interpretation, highlighting specific limitations of using a social constructivist approach to inform or design pedagogy. These limitations include concerns about the extent to which AL, as a social constructivist-informed perspective, is 'knowledge-blind' (Clarence and McKenna, 2017) because of its focus on social power relations (Maton, 2013a).

This paper is divided into three main sections which explore concerns about:

1. The coherence of the AL model.
2. The hierarchical structure of the model.
3. The broadly social constructivist epistemology and ideological commitments underpinning the model.

The paper ends with a brief discussion of possible ways to resolve apparent contradictions, potentially building on the insights which AL offers, whilst also focusing on designing effective pedagogy for LD.

1. Concerns about coherence in the academic literacies model: the constituent pieces do not seem to fit together

Academic literacies research brings together three distinct and seemingly conflicting perspectives on student writing into a hierarchical relationship. It names the overall model after the top layer, then states an intention to 'encompass' or 'encapsulate' (Lea and Street, 1998, p.158) these components into a coherent whole. Though explanations and defences of this model have been made (Lillis and Tuck, 2016; Lillis, 2019; Wrigglesworth, 2019), some confusion around its intended use remains. We speculate that problems with the ideological coherence of the model's structure may be a factor in this confusion.

The details of the AL model have been discussed at length elsewhere (see Wrigglesworth, 2019 for a concise description). However, a very brief review is useful here (see Figure 1). Adapting Lillis and Tuck's (2016, p.32) 'three-part heuristic' summary, we have added a

note on whether each element is designated as having a normative or transformative orientation in the model.

Table 1. A summary of the academic literacies model (adapted from Lillis and Tuck, 2016, p.32).

	Approach/model	Perspective on student writing	Orientation	Abbreviation in this paper
1.	Study skills	Decontextualised skills	Normative	SS
2.	Academic socialisation	More or less implicit academic socialisation into given genres and practices	Normative	AS
3.	Academic literacies	Situated, shifting, and contested literacies	Transformative	AL

Layers 1 (study skills, SS) and 2 (academic socialisation, AS) at times receive fulsome criticism when viewed through an AL lens, principally for their normative perspectives which ignore aspects of context and institutional power dynamics. It is claimed that these flawed SS and AS perspectives lead to a deficit view of student writing, an overgeneralised depiction of student characteristics, and unwarranted assumptions that writing is transparent in conveying meaning (Lea and Street, 1998, pp.158−159). This lack of transparency can, for example, manifest in the way terms such as ‘introduction’, ‘argument’, or ‘structure’ are not understood in the same way by everyone, but are treated (by subject lecturers) as if the meaning is stable and clear to all (Lillis and Turner, 2001, p.58).

AL, in contrast, uses a transformative orientation, entailing the need for negotiation and dialogue over ‘specific and contested traditions of knowledge making’ (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.12). This involves questioning what constitutes ‘appropriate or effective’ language use when seen as social literacy practices within ‘sites of [...] discourse and power’ (Lea and Street, 1998, p.159). Although the AL model directs some distinct critiques at particular elements of the SS or AS approaches respectively, for the purposes of this article, the above provides a sufficient summary of critiques against the lower tiers of the AL model.

1.1. Conflicting normative and transformative orientations in the model

AL proponents stress that each layer 'successively encapsulates the other' (Lea and Street, 1998, p.158), with each having 'some value' but 'only an academic literacies approach fully supports a practices approach that is ideologically informed' (Wrigglesworth, 2019, p.7). At times, however, it is hard to see how an explicitly ideologically informed model works as a coherent whole when its component parts are ideologically opposed in their contrasting normative (SS, AS) and transformative (AL) orientations.

Fundamentally, the model characterises SS and AS normative approaches as instructing students 'you are doing it wrong—write like this', whereas AL's transformative orientation advises students that 'there is no wrong, do not let anyone tell you how to write'. For example, Badenhorst et al. (cited Lillis et al., 2015a, p.101) claim that their AL-derived pedagogy 'allowed participants to see that there was no "wrong" way to write but rather there were choices about whether to conform'. Even where AL researchers recognise instances where 'normative approaches that involve inducting students into existing and available discourses are essential' (Paxton and Frith, 2015, p.156), the supposed 'transformative dimension' added by AL methods are not unique to AL and seem to lead to a normative target outcome. For example, Paxton and Frith (2015) emphasise ensuring shared understandings of key terms and working with students' prior learning. These techniques are, however, widely used outside of AL, including by Socrates in his dialogues, which start by asking his interlocutors: 'what do you understand by X?' (Matthews, 2020, p.49). These dialogues typically lead towards a pre-determined (normative) outcome that Socrates has in mind, even if that destination is negatively defined. It is thus difficult to see how the opposing normative and transformative readings within the AL model can be reconciled in a hierarchical model; the component parts do not build on one another—they conflict. Individual elements of a coherent model are usually necessary but not sufficient, rather than necessary but deficient.

In the model's defence, Lillis (2019) points out that AL practitioners 'necessarily engage with normative practices as part of their/our daily work in academia' alongside more transformative explorations (p.7). A collection of case studies has been presented as an example of this 'normative meets transformative' work in practice (Lillis et al., 2015a). However, it is not clear what in the 'critical thinking space' (Lillis, 2019) of the AL model guides this practice; for example in choosing or discerning between seemingly oppositional

normative/transformative interventions in our teaching. Lillis and Scott (2007) have explained that an AL approach 'involves an interest in' normative questions but is simultaneously 'explicitly transformative rather than normative' (pp.12−13). This seems difficult to reconcile in both theory and practice, particularly as 'practitioner-researchers will define and work with the notion of transformation somewhat differently' (Lillis et al., 2015a, p.8). In the same collection of case studies, Harrington (in Lillis et al., 2015b) describes AL's transformative approach as 'fundamentally a way of seeing and being' in which 'the normative has the potential to enable the transformative' (pp.12−13). As such, she cautions against 'set[ting] the "normative" against the "transformative", as has sometimes been implied' (Harrington in Lillis et al., 2015b, pp.12−13)—presumably by critics of AL. However, these orientations have been set in tension within the explicitly hierarchical model of AL by proponents of AL who themselves fiercely critique normative approaches as representative of 'exclusionary narratives of power and identity' (Harrington in Lillis et al., 2015b, p.12).

1.2. Drawing on Bakhtin for support

Some AL researchers have drawn upon the thinking of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to facilitate this difficult move 'from critique to design' (Lillis, 2003). Wrigglesworth (2019, p.8) cites Lillis' (2006 [sic]) work in suggesting the pedagogical use of 'descriptive' ('unquestioned […] clear') and 'ideal' ('cloudy') forms of dialogue as perhaps a way to bridge the gap between normative and transformative orientations. However, it is difficult to recognise the 'descriptive', monologic, 'cultural claims' (Wrigglesworth, 2019, p.8) associated with (presumably non-AL) pedagogy and academic discourse as representing 'one […] voice, identity and authority' (Wrigglesworth, 2019, p.8). While different disciplinary discourses may have different perspectives on the existence of 'one truth' or 'many truths', it does not withstand scrutiny to characterise teaching and academic discourse as monologic across university settings. Lillis (2003) gives the example of an essay assignment as evidence of 'the more obvious monologue practices surrounding student academic writing' (p.199). In this characterisation of academic study and writing, the student is required to 'respond in accordance with the knowledge that has been authorised in lectures, seminars and course materials' (Lillis, 2003, p.199). This is a particular interpretation of such a process, and the evidence presented for it is equally open to alternative interpretation. In many disciplines, it is common for lecturers to encourage students to read more widely than 'authorised' reading lists, seek challenges to

established ideas in seminars, and to include specific learning outcomes and grading criteria aimed at eliciting critical thinking from students.

Lillis (2003) highlights instances of lecturer comments, or lack thereof, on aspects of student work as evidence of attempts ‘to impose one version of truth’ (p.189). It is the case that lecturers (necessarily) make normative judgements about the articulation of knowledge claims in student essays—over types of source, specificity of language use, relevance of content, types of evidence, or strength of claims. However, there are justifications, based in the knowledge structures of particular discourses (Maton, 2013b), for weighting particular forms of evidence and articulation over others. To characterise the informed and purposeful use of discipline-specific concepts and vocabulary as merely to ‘ventriloquate [sic] or echo conversations across academic and disciplinary contexts’ (Lillis, 2003, p.201) seems insensitive to the needs of a discipline and of students attempting to learn about it. Even where ‘scholarly frameworks and writing conventions’ are valued in a case study of AL-informed pedagogy, it is only as a ‘form of power that can be appropriated and used’ (Clughen and Connell, 2015, p.52), rather than as legitimate knowledge. There are, however, justifications for lecturers to question the manner in which students use personal experience (anecdotal evidence), emotions, or digressions of the kind Lillis highlights which are based on more than a flexing of academics’ social power. As in any human endeavour, there are flaws and biases in implementation, but academic discourse includes a need to communicate knowledge in a process which recognises its own fallibility and remains open to dialogue and contestation by design. The knowledge produced is explicitly acknowledged as provisional and partial.

The ideologically driven AL characterisation of academic discourse as ‘one truth, voice, identity and authority’ seems to be a straw man, and potentially indicative of its ‘knowledge-blindness’ (Maton, 2013a) to be discussed below. Returning to Lillis’ recourse to Bakhtin, this ‘knowledge-blindness’ is understandable given that there are widely acknowledged ‘vague claims’ and ‘persistent, structural ambiguities in Bakhtin’s writing’ (Hirschkop, 2021, p.160, 153). Indeed, Hirschkop (2021) traces starkly contrasting interpretations of the ‘cult of Bakhtin’ (p.160), enthusiastically taken up by religious, liberal, and left-wing scholars and respectively implemented in opposing directions. These opposing interpretations and uses themselves serve as a refutation of the claim that academic discourse is dominated by ‘one voice’ and ‘one truth’, and challenges even the more nuanced characterisation of academic discourse as a ‘monologic−dialectic’ binary of

'progressive negation of one statement by another' (Lillis, 2003, p.199). As with the diverse interpretations of Bakhtin traced by Hirschkop (2021), it is similarly likely that for the AL researchers drawing on Bakhtin, '[t]he new world they glimpsed reflected the ideologies they brought with them' (p.152). This is not to dismiss Bakhtin's literary theory as a lens for examining academic writing, but to caution that '[s]uch insights cannot stand on their own […] they demand elaboration, sceptical analysis, testing against empirical material' (Hirschkop, 2021, p.160). Further, in considering use of AL as a design frame for their teaching, learning developers might consider the extent to which the ideological claims and the implications of such AL-informed thinking align with their own.

1.3. Normativity and transformation: tension or contradiction in the LD literature?

In addition to influences from other fields, potential confusion in engaging with the AL model on a practical level has been recognised within the LD literature. Reflecting on the development of AL, Lea (2016) concedes that 'it is indeed difficult and challenging to articulate the principles of academic literacies in guidance for students' (p.91). This difficulty 'may also be the case in teaching contexts that take place within the limits of the curriculum in terms of time and space' (Lea, 2016, p.91), which seemingly applies to virtually all teaching contexts, at least where LD support is embedded as per current best-practice recommendations (Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019). Further, in the conclusion of their innovative community-sourced literature review of AL, Hilsdon, Malone, and Syska (2019) recognise that 'the exact nature of the relationship between approaches (SS, AS, AL) has proved difficult to define, both in theory and in practice' (p.35).

As evidence of these blurry distinctions, the same Hilsdon, Malone, and Syska (2019) review attempts to illustrate the embedding of an AL approach in an Australian HE context. However, the quotation cited by the authors as an illustration outlines 'the need to frame language […] as something specific to individual disciplines and in which learners need to become conversant if they are to gain membership of their respective communities of practice' (Murray and Muller, 2018, p.1350). This exemplifies a form of acculturation typical of an AS approach in its presentation of a language to be learned in order to access the discipline. In considering the 'converging space' of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and AL, Lillis and Tuck (2016) caution researchers against assuming that EAP (by implication, a form of academic socialisation) and AL 'can straightforwardly be combined or their differences collapsed' (p.37). It is not clear here how the 'encompassing' of AS into

the AL model achieved by AL researchers (see Section 1) is different from attempts to find synergies between EAP and AL in EAP research.

It seems that there is a case to be made for some lack of clarity or coherence in the AL hierarchical model. A key aspect of this is the difficulty for lecturers or learning developers in how to deal with the tension between normative and transformative orientations, particularly given the difficulty of defining 'transformation' consistently (Lillis et al., 2015a, p.8). In addressing the coherence of the AL model, hierarchy is used as a way to structure the elements, so this paper now turns to this idea of a pyramid model.

2. Resisting normativity through hierarchy?

Though hierarchy can be useful in organising and relating complementary concepts (see Bloom's taxonomy, for example), its contribution to the ideological coherence of the AL model is less clear. In their seminal paper, Lea and Street (1998) state that in constructing and applying the AL model, they 'take a hierarchical view of the relationship between the three models, privileging the "academic literacies" approach' (p.158). The same point is repeated in theoretical reviews (Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019) and practical case studies (Wrigglesworth, 2019). However, it seems contradictory that a model which strongly critiques normativity uses hierarchy as an organising principle. This choice of structure implies that hierarchical (therefore implicitly normative) thinking in the AL design space should guide the critical thinking, pedagogic choices, and/or design work of the model's adherents.

Adding to this ideological tension is Lea's (2016) retrospective statement that 'we always argued that our three models of student writing were not hierarchical' (p.90). This directly contradicts the seminal and highly cited 1998 paper, and subsequent statements on 'the privileging of the academic literacies model' by Lea in 2017. In the 2016 work, Lea concedes that 'it may be the distinction we made between academic socialization and academic literacies is too crude, particularly when the former becomes explicitly associated with a normative approach' (2016, p.90). She also notes that the initial AL focus on institutional production and validation of knowledge has been supplanted by interest in 'the practices and experiences of individual students and their university teachers' (p.89). It is possible that this increased focus on student−teacher practices might

be better served by a different configuration of model elements—perhaps a ‘floating’ conception of AL considerations to which educators can refer in the design of their interventions, courses, and curricula. Unsettling AL from its dominant position in a hierarchical model might give educators theoretical room to implement the normative aspects of teaching, whilst tempering their plans within a ‘critical thinking space’ (Lillis, 2019) which they can use for reflection, but without the need to pay lip service to AL as privileged across disciplines and contexts.

This tension between hierarchy, normativity, and transformation may be crucial in explaining misunderstandings and confusion around AL, but no easy solution is apparent. Both Lea (2016, p.90) and Lillis (2019, p.1) touch on this tension, referring to earlier work by Lillis and Scott (2007). Lea (2016) suggests that normative elements are ‘implicit’ in transformative work (p.90), whilst Lillis (2019) mentions the necessity of ‘straddling both normative and transformative orientations’ (p.1). These caveats notwithstanding, the hierarchical AL model is vague on how to strike this delicate but essential balance, and so it is similarly difficult to see how AL’s transformative approach might ‘usefully draw on and engage with other approaches to writing’ (Lillis, 2019, p.8).

These limitations suggest that further research and clarification might be helpful. As mentioned in Section 1.3 above, Lea (2016) recognises that providing guidance through an AL lens is tricky because ‘the very act of fixing and reifying tends to appear normative despite the best intentions of the authors’ (p.91). Though Lea is referring to fixing ideas in print, and without dialogue, this narrow interpretation of dialogue may not be the underlying problem. Contributing to the academic literature is itself a form of dialogue, and conversely making a verbal statement to a student can be seen as a form of reification. We would go further in stating that—regardless of the learning developer’s intent—the act of providing guidance is unavoidably, to some extent definitionally, normative. To address this apparent sticking point, it may be helpful to examine the broadly social constructivist epistemology on which AL is based. In the next section we will consider the possibility that sometimes a ‘constructivist epistemology undermines effective teaching’ (Kotzee, 2010, p.177).

3. Is AL's underlying social constructivist ethos stifling the development of effective LD pedagogy?

This section discusses the possibility that the social constructivist (SC) lens through which AL sees the world (ontology) and how we can understand the world (epistemology) limits its ability to generate effective pedagogy, even if only as a 'design space' (Lillis, 2019). As discussed in the introduction, this paper aligns with Shay's reading of social constructivism as inspired by Packer and Goiceochea (Packer and Goiceochea, 2000, cited Shay, 2008). This reading combines a 'socio-cultural strand which emphasises the situatedness of practice and the constructivist strand which emphasises the constructedness of knowledge' (Packer and Goiceochea, 2000, cited Shay, 2008, p.596). This seems broad enough to capture the 'sources' of AL as set out in the appendix of Lea and Street (1998, p.172), especially the strong influence of New Literacy Studies, which Street (2012) confirms is embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. Lillis and Scott (2007, p.11) also cite Latour and Woolgar's (1986) work on the sociology of knowledge as an influence on AL research, which implies an endorsement of this ontological position. This is significant as this interpretation (which Latour later rejected) uses a 'strong' position on social constructivism in which 'there is no reality independent of the words […] used to apprehend it' (Woolgar, 1986, p.312).

3.1. Academic literacies as 'knowledge-blind'?

As discussed in Section 2, AL researchers have grappled with how to 'teach a disciplinary form without inducting students into normative genres' (Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019, p.22). Researchers in the sociology of education have explored ideas relevant to this tension, arguing that disciplinary forms of knowledge shape the ways in which such knowledge is communicated, in turn shaping the social conventions and practices which are a focus of AL. Indeed, Hilsdon, Malone, and Syska (2019, p.19) cite Johnson, who explores ways to connect to the AL focus on disciplinary practices with disciplinary forms of 'subject knowledge'. Johnson (as cited in Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019, p.22) draws upon Maton's (2013a and 2013b) work, which is critical of social constructivism, as a potential way to understand discipline-specific knowledge structures and achieve a 'balance of these two forms of knowledge' (Johnson as cited in Hilsdon, Malone and Syska, 2019, p.22). It is this idea of the role of knowledge in LD theory and practice that forms the focus of this section.

Maton (2013a) challenges thinking in much current educational research—and in particular SC work—in claiming that SC is 'knowledge-blind' (p.9). He argues that the SC perspective deems knowledge as processes of knowing and relations between knowers, rather than as an object in itself. As a result, SC-oriented studies struggle to focus on knowledge structures, by which we mean curricular content and how it is 'organised, sequenced, expressed, assessed, and valued' (Clarence and McKenna, 2017, p.39). Using SC perspectives therefore entails that 'knowledge as an object is obscured' (Maton, 2013a, p.9). Given the AL focus on 'meaning making' processes within the context of 'issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority' (Lea and Street, 1998, p.157), this has clear implications for AL. Indeed, it seems AL is arguably illustrative of a theory in which 'knowledge is reduced to a reflection of social power' (Maton, 2013a, p.9). One consequence of this, Maton argues, is that education informed by such a view 'proceeds as if the nature of what is taught and learned has little relevance' (2013a, p.9).

A lack of attention to knowledge as described by Maton is a potential weakness in the AL model. Indeed, Clarence and McKenna (2017) highlight the fact that knowledge structures interact with 'socially situated and value-laden contexts such as academic disciplines' (p.39), but crucially are not reducible to these contexts. In fact, it seems that practices and knowledge structures co-construct one another and are 'always connected' (Maton and Moore, 2010, cited Clarence and McKenna, 2017, p.39) in a dialectical manner. It is worth considering, then, the extent to which such potentially 'knowledge-blind' approaches are effective in pedagogy.

3.2. Examining evidence on the effectiveness of AL-informed pedagogy

To address concerns about the practical application of AL, case studies of AL-informed 'praxis' in 'pedagogy and curriculum design' have been produced (for example, see Lillis et al., 2015a; Wrigglesworth, 2019). These studies offer rich, ethnographic action research or case study-based findings offering perspectives on specific contexts. The studies in Lillis et al. (2015a), for example, focus on individual accounts of practice, 'perspectives on what constitutes transformative design' (p.17), and more reflective accounts from the field. Like Lea and Street's (1998) original study, these accounts provide rich descriptions of LD activity. As a result of AL's concern with situated practice and the meaning-making

activities of individuals, these qualitative studies are inevitably ‘not based on a representative sample from which generalisations could be drawn’ (p.160). As such, in the absence of ‘multiple research philosophies’ of the kind called by Fallin (2024, p.166), it is difficult to fully evaluate the effectiveness of AL-informed pedagogy.

Furthermore, as discussed previously, some AL concepts (such as transformation) offered to inform the design thinking for LD pedagogy can be difficult to define or specify. In a description which in some ways echoes the ‘straddling’ of normative and transformative orientations in AL, Perkins (2006) advocates a strikingly wide interpretation of the constructivist approach. Perkins’ (2006) interpretation explicitly permits ‘departing from constructivist principles’ (p.34) to be effective. As evidence of this claim, Perkins (2006) grants that:

> If a particular approach does not solve the [pedagogical] problem, try another—more structured, less structured, more discovery-oriented, less discovery oriented, whatever works [...]. Teaching by telling may work just fine (p.45).

Implementing an approach of ‘teaching by telling’ sits uncomfortably with the privileged, transformative orientation of AL and raises further questions about the coherence of these theories. Even proponents of constructivism caution that ‘often it comes across as more of an ideology than a methodology’ (Perkins, 2006, p.34). It can be used simplistically ‘to distinguish the good guys (constructivists) from the bad guys (traditionalists)’ (Sjøberg, 2010, p.485), ultimately functioning as ‘a statement of faith’ in the notion of constructivism (Matthews, 2020, p.52).

As discussed in Section 1.2, at times AL characterises university teaching in starkly negative ways where more evidence might be useful. For example, Lillis and Tuck (2016) state that ‘What AcLit seeks to explicitly avoid is the idea that students first need to learn “the basics” and only then can be exposed to a pedagogy which leaves space for questioning and change’ (p.34). The implied claim that non-AL-informed pedagogical approaches leave no room for questioning is not evidenced in Lillis and Tuck’s 2016 article and seems resonant of a ‘straw man’ in which non-constructivist approaches ‘are caricatured into a simplistic style, [which] the vast majority [of critics of constructivism] would not endorse’ (Krahenbuhl, 2016, p.100). It is not clear whether Lillis and Tuck support teaching ‘the basics’, but they do explain that they do not want student questioning

to be ‘seen as a distraction’ (p.34). They warn against creating conditions where questioning is ‘infinitely postponed—or reserved only for those already admitted to academic “inner circles”’ (Lillis and Tuck, 2016, p.34). Again, the implied claim that, in taking non-AL approaches, students’ ability to question will be ‘left behind’ (p.34) is not directly supported with evidence or reference to other sources in that text, so, crucially for our argument, stands more as an ideological commitment than a well-supported position in this case.

Overall, this analysis suggests challenges for AL: of escaping the seeming contradictions of teaching without knowledge, of saying ‘do not be normative’ without being normative, and of supporting an ‘ideologically informed’ approach (Wrigglesworth, 2019, p.7) with persuasive evidence.

4. Escaping the contradictions?

This article has discussed potential contradictions in dealing with concepts of normativity and transformation in education and highlighted the role of knowledge in learning and teaching. AL fundamentally faces a contradiction in saying that ‘students should do things any way they want—as long as it is the privileged AL way’. This is a difficult position which critical theorists such as Biesta (2017) acknowledge. For example, in Biesta’s (2017) analysis of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), he highlights the contradiction which creeps into emancipatory approaches, where in some ways ‘Freire himself operates as a [conventional, normative] teacher, not only by telling (other) teachers what they should and should not do, but also by expressing strong claims about the allegedly true nature of human beings’ (Biesta, 2017, p.59).

Perhaps a middle ground is possible which retains AL’s critical lens but equally accounts for the role of knowledge in pedagogy. In a context where social constructivist-informed ideas, such as AL, are influential, it is important to consider how ideological considerations influence all pedagogic models—including interrogating hierarchy and contradictions when they occur in AL. To reiterate, we the authors broadly align ourselves with the ethos of AL. We acknowledge Lillis’ (2019) claim that AL was not originally intended to be a practical formula or prescription for pedagogy, and we believe it serves an important function in highlighting the workings of power dynamics in educational contexts. However, there are

evidently challenges for learning developers in translating calls to ‘work with’ the AL model (Lillis et al., 2015a, p.8) into practice, and questions remain about the effectiveness of approaches which do so.

In a context where constructivism at times operates as ‘more of an ideology than a methodology’ (Perkins, 2006, p.34), it is useful to note that strongly guided—yet student-centred—teaching has been shown to be both possible and effective in other contexts (Matthews, 2020). Such approaches are possible without relying on a constructivist orientation in which a focus on power relations dominates by hierarchical design. Other ways of understanding the world and how we might learn and teach about it are available. A detailed discussion of them is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth considering the value of inferentialist or realist orientations to understanding and pedagogy.

Inferentialism aims to balance the need for knowledge with interaction and so ‘accommodate both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives on the phenomenon of learning’ (Taylor, Noorloos and Bakker, 2017, p.771). Realist interpretations include those from scholars of Science education (Matthews, 2020), the critical realism underpinning the work of Maton (2013a), or more nuanced understandings of ‘construction’ from actor−network theory (Latour, 2005). Latour, for example, has fundamentally changed his aforementioned epistemological stance since his 1986 work with Woolgar on the sociology of knowledge (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). In his 2005 work, Latour rejects his earlier strong SC position, which he shared with Woolgar, that ‘reality is constituted through discourse’ (Woolgar, 1986, p.312). Learning developers might wish to consider the extent to which this strong SC understanding of the world, which forms part of the foundation for AL thinking (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.11), aligns with their own. We believe there are legitimate questions to ask in a context where, as Latour (2005) boldly claims, ‘social theory has failed on science so radically that it’s safe to postulate that it had always failed elsewhere as well’ (p.94).

Conclusion

This theoretical analysis set out to elaborate our concerns with the structural coherence of the AL model, and to investigate apparent confusion over its relationship to pedagogy in LD. AL has rightly been influential in revealing how power dynamics impact student writing

in institutions and how this might manifest in various written genres. However, we argue that the hierarchical structure of the model cannot resolve the tensions between its constituent yet conflicting normative and transformative orientations. We also express concern about the pedagogical limitations entailed by the 'knowledge-blind' (Maton, 2013a, p.9) nature of AL and the social constructivist epistemology on which it is based. In the absence of extensive critical scrutiny of the link between constructivist thinking and pedagogical practice within the LD literature, we drew upon research from the wider educational literature to critique 'knowledge-blind' pedagogical approaches. Finally, we highlighted the ideological dimension which may influence this adherence to constructivist thinking in education. Further research might (like Clarence and McKenna, 2017) explore positive, student-centred contributions which social realist or critical realist-informed approaches could make to LD, and how these could be synthesised with the important social insights yielded from AL.

We anticipate that animated and evidence-based responses to these concerns can and will be made. However, we feel it is important to raise these points which, in our view, are under-researched in the learning and educational development literature. Even if we ultimately reject them based on stronger counter evidence, the process of doing so will consolidate our thinking and the effectiveness of our LD practices and evolving pedagogical approaches.

Acknowledgements

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

References

Badenhorst, C., Moloney, C., Dyer, J., Rosales, J. and Murray, M. (2015) 'Thinking creatively about research writing', in T. Lillis, K. Harrington, M.R. Lea and S. Mitchell (eds.) *Working with academic literacies: case studies towards transformative practice*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press LLC, pp.97−106.

Biesta, G. (2017) 'Don't be fooled by ignorant schoolmasters: on the role of the teacher in emancipatory education', *Policy Futures in Education*, 15, pp.52−73. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316681202

Clarence, S. and McKenna, S. (2017) 'Developing academic literacies through understanding the nature of disciplinary knowledge', *London Review of Education*, 15, pp.38−49. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.1.04

Clughen, L. and Connell, M. (2015) 'Working with power: a dialogue about writing support using insights from psychotherapy', in T. Lillis, K. Harrington, M.R. Lea and S. Mitchell (eds.) *Working with academic literacies: case studies towards transformative practice*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press LLC, pp.45−53.

Fallin, L. (2024) 'Methodologies for research in learning development', in A. Syska and C. Buckley (eds.) *How to be a learning developer in higher education: critical perspectives, community and practice*. London: Routledge, pp.164−174.

Hilsdon, J., Malone, C. and Syska, A. (2019) 'Academic literacies twenty years on: a community-sourced literature review', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 15. pp.1−49. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.567

Hirschkop, K. (2021) *The Cambridge introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kotzee, B. (2010) 'Seven posers in the constructivist classroom', *London Review of Education*, 8(2), pp.177−187. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2010.487340

Krahenbuhl, K.S. (2016) 'Student-centered education and constructivism: challenges, concerns, and clarity for teachers', *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies*, Issues and Ideas, 89(3), pp.97−105. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2016.1191311

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, B. and Woolgar, S. (1986) *Laboratory life: the construction of scientific facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lea, M.R. (2004) 'Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design', *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(6), pp.739−756. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507042000287230

Lea, M.R. (2016) 'Academic literacies: looking back in order to look forward', *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 4(2), pp.88−101. Available at: https://www.ajol.info/index.php/cristal/article/view/149790 (Accessed: 30 Aug 2024).

Lea, M.R. (2017) 'Academic literacies theory and practice', in B. Street and S. May (eds.) *Literacies and language education*. Cham: Springer, pp.147−158.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V. (1998) 'Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach', *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), pp.157−172. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364

Lillis, T. (2003) 'Student writing as "academic literacies": drawing on Bakhtin to move from critique to design', *Language and Education*, 17(3), pp.192−207. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780308666848

Lillis, T. (2019) '"Academic literacies": sustaining a critical space on writing in academia', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 15, pp.1−18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.565

Lillis, T., Harrington, K., Lea, M.R. and Mitchell, S. (2015a) *Working with academic literacies: case studies towards transformative practice*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press LLC.

Lillis, T., Harrington, K., Lea, M.R. and Mitchell, S. (2015b) 'Introduction' in H. Lillis, K. Harrington, M.R. Lea and S. Mitchell (eds.) *Working with academic literacies: case studies towards transformative practice.* Anderson, SC: Parlor Press LLC.

Lillis, T. and Scott, M. (2007) 'Defining academic literacies research: issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy', *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), pp.5−32. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5

Lillis, T. and Tuck, J. (2016) 'Academic literacies: a critical lens on writing and reading in the academy', in K. Hyland and P. Shaw (eds.) *The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes*. London: Routledge, pp.30−43.

Lillis, T. and Turner, J. (2001) 'Student writing in higher education: contemporary confusion, traditional concerns', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6, pp.57−68. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510020029608

Maton, K. (2013a) *Knowledge and knowers: towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge.

Maton, K. (2013b) 'Making semantic waves: a key to cumulative knowledge-building', *Linguistics and Education*, 24(1), pp.8−22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2012.11.005

Matthews, M.R. (2020) 'Philosophical problems with constructivism: some considerations for student-centered learning and teaching', in S. Hoidn and M. Klemencic (eds.) *The Routledge international handbook of student-centered learning and teaching in higher education*. London: Routledge, pp.47−64.

Murray, N. and Muller, A. (2018) 'Developing academic literacy through a decentralised model of English language provision', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), pp.1348−1362. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1483015

Paxton, M. and Frith, V. (2015) 'Transformative and normative? Implications for academic literacies research in quantitative disciplines', in T. Lillis, K. Harrington, M.R. Lea and S. Mitchell (eds.) *Working with academic literacies: case studies towards transformative practice*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press LLC, pp.155−163.

Perkins, D. (2006) 'Constructivism and troublesome knowledge', in J.H. Meyer and R. Land (eds.) *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge*. London: Routledge, pp.33−47.

Shay, S. (2008) 'Beyond social constructivist perspectives on assessment: the centring of knowledge', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(5), pp.595−605. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510802334970

Sjøberg, S. (2010) 'Constructivism and learning', in P. Peterso, E. Baker and B. McGaw (eds.) *International encyclopaedia of education*. Philadelphia: Elsevier, pp.485−490.

Smith, P.V. and Baratta, A. (2016) 'Religion and literacies in higher education: scoping the possibilities for faith-based meaning making', *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)*, 4, pp.68−87. Available at: https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC199928 (Accessed: 30 Aug 2024).

Street, B.V. (2012) 'New literacy studies', in M. Grenfell, D. Bloome, C. Hardy, K. Pahl, J. Rowsell and B. Street (eds.) *Language, ethnography, and education*. New York: Routledge, pp.27−49.

Taylor, S.D., Noorloos, R. and Bakker, A. (2017) 'Mastering as an inferentialist alternative to the acquisition and participation metaphors for learning', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 51(4), pp.769−784. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12264

Wingate, U. and Tribble, C. (2011) 'The best of both worlds? Towards an English for academic purposes/academic literacies writing pedagogy', *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(4), pp.481−495. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.525630

Woolgar, S. (1986) 'On the alleged distinction between discourse and praxis', *Social Studies of Science*, 16(2), pp.309−317. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312786016002006

Wrigglesworth, J. (2019) 'Pedagogical applications of academic literacies theory: a reflection and case study', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 15, pp.1−21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i15.552

Author details

Steven White is a Senior Teaching Fellow in Education Development at the University of Southampton. He has had an interest in contrasting perspectives on learning and teaching since a senior colleague told him he 'bloody well better be' a social constructivist. His research interests include third-space perspectives on HE, digital and media literacy, and teaching/learning critical thinking.

Sunny Dhillon is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies at Bishop Grosseteste University. His research interests include Critical Theory (The Frankfurt School), Nietzsche, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Utopia, and Philosophy of Education. His current research projects explore the crises of liberalism as they relate to HE practices in the UK and the role of gameplay and satire as potential responses to this context.

Licence