

Teaching Referencing as an Introduction to Epistemological Empowerment¹

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[abridged and adapted]

As academic tutors at Rhodes University we spend much of our time looking at students' essays. We have come to realise that a large number of students, both under-graduate and postgraduate, have difficulties with their writing, many of which are related to the difficulties with reading, using sources and referencing. When referring to use of sources or referencing we mean much more than the conventions for acknowledging one's sources; that is, surname, year of publication and page number. We agree with Angellil-Carter (1995, p. 1) when she says:

We have understood referencing as the superficial manifestation of a much deeper, elemental feature of academic writing, which is the selection from sources, and subsequent integration and synthesis of knowledge and ideas into a coherent whole.

We therefore view the ability to use ideas from sources and referencing as being essential to the construction of knowledge in the university and, particularly, in academic writing. As our research progressed, the following emerged as our main research questions: How do students understand the need to reference? What difficulties do they have with referencing? If referencing is explicitly taught within a course, do students improve in terms of their ability to use sources in subsequent writing?

In order to address these questions, we felt it necessary to examine the type of literacy and epistemological understanding that school fosters in students in comparison to the literacy and epistemology that higher education expects. At school, in South Africa and elsewhere, teachers and textbooks present knowledge as clear-cut. The heavy reliance on textbooks and rote-learning which has characterised school education in South Africa (Langhan, 1993) has resulted in students with similar problems to those of some students in the United States. Geisler (1994, p. 90) noted in a study of US undergraduates that school had left students unable to use academic texts 'to gain insight into the context-bound processes by which

¹ NOTE: We use 'epistemological empowerment' in the sense of helping students to understand what knowledge and values the university generally and specific disciplines accept as valid. Also, as Prawat (1991, p. 739) says, to 'enable [students] to overcome the inclination to uncritically accept (or reject) knowledge claims advanced by so-called experts in the field'.

formal academic knowledge can be integrated with personal knowledge brought from their indigenous home cultures'. It is through knowing when and how to reference that students demonstrate their ability to integrate, in their writing, the knowledge they have gained from their reading with their own ideas. As Thesen (1994, p. 30) says, 'The convention of referencing is what characterises the academic essay more than any other feature'. Angelil-Carter (1995, p. 99) argues further that 'referencing is a fundamental part of the academic discourse ... essential to ... an understanding of knowledge as constructed, debated and contested'. Referencing thus has a strong epistemological basis but students, especially novices in the academic world, don't necessarily understand epistemology in the way that 'experts' in academic disciplines do. They see knowledge as uncontested.

Swales and Feak (1994) provide the following reasons why writers do and should reference in their essays:

- to recognise and acknowledge the intellectual property rights of authors as a defence against plagiarism since it is the ethical thing to do;
- to show respect to previous scholars by acknowledging previous achievements;
- to persuade readers of their argument and to give their statements greater authority;
- to supply evidence and demonstrate that writers are familiar with the field to show that research has been done and to point the way to what has not been done and needs doing. (Adapted from Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 81.)

In addition to these reasons, we believe that it is essentially through integrating the ideas from sources with their own ideas that writers of academic essays construct knowledge in the discipline about which they are writing. From our experience of working with first-year students we suspected that many students enter higher education with an understanding of epistemology as 'something out there'; not as being constructed. The data gathered in the interviews which we conducted confirmed this to be the case.

For example, interview data showed that most of the student informants only seemed aware (at a conscious level) of the first two reasons for referencing outlined by Swales and Feak above. Ursula, for example, stated clearly that the only reason she references is so that she will not be accused of plagiarism and Zelda said 'referencing is for showing the lecturer that you have read those books ...'. Referencing seemed to be regarded as something that had to be done in order to satisfy the lecturers, rather than as a way of acknowledging how knowledge had been constructed. Another misconception that we encountered is that many students believe that it is only necessary to acknowledge a writer if one is using the actual words of the writer, that there is no need to reference ideas. Yolanda, for example, when questioned about why she had not acknowledged an idea that had clearly come from her

reading said 'I read that somewhere, but thought I paraphrased it so I didn't see the point that I should reference'.

Carson's (1993, cited in Johns, 1997 p. 63) study of the intellectual demands on undergraduate students found that 'drawing from and integrating textual sources were two of the major challenges students face in attaining academic literacy'. Our belief is that this stems from students having difficulty in understanding the epistemology of the university.

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