

# **National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia**

## **Flexibility: Pathways to participation**

Refereed papers from the  
NAEEA Conference  
27 – 29 November 2013  
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Australia

Black, M. (2013). Investigating literacy cultural capital, academic achievement and socio-economic status among first year university students

In Proceedings of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia Conference; Flexibility: Pathways to participation, Melbourne, Australia, 27-29 November, 2013.  
Accessed from <http://enablingeducators.org/conference/2013.html>

Published 2013 by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, C/- Open Access College, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, 4350

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# Investigating literacy cultural capital, academic achievement and socio-economic status among first year university students

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*The dramatic shift in undergraduate student diversity has presented pedagogical challenges for university teachers, particularly in areas of literacy. There are concerns among Social Science and Arts educators around increasing incidence of informal writing, plagiarism and disengagement with reading. This paper supports an argument that these pedagogical challenges relate, in part to the literacy cultural capital of students. To determine the relative influence on literacy cultural capital of socio-economic status (SES) and academic achievement, this paper reports the analysis from a reading engagement survey administered to first year sociology students at ACU. The findings invite debate as to whether university educators should be 'tailoring' curriculum content to suit the multiliteracies of a diverse student body, or rigidly upholding 'elite' academic literacy at the exclusion of all else.*

Australian universities are transforming from elite institutions to institutions of mass education. Integral to this enterprise has been a huge growth in higher education participation, with one in 18 Australian residents in 2010 having attended a university (Norton, 2012, p.20). The 2008 *Australian Government* ('Bradley') *Review of Higher Education* specified access, retention and completion targets for equity groups; this has resulted in increased enrolments from 'non-traditional' students (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012, p.386). Accompanying the massification of undergraduate courses has been the steady lowering of university entry (ATAR) scores and, with the targeted increase in students from under-represented populations, a dramatic shift in student diversity. One of the major challenges for a modern university educator is the increasing number of students lacking prerequisite literacy skills for undertaking academic work. While supporting the equity platform in principle, such challenges have required a redefinition of our professional roles as educators, with improvement to student literacy becoming the centrepiece of academic teaching.

At outset, university educators with an interest in improving the academic literacy of students need to recognise a complex relationship between cultural capital, socio-economic status (SES) and academic achievement. As part of an access and equity agenda, the Bradley Review (2008) set an access target for low SES students of 20 percent of undergraduate enrolments; and an equitable rate of completion. Social scientific studies (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012:386; DiMaggio, 1982; Sewell & Shah, 1967) have found that once low-SES students are at university, these students' academic achievement scores are comparable to those of high-SES students. For DiMaggio

(1982) such ‘cultural mobility’ generally occurs when students are intrinsically motivated to achieve. Ofcourse it can be argued that regardless of SES, any student needs to be intrinsically motivated to succeed; the point made by DiMaggio is that success is harder to attain for students whose social and cultural background is not congruent with the values and knowledge of ‘middle class’ students. To this end, it has been demonstrated by ‘cultural reproduction’ theorists (e.g. Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) that students with advanced levels of cultural capital are relatively advantaged in the educational ‘game’. Here ‘cultural capital’ refers to the transmission of knowledge, norms and values as transferred from one generation to the next; ‘fields’ such as education reproduce these relations of power (Bourdieu, 1995, p.88; 2007, p.84).

To explore literacy cultural capital in undergraduate students at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) a survey was undertaken to assess the ‘reading engagement’ of 141 first year sociology students. The survey findings are revealing, mirroring global research showing that young people are reading less for pleasure (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, p.7) and engaging with more ‘informal’ online reading. In light of increasing student diversity, the survey findings are used to engage debate as to whether university educators, particularly in Arts and Social Sciences, support new literacy theorists (Heller, 2008; Janks, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005) call to embrace multiliteracies in teaching; or should educators reproduce elite academic literacy at the exclusion of all else. The data presented in this paper is discussed in context of this debate and an argument advanced for an inclusive teaching agenda.

## **Literature review**

### **Cultural capital, elite and ‘new’ literacies**

Over the last 30 years educational scholars have advanced an interest in the social contexts of ‘literacy’ (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Friere & Macedo, 1987; Heller, 2008; Janks, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005; Levine, 1986). Cognitive theorists see the term ‘literacy’ as ‘a multifaceted set of instrumental skills involving cognitive processes which operate in the production and comprehension of texts’ (Cook-Gumperz, 1986, p.3). From a sociological perspective the social practice of literacy is culturally developed through institutions (Halliday, 1978; Janks, 2010, p.2; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005, p.5); as such what constitutes ‘good’ literacy is historically determined through orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1989, p.17). This discourse advances ‘good’ literacy as characteristic of a highly educated person. The legitimation of elite literacy is reinforced through formal and critical writing, reading (Heller, 2008, p.53; Janks, 2010, p.5) and critical engagement of academic text (Zipp, 2012).

Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (2007) equips an individual with the knowledge and practical skills to succeed in a given field, to have a feel for ‘the game’. In Bourdieuan terms, low socio-economic status (SES) students, generally from working class and non-English speaking backgrounds, possess lower levels of cultural capital than traditional ‘middle class’ students (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012). In studies of cultural capital and educational outcomes, cultural capital has been highly associated with academic achievement (see Dabaghi & Mohammadi, 2012; Noble & Davies, 2009) furthermore, strong associations have been found between parents’ and students’ cultural capital (Noble and Davies, 2009; Sullivan, 2001). Reinforcing this, the

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009) found Australian young people are more likely to have high levels of 'educational attainment' if parents had completed a higher education qualification and if parents worked in highly skilled managerial or professional occupations.

Educational researchers (see Dabaghi & Mohammadi, 2012; Gaddis, 2013; Noble & Davies, 2009) operationalise 'literacy' cultural capital as reading for pleasure, knowledge of literature, attitudes toward reading and book buying, and parental encouragement of reading behaviour, as well as the comprehension of text and interest in media and current affairs. Theorists such as Gaddis (2013, p.2) postulate reading as an exemplar of literacy cultural capital which associates with educational success. Furthermore a home environment which orients students toward the university environment is seen as conducive to academic success (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012). To this end, 'capital' goes well beyond basic elements of literacy into the educational experience of family members (Roska & Potter, 2011), the level of cultural engagement and ultimately, the cultivation of 'linguistic habitus' (Bourdieu, 1995, p.87).

Given these social contexts for literacy, 'reading' is more than decoding a text, our social and cultural location contribute to the meaning we make from text (Bernstein, 2007, p.104; Halliday, 1978; Kress, 2000, p.91); reading also facilitates learning and independent thought through exposure to alternative points of view. Theorists advancing reading as a class based practice have observed that 'language use properly favoured by literate usage are more prevalent in middle than working class culture (Freebody, 1992, p. 68). Scholars supporting this view (Baynham, 1995; Freebody, 1992; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Janks, 2010) argue that success in the field of higher education is conveyed through an 'invisible pedagogy' (Bernstein, 2007, p.109) by which a parent, generally middle class, transmits to the child 'communication competencies' and linguistic codes (Dabaghi & Mohammadi, 2012; Gaddis, 2013; Jaeger, 2011), both oral and written, which replicate the 'visible' pedagogic practices of education. In short, literary forms of cultural capital are linked to educational outcomes (Jaeger, 2011, p.281).

## Digital literacy and reading engagement

Inspired by the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), new literacy theorists (e.g. Heller, 2008; Janks, 2010, p.4; Kress, 2000, p.182; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005) have argued for opening the academic literacy field to include participatory, oral, community and digital based multiliteracies. These theorists critique conventional literacy education as a 'discursive space' in which 'symbolic and material resources' underpin the reproduction of social inequalities (Heller, 2008, p.50). Given the pedagogical concerns underpinning this paper, the new literacy platform is indeed compelling. The platform is strengthened by studies showing that students are reading less than in previous generations, with a recent US study (Purcell, Buchanan & Friedrich, 2013) showing that two-thirds of high school students had fair or poor abilities to read or comprehend long and complex text, a creeping informality in student writing and increased instances of plagiarism. The US experience is arguably mirrored in Australian higher education, suggesting a cultural shift in approaches to literacy acquisition.

In considering the position of new literacy theorists, educators need to be aware how cultural capital embodied in academic literacy is strategically critical in achieving

professional employment (Cook-Gumper, 1986:4; Lankshear & Knobel, 2005:11). Digital literacy is now an expected competence in professional work, yet debate persists over the influence of digital media on academic learning. It has been 20 years since the 'technologising literacy' discourse emerged, including concerns that computer assisted learning would re-constitute academic literacy (see Bigum & Green, 1993). Critiques of the movement point to instances, as cited above, of students reading less and 'blame' this on computers and social media. It is argued that through changing academic writing conventions such as spelling, digital literacies may shift the parameters of 'English' language. Arguably though, the technology *as* literacy project has not been realized, rather technology has been used to promote literacy 'skills' (see Levine, 1986, p.203) with students learning evaluation of online sources (Wood & Smith, 2001). Researchers have even found the equity agenda to be strengthened by digital modalities, with an Australian study (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012, p.389) reporting that 60 percent of high achieving, low SES students used an online learning facility to attain academic success.

It can be concluded that two broad trends have emerged which have implications for academics in the modern university, firstly, the massification of universities and increased student diversity means students are entering university with less 'literacy' cultural capital than students from previous generations; secondly, a preference for online reading suggests a broad cultural change among 'Gen Y' students.

### **Reading engagement survey**

#### **The method**

A survey of reading engagement was undertaken with 141 first year sociology students at ACU. The survey comprised of a self-completion questionnaire completed in class; the survey comprised Part A demographic questions including age, gender, postcode of residence; part B attitude statements and Part C comprehension of a passage from a sociology text. As a raw measure of 'literacy cultural capital' eight items were extracted from a reading engagement survey questionnaire. The survey received approval under an existing ACU ethics first year student project protocol.

Survey findings were statistically correlated with measures of academic achievement and SES. Student end of semester assessment results comprised a measure of 'academic achievement' and, appropriating the SES measure employed by the Australian higher education sector, student residential postcode was mapped to a SEIFA (Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas) Index of Education and Occupation, 2011. Three SES classifications were derived; postcodes mapped to a SEIFA index of 76 to 100 were classified as 'High SES', 26 to 75 classified as 'Medium SES' and 0 to 25 classified as 'Low SES'. Only five students actually qualified as 'low SES' so the middle SES percentile split into 'Upper Medium SES' (51-75 index) and 'Lower Medium SES' (26-50 index). Data on parents occupation and education was not permitted in the ethics protocol; as such analysis associated items in the reading engagement survey (literacy cultural capital), SEIFA indexes for SES and student assessment scores as the measure of academic achievement.

## The results

As shown in Table 1, three items in the reading engagement survey demonstrate a fair association with student SES. Notably a majority of students from high (57.6%) and upper-medium (60.7%) SES enjoyed reading books and other fiction; this contrasts to significantly lower levels of enjoyment reading fiction among students of low (40%) and lower-medium (44.8%) SES. Furthermore, low (80%) and lower-medium (31%) SES students were more likely than upper-medium (21.5%) and high (20.8%) SES students read only non-fiction literature. Table 1 shows similar trends between academic achievement scores and the cultural capital items. Of particular interest is the relatively high correlation between academic achievement and reading exclusively online material such as Facebook and e-zines. To this end some 21.4 percent of lower achieving students exclusively read popular online sources compared to 11.9 percent of highest scoring students. Interestingly, the trend is reversed in the association of SES and reading popular online sources. Here high SES students (20.9%) were twice as likely as low-medium SES (10.3%) students to read popular online sources exclusively. In short, lower reading engagement is more associated with student academic achievement than with SES.

**Table 1 Association between reading engagement, SES and academic achievement scores.**

Reading engagement item	Academic Achievement Score	SES
I have always enjoyed reading books and other fiction	-.064	.141
I only read non-fiction such as magazines	.096	-.178
I prefer watching a film to reading a book	.020	-.051
I enjoy reading both fiction and non-fiction	-.141	.068
I find it boring to read anything longer than 5 pages	-.095	.103
I enjoy ... current affairs, news and politics	.087	.087
I do not enjoy reading academic material	.007	.002
I only read online such as e-zines, facebook, blogs	.212	.147
University text books are difficult to read overall	-.044	.177

Table 2 shows those students scoring highest on academic achievement are more inclined to enjoy reading both fiction and non-fiction than lower scoring students. Moreover the students with highest academic achievement scores are less likely than low scoring students to read non-fiction and online material only. These findings are somewhat incongruous with the finding that higher achieving students (23.8%) are also more likely to report boredom reading more than five pages. This anomaly could reflect the level of reading in a particular course, as higher achieving students (40.5%) are almost twice as likely as lower achieving students to find university text books difficult to read. Overall as shown in Table 2, for students in this sample there is clearly an evident association with academic achievement and a preference for formal reading.

**Table 2 Reading engagement (%) with high, medium and low academic achievement scores.**

Reading Engagement Survey Item	0-34 score	35-39 score	40-60 score
I have always enjoyed reading books and other fiction	50%	60.6%	64.3%
I enjoy reading both fiction and non-fiction	71.4%	78.9%	81%
I only read non-fiction such as magazines and newspapers	28.5%	20.8%	16.6%
I find it boring to read anything longer than five pages	14.3%	23.7%	23.8%
I enjoy keeping up with current affairs, news and politics	57.2%	60.6%	52.4%
I do not enjoy reading academic material	21.4%	44.7%	30.9%
I only read online such as e-zines, facebook, blogs	21.4%	18.4%	11.9%
University text books are difficult to read overall	28.6%	35.2%	40.5%

Tables 1 and 2 show several non-linear associations between reading engagement items, SES and academic achievement. Neither academic achievement nor SES linearly associate with reading news and current affairs, which seems to interest the majority of students, nor with enjoyment of reading academic texts. Approximately one-third of students irrespective of SES find academic texts difficult to read, and do not enjoy reading academic literature. Furthermore about two-thirds of students, irrespective of SES or academic achievement score, prefer to watch a film than to read a book. Overall the results show more evidence supporting an association between academic achievement and literacy cultural capital than with SES. To this end the survey supports studies showing a ‘positive’ orientation to reading as linearly associated with high academic achievement. By contrast students engaged with reading online material and non-fiction are more likely to attain lower academic achievement scores.

## **Discussion**

In the discussion of method, it was noted that based on residential postcode, only 5.5 percent of survey respondents were ‘low SES’. As such, the designation of ‘lower’ SES incorporates not just low SES but also lower-medium SES students. To this end the findings suggest that having a ‘lower’ SES does not in itself indicate low academic achievement. Nevertheless the findings support a proposition, at face value, that reading cultural capital is associated with SES *and* academic achievement. Such findings lend weight to both cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and cultural mobility (DiMaggio, 1982) theories, and support studies (Dabaghi & Mohammadi, 2012:396) showing that students with high levels of cultural capital enjoy high levels of academic achievement.

If students with high levels of literacy cultural capital enjoy more success at university, can the university help ‘grow’ the literacy cultural capital of all students? Noble and Davies (2009:593) argue for changing university cultural norms, and enabling students

from diverse backgrounds to be comfortable with academic conventions. This argument emerges from work of researchers such as Lamont and Lareau (1988) who identify a number of means through which cultural capital may alienate individuals from university, first through recognising they do not fit into university; secondly, failing to complete applications for university, choosing the wrong course; thirdly, an institutionalised bias toward non-traditional students. Based on the reading engagement survey data sociology students at ACU are predominantly 'lower' and 'upper' middle SES, furthermore they are culturally and linguistically diverse and, as documented by learning and teaching researchers at ACU, many are first in family to attend university. To assist these students to improve academic literacy and 'accrue' cultural capital, ACU offers an online academic literacy skills program *Leap into Learning*. Through embedding *Leap into Learning* into sociology teaching, myself and research colleague Sue Rechter (Black & Rechter, 2013) found marked improvement in academic literacy, particularly in lower-medium SES students. Part of the success of *Leap into Learning* is it engages with digital literacy capital of young students, allowing students to work at pace and providing a 'comfortable' mechanism for acquiring new literacy skills.

Whilst *Leap into Learning* certainly develops academic writing skills, it does not in itself advance reading engagement. Survey results reported in this paper suggest, irrespective of SES and academic achievement, an across the board dis-engagement with conventional academic modes of reading. What about the culture of our students, how is this changing? Although little comparative data exists, results from similar studies (e.g. Zipp, 2012) indicate a broad cultural shift in reading engagement. Here it is argued that sociology texts (and by implication, other Social Science texts) are too comprehensive, covering too much conceptually for students who, for the most part do not undertake higher degrees in sociology (Zipp, 2012).

As university educators do we accommodate this trend and, if so, how? We could provide more readable, visually and digitally accessible, texts. However this occurs already and still students are dis-engaged. Perhaps the formative work of sociolinguist Michael Halliday (1978) sheds some light; Halliday (1978, p.122) argues that text is situational, and constitutive of cultural meanings. It is well recognised that the new 'wave' of non-traditional students brings a set of cultural meanings around texts which differ markedly from those of the academy. To this end Luke (2003:398) observes the blend of 'old' and 'new' media has become part of the everyday culture of young people, in so doing constructing cultural identities. In the last ten years, new integrated, digital medias have solidified these identities, young people identify with the brands they use (e.g. 'i-mac'), and the language of popular culture has become part of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1995:78). Popular language is frequently used in written academic work (e.g. 'hey u') thereby challenging conventional academic writing conventions. So with a shift towards digital multiliteracies there is, evidently, a shift in the linguistic habitus- the disposition towards reading and writing- of students. So engaging student's reading through digital portals makes sense, the challenge is doing this in ways which uphold the conventions of academic writing. To compound the challenge, changing cultural norms of what constitute 'good literacy' are superseding moral judgements of 'poor literacy' students and, by contrast, elite literacy students as 'capable of exercising good or reasonable judgement' (Cook-Gumperz, 1986:1). The 'new normal' sees digital literacy as evidence of 'good' literacy, mirroring the fusion of formal and colloquial writing evident in popular discourse. To properly understand how this cultural shift



influences a subjective, individualised engagement with (academic) text, literacy educators need to undertake extensive programs of qualitative research, including observational work.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the issues raised in this paper need to be considered in relation to equity. Supporting the findings in this survey, a number of researchers (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Noble and Davies, 2009; Sullivan, 2001) argue that social class is less important than educational achievement in determining participation in higher education. While the survey results show that students with high academic achievement are more likely to have high levels of literacy cultural capital, in advancing an equity agenda, interventions aimed at enhancing literacy can and should be inclusive. The argument in this paper is that teaching academics should promote skills in academic literacy to students, using the digital learning portals familiar to undergraduate students. As academics we need to accept changing cultural norms; students are reading fewer academic texts, studying less than students of previous generations and are engaged primarily with digital 'learning'. This shift will ultimately bring (some) accommodation of less formal literacy conventions, how this is done without compromising academic integrity is the challenge.

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