PROBLEMatising Academic Discourse Socialisation

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A growing body of research examines academic discourse socialisation as a dynamic, situated, social, and cultural process that in contemporary contexts of higher education is often multimodal and multilingual as well. The process is characterised by variable amounts and uptake of modelling and feedback, variable levels of investment and agency on the part of learners, behind-the-scenes power-plays, and variable outcomes as well — both short-term and longer-term. In this paper, I discuss five sets of issues that stem from a common lack of understanding of these complexities and illustrate them with findings from recent research, particularly but not exclusively in studies conducted in Canada examining oral academic discourse socialisation and, to a lesser extent, written academic discourse. Some implications of this overview are that language professionals need to better understand the actual discursive practices and requirements of various fields and activities and the experiences of participants who are being socialised through course-related activities. We must also consider possibilities for enhancing those experiences to maximise students’ participation and success in their language and content learning.

INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse has been examined from a number of theoretical perspectives over the past two decades in applied linguistics, particularly at the postsecondary level, with language and literacy socialisation being one of the more recent. The basic questions this latter work addresses are: How do newcomers to an academic culture, whether as native speakers or non-native speakers of the language(s) used, learn how to participate appropriately in the oral and written discourse and related practices associated with that discourse community? How are they explicitly or implicitly inducted or socialised into these local discursive practices (Duff 2008a)? How does interaction with their peers, instructors, tutors, and others facilitate the process of gaining expertise in those practices? And how do the practices and norms themselves evolve over time and across practitioners, given the cultural and historical context of the local community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991)?

In what follows, I briefly describe some of the historical trends in research on academic literacies and socialisation. I then identify five issues connected with academic discourse socialisation in second-language (L2) contexts specifically that call into question a number of assumptions about both the nature of academic discourse in contemporary secondary and postsecondary settings and about our conceptualisation of linguistic socialisation as well, which has too often been (mis)understood to be highly deterministic, a form of behavioural conditioning that inevitably leads to successful and complete integration within the target community.

Because my own research to date has focused more on oral discourse than written discourse, examples will be given from oral academic discourse primarily, across several research sites. However, this focus on oral language use must increasingly also take into account the fact that
oral discourse is derived from, or supported to a large extent by, a variety of written notes, papers, articles, electronic discussions, as well as graphics and other semiotic systems that are now commonplace in highly intertextual academic discourse environments. Moreover, written communication related to academic work now bears many features of oral discourse as well, in computer-mediated and other digital communications, for example.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN RESEARCH ON ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Early studies of academic discourse in the 1980s included surveys of what professors expected in their courses across a range of disciplines, based on interviews with them, questionnaires, or analyses of their course syllabi (e.g. Ferris and Tagg 1996a, 1996b; see Braine 2002; and Morita and Kobayashi 2008, for reviews). Discourse or genre analysis studies approached the matter somewhat differently, examining text and move structures in academic writing and sometimes corresponding linguistic structures and discourse markers. A typical form of research would be the comparison of journal article abstracts, introductions, discussion sections, or conclusions (among other components) within or across the sciences and the social sciences (e.g. Brett 1994; Swales 1990). Some systemic functional linguists, furthermore, have studied textbook and classroom discourse common in k–12 schooling, such as the language of cause–effect and the practice of nominalisation in scientific discourse. They have provided elaborate classification systems for different knowledge/rhetorical structures, genres, and registers, typical lexico-syntactic forms associated with these text structures, and the kinds of graphic organisers that tend to co-occur with these forms as well and must therefore also become part of students’ repertoire (e.g. Mohan 1986). Research from more of a psychological processing perspective, on the other hand, has examined cognitive and linguistic strategies for text comprehension and production. In all three types of study referred to above though, surveys, discourse analyses, and studies of information or text processing, the focus of attention has primarily been on written discourse, such as textbooks, writing assignments, and professional journals, within their respective discourse communities, presumably because writing is a high-stakes cognitive activity that many students struggle with.

Research in these areas continues, together with contrastive rhetoric studies comparing, for example, grant applications in Finland (in Finnish), and in the United States (in English; Connor 1996). Some critical contrastive rhetoric studies disputing some of the cross-cultural stereotypes of writing styles put forward in early contrastive rhetoric studies (e.g. Kaplan 1966) have been conducted as well (e.g. Kubota and Shi 2005). However, in recent years some of this text-related survey and discourse analytic research has been complemented by in-depth case studies and ethnographies of individual learners and their interlocutors negotiating the textual requirements, and especially their own writing processes and struggles, across courses, or throughout the dissertation writing experience, in some cases longitudinally over one or more years (e.g. Spack 1997; Casanave 1992, 2002). Part of this reported textual negotiation process also involves learning to negotiate requirements with peers and mentors. A number of well known scholars in our field have, furthermore, published their personal reflections on their own multilingual literacy development or socialisation along their academic journeys as graduate students and now professors (e.g. Belcher and Connor 2001) or have described the tensions when scholars
are trained in one linguistic/discourse community (e.g. in the United States) but return to their home country (e.g. China), where other academic discourse traditions prevail (Shi 2002, 2003).

Whereas academic texts might previously have been seen as a rather static set of established rhetorical, generic or discursive conventions, now they are viewed more as a social construction by individuals based on their own histories and social contexts, their learning communities and power relations within them, and their audiences and goals. These social constructions then also evolve as the disciplines, genres, and participants themselves undergo changes. Thus, academic discourse, like many other areas of study in the humanities and social sciences, has taken what is now frequently referred to as a ‘social turn’ (e.g. Block 2003). This conceptual and often methodological shift has encouraged an examination of language, literacy and discourse as everyday social practice, which is neither confined to individuals nor to written texts. The orality, intertextuality, and multivocality of academic discourse (Maybin 2003), as well as its social, cultural, and historical context and evolution, have thus come to the forefront, a trend that some scholars attribute to the New Rhetoricians (e.g. Prior 1995a, 1995b, 1998) and the Sydney school of Systemic-Functional Linguistics (see Belcher 2004; Hyland 2002). A greater interest in oral academic discourse, however, already had a strong precedent in British and American classroom discourse, especially in the analysis of teachers’ routine questioning patterns (e.g. Initiation-Response-Evaluation, or IRE, interaction), which has continued to garner attention in educational linguistics internationally, particularly now with respect to the form, function, and significance of the Evaluation move (e.g. Mehan 1979; Wells 1993).

SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACHES TO ACADEMIC DISCOURSE SOCIALISATION

It is within this emerging sociocultural, interactional, and increasingly poststructural paradigm that scholars have begun to apply principles of language socialisation to the study of how newcomers become ‘apprenticed’ into academic discourse(s) (including IRE routines). This process of apprenticeship, to use Rogoff’s (1991) metaphor, is also referred to, more or less interchangeably if not synonymously, as academic discourse socialisation, the development of academic literacies (e.g. Street 1996), language socialisation (Duff and Hornberger 2008; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), and participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

The seminal early collections of language socialisation studies published in the late 1980s examined oral routines between young children and their caregivers and peers in mostly non-Western, or non-White middle-class, societies in order to understand the ways in which children learn both the (socio)linguistic practices and expectations associated with such routines and the underlying cultural values embedded in the language and routines (e.g. Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). However, even some of those early studies showed an interest in how well home language and literacy practices would prepare students for academic life at school (e.g. Heath 1986); alternatively, they examined problems when disjunctions exist between the languages, registers, and literacies used in the home and those privileged at school (e.g. Watson-Gegeo 1992; Heath 1986). Recent research on language socialisation in the context of family dinnertime talk has also made links between such seemingly mundane mealtime interactions and the development of scientific reasoning, such as hypothesising or theorising, which is so central to academic literacies (Ochs et al. 1992). Thus, oral everyday practices may be crucially, but inexplicitly, connected with academic discourse socialisation as well, a point to which we will return below.
A new generation of language socialisation researchers in applied linguists and education have also begun to see the relevance of the original language socialisation research for understanding adolescent and adult socialisation practices in educational, community, and workplace settings (e.g. Zuengler and Cole 2005). However, some academic discourse socialisation research has emerged from other traditions, such as new literacy studies and not from linguistic anthropology at all. The two related fields have simply converged.

Academic discourse socialisation, in short, views learning as developing the capability to participate in new discourse communities as a result of social interaction and cognitive experience. It also involves developing one’s voice, identity, and agency in a new language/culture. Learning scientific discourse, in this view, involves learning to think, act, speak and write like a scientist in a scientific community of practice (or a simulation of one). The teacher’s or tutor’s role is to scaffold learning – to provide sufficient challenge, interest, and support to assist learners to complete tasks, often in collaboration with others initially and then independently as they learn to regulate their own learning and task accomplishment (Lantolf 2000).

The research methods used in much academic discourse socialisation research involves qualitative – often ethnographic – methods, including participant observation, interviews with participants, examination of the researcher’s fieldnotes and any journals or logs kept by participants, plus content and discourse analysis of relevant documents, such as course syllabi, artifacts produced by participants (e.g. PowerPoint presentations, reports), and transcripts (e.g. from tutorials, classes, interviews) (see Duff 2006, 2007, and 2008 for a discussion of qualitative research methods and generalisability in this kind of research). The triangulation of data, methods, perspectives, and so on, is also commonplace in order to uncover the various understandings of both new and more experienced members of the discourse community. In addition, some of the most instructive research is longitudinal, with in-depth case studies of learners’ academic socialisation (Duff 2008b). Some research also takes pains to give voice to otherwise seemingly silent actors in these communities to understand their identity negotiation, transitions, dilemmas, and so on, within their academic communities, or to look ‘behind the scenes’ of classrooms to relevant academic interactions outside of classroom settings that prepare students for academic discourse (e.g. Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Kobayashi 2003; Morita 2004).

In the remainder of this paper, I explore five issues connected with academic discourse socialisation that, in my view, require greater problematisation. These are not ordered according to priority or seriousness but rather as a means of foregrounding particular points.

**ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IS INDEED ‘ACADEMIC’**

The first point is that academic discourse, especially as it is enacted or co-constructed in many classroom and laboratory contexts, is not a pure variety or genre of language, distinct from other more vernacular varieties of language. On the contrary, my research in high school content-area classrooms in Canada (Duff 2002, 2004) revealed that students were being socialised into new, multimodal, intertextual, heteroglossic literacies and repartee, a finding that is consistent with our early analyses of postsecondary students’ experiences and challenges as well. Giving an academic presentation, for example, students might first need to begin with a personal introduction expressing their interest or their background with respect to the topic or might include some humour. Indeed, in that work and in other ongoing research, many students report that they
often find the vernacular discourse in classrooms and extracurricular references and repartee more difficult to comprehend or engage in than strictly ‘academic’ language and topics. What is more, the students might find themselves inundated with references to popular culture texts or icons, such as The Simpsons, Seinfeld, or other American television programs, popular movies, sports programs, or local current affairs and need to make logical connections between these topics and the academic material. Members of academic discourse communities, like other speech communities, might inject these examples or asides as a way of increasing engagement with their subject matter, providing levity, making personal connections with others, displaying their own interests, and/or exemplifying problems by drawing on everyday situations that are familiar to many students from these media. As the erudite Canadian journalist Rex Murphy has described it with respect to his own lectures at universities, ‘the currency of our time is the reference to celebrity. You will not go out and cite John Milton and expect any general group [to respond]. If you want to connect with a group, either by camera or print, the coin is Homer Simpson, the coin is Oprah’ (Wigod 2003).

As I have explained elsewhere (Duff 2001, 2004), there are good explanations for this phenomenon of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and genre mixing (Hyland 2004) and even in attempts to more deliberately foster a highly pop-culture-laden hybrid form of discourse in education (Duff 2004). Proponents cite the wisdom of building on students’ interests and background knowledge and extending that to new, more academic spheres. However, the research has also shown that the students most alienated from such texts and discussions, although simultaneously often intrigued by them, are newcomers who do not have a high level of proficiency in the classroom language or who lack the necessary cultural background knowledge and the ability to process the information online in order to make immediate sense of it, let alone try to contribute to it. Hyland (2002), describing corpus research that has attempted to distinguish between genres, notes that defining their ‘immanent properties’ has not been straightforward. He also identifies new ‘blurred’ genres outside of the academic mainstream, such as ‘infotainment, advertorial, docudrama’ (p. 122), which have now made their way into our common lexicon. Thus, the hybridity of academic genres is not unique in this respect.

NATIVE SPEAKERS ARE ‘EXPERTS’ WHO CAN APPRENTICE AND ACCOMMODATE OTHERS TO BECOME EXPERTS (‘LEGITIMATE PARTICIPANTS’), AND PROVIDE THEM ACCESS TO TARGET PRACTICES

In my critical review of language socialisation literature (Duff 2002, 2003), I report that it is too often taken for granted that language learners (and other newcomers) will be fully accommodated and apprenticed within their new communities and will also have ample access to the target discourse practices they are expected to emulate. However, such assumptions of apprenticeship, accommodation and access are problematic in the light of evidence to the contrary. Classroom research at certain Canadian universities, for example, finds that far too few instructors provide explicit and appropriate scaffolding, modeling, or feedback to support students’ performance of oral assignments (e.g. presentations, critiques, projects; e.g. Zappa-Hollman 2007). It is simply expected that most students already know what an academic essay or presentation is and criteria for evaluating them, even though these attributes and criteria may vary greatly from one context to the next. Current research by graduate students at the University of British Columbia also
reveals that instructors or teaching assistants often provide only minimal feedback on written assignments (sometimes only a grade and a cursory comment) that students have invested significant amounts of time in; similarly, a grade may be assigned to ‘participation’ but students may never know what the grade actually is, how it is determined, how they might improve their participation, or how their participation might be better accommodated by the community.

Because whole-class discussions and lectures often pose difficulties for reticent students and newcomers to the discourse community as far as their oral participation is concerned, instructors may provide other forums for discussion such as group work or group projects. However, despite their honourable intentions, the same instructors may be completely unaware of the actual efficacy or implementation of these arrangements (e.g. Leki 2001). Furthermore, it is also expected, by students themselves, their families, their local institutions, or even by immigration authorities in the case of school-aged students, that non-native speakers of English will have ample access to oral English or to people who can proofread their written work outside of their courses. But as Ranta’s (2004) ongoing research with Chinese international students at a Canadian university reveals, students over a six-month period who kept daily computer logs reported having only 10 minutes a day of out-of-class exposure to English conversation. Clearly, this limited L2 socialisation outside of class does little to support students’ in-class comfort level dealing with English or with other English-speaking peers.

It is also commonly assumed by students and language teaching institutions, but now vigorously contested by the field of applied linguistics, that ‘native speakers’ of a language, by virtue of having grown up with that language, are somehow inherently superior in their knowledge of academic discourse and in their ability to engage effectively in sophisticated language/literacy practices or to teach about them. This is not to suggest that native speakers cannot be subject experts or highly proficient scholars, of course. Or that, on the contrary, non-native speakers of the language have less inherent potential to become (or already be) expert in aspects of L2 academic discourse. But as Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) demonstrated in an early article on academic discourse socialisation in the context of tertiary physics labs, expertise is also socially and interactionally constructed and is displayed by different people at different moments in time.

Unfortunately, some of the ‘expert’ vs. ‘novice’ apprenticeship literature leads people to assume that the mature ‘native’ or indigenous members of the culture (e.g. physics lab directors) are invariably experts in all aspects of their work who in turn socialise their students into such expert knowledge. As we know, not all so-called experts are good socialising agents, however, for a variety of reasons. Connected with this point is a common misconception that native speakers can write or produce oral academic discourse better than non-native speakers purely on the basis of their linguistic proficiency. Again, we know that native speakers vary considerably in their discursive and communicative competence and thus in their ability to write well, to present well, to teach well, or to relate to others well.

My research in Hungary (Duff 1993), for example, revealed that many of the international English-speaking teachers imported to teach physics, mathematics, and other subjects in the English-medium dual-language schools did not have their contracts renewed after one year because, although their English was proficient, they might not have been adept at using English with non-native speakers in the teaching of content and, furthermore, their knowledge of the curriculum (e.g. in physics, mathematics, or history) and their content mastery was found to be inferior to that of local Hungarian-trained teachers.
To give another example of the potential mismatch in expertise, seniority and native speaker status, with respect to the point that academic discourse may be highly intertextual and a hybrid of genres, the local teachers might be less well-versed in contemporary popular culture or other local events than their students are. And the international students, coming from a different set of world experiences, may have different, better-informed perspectives on topics related to their source countries. Therefore in such cases, the students have greater expertise of such topics, while the teachers likely have a superior grounding in the truly academic content in the curriculum – but this, again, must be established interactionally in an ongoing manner. Duff (1995, 1996) showed how students in bilingual programs tried to socialise their Hungarian teachers into what they considered to be superior English language usage or superior teaching methods. Thus, participants may be positioned by themselves or others in such a way that their (potential) expertise is established/constructed, validated, or undermined through the discourse itself (Duff 2002; Morita 2004), regardless of their real knowledge or potential contributions.

Another related fallacy, often held by international graduate students, is that the local native-speakers in their classes (teachers, students) have an inherent academic and linguistic advantage in fulfilling such course requirements as giving class presentations or writing papers. However, as Morita (2000) revealed, many of the local students, and especially those who have been out of school for some time, may also find these assignments daunting and are also being socialised into the new discursive norms in that setting, not only by the teacher but also by observing others’ performance. Like their international counterparts, the local students may never have done an oral presentation of the sort that is required or may not have used computer-mediated courseware tools for online discussions (e.g. WebCT) and may feel very nervous, regardless of their linguistic proficiency. In addition, the international students often have far better preparation to undertake the academic tasks and have better strategies, such as forming study groups, rehearsing presentations many times before doing them, being experienced users of newer technologies such as PowerPoint, and so on, which their teachers and classmates may not yet have learned. Yet, as Leki (2001) reported, the native-speaker local students in group work situations together with their international counterparts, may underestimate their capability and relegate them to minor roles, such as doing errands (e.g. going to the library) rather than be involved in substantive discussions about the content of projects. Another example is when highly verbal local students freely display their knowledge (‘expertise’) in the oral mode during class discussions but are in fact the weakest in more important areas such as academic writing (Duff 2002).

In addition, as academic discourse itself evolves and innovation is introduced into forms of inquiry and ways of representing new knowledge (e.g., through narrative inquiry, multimedia, bricolage, fictionalised accounts, and so on), often by the so-called novices in our universities – our students – the academic discourse socialisation takes place not just bidirectionally but often more unilaterally as the young innovators try to educate their supervisors about valid new forms of research, which may be accepted, rejected, adapted, and evaluated in various ways as the academy tries to keep up with such changing norms and genres.

Finally, Li’s (2000) research with immigrant women learning English and clerical skills for work contexts, while not in the academic domain, also shows that in many cases the native speaker co-workers who provided good mentoring advice about how to engage management in discussions about reasonable work demands, failed to provide good leadership in other domains:
they were often rude, threw work implements in the workspace, and swore, and it was up to the so-called novices to delicately socialise these co-workers into more respectful behaviours.

With respect to student legitimacy and ways of multiple forms of participating, Wenger (1998: 101) writes:

newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members... Only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect or exclusion.

This legitimacy is often hard to earn, however, and as Morita’s (2004) research shows, variable participation has multiple meanings, sources, and consequences. The six Japanese female international students who participated in her study revealed across time and across courses variability in their in-class participation and how it was very much a social co-construction that defied cultural essentialism as an explanation (e.g. ‘Japanese females don’t like to participate in class discussions’). As one example, she cites Nanako:

If someone followed me in all my courses and simply observed me, she would have just thought that I was a quiet person. But my silence had different meanings in different courses. In Course E, the instructor made me feel that I was there even when I was quiet. In the other courses my presence or absence didn’t seem to make any difference... I just sat there like an ornament (p. 587).

Another student reported how the class she was in was clearly delineated along the lines of Ph.D. versus Master’s students, with the Ph.D. students being constructed (by the instructor and themselves) as highly legitimate performers and the silent onlookers as illegitimate.

To summarise, then, discourse socialisation is not just for ‘non-native speakers’ but for all ‘novices’ or newcomers and, importantly, it continues for all academics and members of society throughout our careers. Unfortunately, the expert/novice dichotomy tends to overstate and essentialise difference and legitimacy, and does not take into account the multiple competencies of individuals rather than simply their relative degree of expertise in just one area, or one narrow band of experience.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE CHALLENGES PRIMARILY INVOLVE WRITING TRADITIONAL ‘STANDARD ACADEMIC DISCOURSE’

As should be quite clear from earlier sections of this paper, there is more to academia and to socialisation within academia than just learning to read and write standard academic discourse, which is nevertheless a crucial form of knowledge construction, representation, and assessment. However, it is also a rather Anglo-centric view of what forms and modes of scholarly knowledge are privileged in the academic world at large. For example, in many parts of Europe through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continuing today in Hungary and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, oral academic discourse and not written forms have been much more highly valued and inculcated than written ones, beginning with primary education and continuing through to tertiary education (Duff 1993). Most in-class and out-of-class assessment and thus everyday and high-stakes academic discourse socialisation takes place orally through interactions
between the teacher and individual students who are called upon to give recitations in class or who face a panel of oral examiners for their school-leaving/matrículation and university entrance examinations.

But even in North American and other settings, oral presentations, group project work, and oral communication skills are now being stressed and assessed to a greater extent than in the past, reflecting, in part, the amount and quality of collaboration and communication (and not just textbook knowledge or theory) that are now required in real-world knowledge-building and knowledge-sharing in a variety of professional and academic fields – from medicine, to engineering, pharmacy, education, social work, clinical psychology, and so on (Duff 2008a). Also, the students themselves in these new discourse communities may be asked to evaluate their own and others’ participation in these highly oral, collaborative activity settings, normally on the basis of their social interaction skills as well as their knowledge of academic discourse.

However, although oral academic discourse has not received as much attention in the relevant research in applied linguistics as written discourse to date, new research demonstrates just how socially, cognitively, and discursively complex and variable a standard oral activity such as ‘oral presentation’ can be, whether in the context of a classroom, a thesis/dissertation defense theatre, or a conference (Kobayashi 2003; Morita 2000; Zappa-Hollman 2007).

In engineering, an in-class presentation may involve reporting on a final original project or problem solution; in the neurosciences, it may take the form of the presentation and critique of new research; and in French literature, it may entail the discussion of an author or a particular piece of literary work from a theoretical or aesthetic perspective (Zappa-Hollman 2007). The length of time given to the presentation, the number of presenters (and/or discussants) scheduled for one session, the kinds of multimedia, handouts and other mediating ‘tools’ expected, the number of presenters taking part in a single presentation, and the evaluation criteria typically vary considerably across disciplines and even across courses within the same discipline, together with variability in the features of the academic discourse itself (Morita 2000; Zappa-Hollman 2007). A single presentation also will typically involve multiple concurrent forms of discursive representation: the source article(s) or project being presented, a script of some sort (unwritten or written) delivered orally by the presenter which may be different from the longer written version (e.g. a thesis, a conference paper or article, or term paper), a handout, and a PowerPoint presentation or poster. Thus ‘standard academic discourse’ in this context is very multi-layered and involves multiple forms of standard academic discourse, only some of which are written (e.g. Kobayashi 2004). Furthermore, the discourse and attendant socialisation into it typically involves being able to establish one’s epistemic stance (as sufficiently knowledgeable but not arrogant) and credibility, establishing rapport with the audience and collaborators and mentor/instructor, fielding questions and leading a discussion following the presentation itself, handling critique well, and so on (e.g. Morita 2000).

In addition to the centrality of oral discourse – in the to-and-fro between instructors and students, in teacher-fronted discussions, peer discussions, and in formal presentations – much academic discourse that takes place in the written mode does not involve standard academic discourse but, rather, includes traces of oral discourse if not simply a written version of the vernacular. With an increasing number of mixed-mode courses offered at universities, involving both face-to-face and online discussion components (or, for that matter, just one or the other mode), as well as other list-serves set up to facilitate out-of-class communication, students and
teachers must learn to participate in new kinds of discourse communities and new genres mediated by new technologies. In Yim’s (2005) research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) in mixed-mode graduate courses in education, she found that students, both native and non-native speakers of English, needed to learn the appropriate roles, registers, and technological skills to participate in asynchronous, threaded bulletin-board discussions related to course content. In one course, the instructor insisted on highly academic discourse and carefully formulated responses to course content, which all students struggled with to some extent. In another course, the instructor provided a somewhat more informal forum for discussion and in that discourse community students were socialised into different kinds of language use, pragmatics and role-taking. The CMC speech functions involved conveying knowledge and expressing opinions (initiating and reacting to postings), making requests (e.g. for additional information) and commands, and then using a range of social formulas or speech acts, such as greeting, thanking, acknowledging, and apologising. The students learned how to participate through observation and modeling by the teacher and by others. In the course that required less formal academic discourse, students produced more postings on average and reported feeling more ownership over their writing and also others’ writing. In the more formal environment, on the other hand, there was tension between the instructor’s preferred style of communicating online and that of students, and an attendant lack of social formulas and positive appraisal of one another’s messages. As one local native-speaker of English observed with respect to her own socialisation and evolution in the less formal online community:

I noticed in myself, at first my answers were very formal, very similar to term papers, very academic. Now it’s becoming more conversational. Because, I think, I saw other people. Their writing was more conversational. So then I didn’t want to appear unfriendly or cold. And I thought it’s true, because we’re communicating. It’s not live, however it is to your colleagues and everything. So, I think it’s become more casual now (Yim 2005: 87).

In the more formal course, however, students felt unduly constrained by the norms of standard academic discourse applied to that medium. One student lamented: ‘I feel like I can never get into a discussion, because all these ideas in my head, opinions, and you know, I’m DYING to get them out. But [the teacher] says it’s not academic’ (Yim 2005: 99–100). A Korean international student in the more formal CMC reported that

[the teacher] told us not to write in colloquial style. She emphasised that we compose in a way that is appropriate for the graduate-level. If we were allowed to write in free style, it would be easier for me, too. Even though I don’t have good English skills, I would’ve been able to compose more often freely (Yim 2005: 98).

The kinds of participant roles assumed by students in CMC (Eggins and Slade 1997), such as information provider, information seeker, facilitator, and evaluator (roles identified by Yim), and the number of responses to an initial posting in addition to the register of the discourse itself, thus varied considerably across the two courses.
Potts (2005) also examined CMC discourse in mixed-mode graduate courses in language and literacy education and, similarly, reported on the bidirectional or multilateral socialisation taking place as everyone in the discourse community, over time and in response to others' forms of participation, learned together about how to participate most meaningfully and also how to project their (desired) identities as intelligent, informed graduate students. In that research, as in Yim's, meaningful participation also involved a major social and pragmatic component, one that increased over time as Potts tracked the number and proportion of postings with ‘social content’ as opposed to purely academic content. Early in the course, the social content peaked as people introduced themselves, then declined in subsequent weeks as more academic content was examined, but by Weeks 9 and 10 of the 13-week term again increased dramatically. One non-native English speaker in the course reflected on her academic discourse socialisation as follows: ‘I try to learn how... other participants post their message, and then I try to cite their postings into my posting, not exactly the expression, I try to imitate their style, their writing style and then I try to imply [apply] the way of writing into my posting’ (Potts 2005: 151). This process of deliberately analysing, borrowing, and imitating certain others’ postings was commonly reported.

Finally, written standard academic discourse may be found in textbooks, journal articles, and in assignments, but it does not capture the other forms of social or pragmatic interactions that take place in academia that are also very important: such as, negotiating office hour visits or assignments, sending requests to a potential research supervisor about the possibility of studying or collaborating with her, requesting letters of recommendation and so on, which also are forms of discourse that vary from context to context (and culture to culture) to some extent but which are also potentially high-stakes interactions that students and their mentors must become very adept at doing well (e.g. without being offensive or pushy but without appearing too non-committal either). Again, socialisation into these forms of discourse related to academia is crucial as well.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE TASKS ARE TRANSPARENT, STABLE, AND UNIFORM

In some earlier work (e.g. Coughlan and Duff 1994), I critiqued the notion that tasks (or assignments) lead to predictable interactions and discursive outcomes and called this the ‘same task, different activity’ phenomenon. A number of others have subsequently examined this disjunction between the tasks that instructors (or researchers, testers) set up for participants and how those tasks are in fact taken up by them, based on their perception of the task demands or specifications, their assessment of the value of the task, who they are assigned to accomplish the task with, and how they end up engaging in the task (e.g. Parks 2000). In addition, instructors are often unaware of these behind-the-scenes aspects of task enactment, students’ misunderstandings or misgivings, the teachers’ (or researchers’ and testers’) own unclear instructions, or of students’ attempts to subvert the instructors’ guidelines or specifications in various ways based on their own sense of agency, entitlement, or even desperation. More research on academic discourse socialisation is therefore looking at the ecology of tasks or assignments differently than before to try to uncover these multiple perspectives and dynamics at play. Some of this work, as in Yim’s (2005) research on CMC activity, draws on Activity Theory, and specifically on Engeström’s (1999) model of activity. That model highlights the various components of activity systems, such as CMC bulletin-board discussions, which interact in a dynamic manner to produce the enactment of activity.
The systems involve rules for participation, communities, subjects (e.g. instructors, students), mediating tools and artifacts (e.g. language itself, CMC), a division of labor (participant roles), and different objects produced and outcomes.

One such study is the analysis by Kobayashi (2003, 2004) of the in-class presentations of a group project by Japanese exchange students at a Canadian university. He traced the life history of the project, in a sense, and its organic in-class and out-of-class development as students became co-agents of socialisation, coaching one another through a variety of meetings and rehearsals and strategies, using both Japanese and English, in order to ultimately deliver an effective English presentation. An example from his study with an out-of-class presentation rehearsal by one group of Japanese students follows (Kobayashi 2004: 203):

In boldface font, we see how Koyu’s suggestion to use the word *appreciate* in a planned speech act of (mock) gratitude toward the teacher (Izzat) embedded in the presentation is taken up by Tomo, who then offers the phrase *such a good opportunity*, which in turn is adopted by an appreciative Koyu and Yuji. They thus pool their collective expertise about not only appropriate English usage but also pragmatic strategies and humour and then Kobayashi shows how these forms are ultimately used and commented upon when the presentation is delivered to the class with the teacher present.

Each group’s ways of engaging in the task and then performing it differed, however, much as those in Morita’s (2000) study had. In Kobayashi’s case, some of these variables included the students’ original choices of partners and projects, their negotiation of roles and responsibilities, their definition of the task itself, the intersection and interplay of orality and literacy in their PowerPoint presentations, their L1 scaffolding of L2 learning and use, mechanisms of peer support, negotiation of audience needs and addressivity, and then their final performance, perspectives, and outcomes.

Zappa-Hollman (2007) and Morita (2000), described earlier, also examined how the ‘same task’ (individual oral presentations) had different specifications and characteristics across disciplines and that each presentation was not independent of the others. By this I mean that students often chose strategies for their own implementation of the activity based on what they perceived to be successful, unsuccessful, original or unoriginal in previous presentations by themselves and by others in the same courses.

A final example in this section is research by Parks (2000), who documented how the ‘same’ task, a short touristic video project of a destination in Quebec, Canada, was taken up very dif-
ferently by each of three focal participants (and their partners) in her study. The participants were junior-college-aged French learners of English. The paired activity involved the following steps: Identify a tourist site of interest; hand in a proposal for feedback; conduct research for the video (e.g. documentation, permissions); submit a script and storyboard to the teacher; film the video; obtain a technician’s help editing the video; do script revisions; practice and record voice-overs for the video; and then finally present the video to the class. By not only observing these activities and final products but also interviewing students and the teachers, Parks was able to uncover the multiple factors associated with task performance – which resulted in different sorts of cognitive and social task-related activities as well as outcomes. Factors included, for example, students’ general dispositions toward the learning of English and about the project specifically; their attitudes toward working with partners on such assignments; their strategies for making the process more efficient, by skipping steps, delegating tasks that were meant to be done collaboratively, or reducing the number and types of revisions done; their interactions with their partners, which ranged from being highly productive to being rather minimal; and their overall sense of legitimacy and investment as English speakers and how this task might enhance that. Three focal students provided contrasting profiles with respect to these dispositions, although without the in-depth research it is unlikely that the instructor (or others in the class) would have understood the different dynamics at play in the actual enactment of these tasks over time and space.

In brief, examining tasks (or projects, speech events, and activities) as highly complex social constructions reveals the different sorts of discourse socialisation affordances of tasks and the multiplicity of experiences and pathways that students encounter when doing them.

THE AFTERLIFE OF DISCOURSE SOCIALISATION FOR ACADEMIC OR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES

The final section highlights one basic point that tends not to be examined sufficiently in research in academic discourse and that is what I will call the ‘afterlife’ of socialisation or how the sorts of cumulative socialisation experiences described above affect subsequent performance and subsequent socialisation in other settings as well – in other courses, other contexts, and in professional fields (Duff 2008a). In particular, we need to continually examine if our ways of socialising students into new discursive practices and the discursive genres themselves actually match the requirements in the fields in which they will ultimately reside or at least will help them become more skilled at adapting to new requirements. Of course, because socialisation is both lifelong and lifewide (Duff 2003), and because research shows that each new context may have different specifications for appropriate forms of discourse (e.g. comparing Yim’s (2005) two CMC course environments), we should not be overly ambitious in this quest. However, some research shows that forms of discourse taught explicitly in ESL composition courses, for example, such as ‘the five-part essay’, are actually contested or rejected as legitimate or valued forms of essays in mainstream composition classes that the same students may migrate to after their writing proficiency is sufficiently developed. Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) described the mis-match in academic writing cultures between such first-year university composition courses and the havoc it can wreak for students who move from one culture into another unaware of this.

Another example comes from Canadian research by Parks (2001) and Parks and Maguire (1999), who documented how the genre of nursing reports which student nurses were being
trained to produce actually differed from those encountered by the nurses in hospitals, which were truncated or skipped steps that had earlier been absolutely required.

A final example of examining the consequences and applicability of earlier discursive socialisation comes from research examining the linguistic socialisation of adult immigrants training to become long-term resident care aides (to work in hospitals and nursing home facilities or to provide home care). That study also revealed the very different expectations and also socialisation experiences for the participants while studying in their program versus while in their practicum or workplace settings (Duff et al. 2000). Their coursework included language courses to develop their proficiency (and fluency) in English as well their knowledge of technical medical terminology, plus their basic nursing knowledge and skills. However, in contrast, in actual practical workplace settings, the participants had to learn to simplify their language to make it more comprehensible, reduce the rate of speech and also reduce or eliminate technical language that would not be well understood by those receiving their care, and learn utterances in other languages to better communicate with those who did not speak English or the caregivers’ own first language. They also needed to learn to communicate using a variety of nonverbal strategies, such as through touch and a careful analysis of body language, in order to attend to the needs of people with degenerative communication disorders, mental illness, or other conditions. Thus, that research describes how in these subsequent work-related settings the program participants and graduates were being socialised into new forms of discourse and communication in quite complex new discourse communities (dealing with medical staff, other caregivers, family members, the residents/patients themselves, etc.).

Importantly, it would be wrong to assume that in the examples provided of the ‘after-life’ of socialisation here that the earlier discourse socialisation experiences and efforts were inappropriate or their efforts were misplaced. Rather, often that earlier experience provided a solid foundation on the basis of which students could then adapt their practices and introduce innovation and efficiency as needed. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the future trajectories of learners and the discursive norms they are likely to encounter as well as their current needs and how best to scaffold learning experiences for both present and future purposes.

CONCLUSION

A growing body of research examines academic discourse socialisation as a dynamic, situated, social/cultural, multimodal (and often multilingual) process with unpredictable uptake, intentions, behind-the-scenes power-plays, investment on the part of learners, and outcomes – both short-term and longer-term. In this paper, I have selected five sets of issues that stem from a common lack of understanding of these complexities and have illustrated them with findings from recent research, particularly but not exclusively in recent studies conducted in Canada. Some implications of this overview are that language professionals need to better understand the actual discursive practices and requirements of various fields (and activities) and the experiences of participants who are being socialised through course-related activities, and consider the possibilities of enhancing those experiences as well as students’ potential. Some of those possibilities might include, for example, using new computer-mediated communication to support learning and community building, as it has the potential to provide increased access to participation and to discourse for many learners, but may also lead to blurred and blended genres. Alternatively, using more tradi-
tional avenues for developing academic discourse through oral and written assignments by individuals and in groups, greater attention must be placed on the process of developing intersubjectivity in tasks (between and among instructors and students) as well as developing new knowledge in these learning communities. The potential for instructors and students to serve one another better as socialising agents and to take on new participant roles also must be realised to an even greater extent, but this also requires an awareness on the part of instructors of how best to create effective discourse communities in which a variety of literacies are inculcated. Finally, universities and other sites for academic discourse socialisation need to increase the meta-discursive support made available to students (and instructors) to enhance the quality of language and literacy (discourse) socialisation in their midst and to accommodate newcomers to these discourse communities more satisfactorily and seamlessly as well.

ENDNOTES

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