

Book Review

Title: *Academic Literacy for Education Students*

Author: Judy Seligmann

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The title of this book gives a clear indication of its focus, namely the acquisition of the various literacy skills by students of education. It is written by a South African expert in language and learning with long experience in teaching support courses. It targets education students with the view that if educators want to improve learning, they should begin with those who will be charged with educating others. The book however will certainly benefit students who are making the transition from secondary school to university to pursue any discipline in the social sciences. It is therefore strongly recommended as a course book for academic support programs traditionally taught to First Year university students. For scholars grappling with what constitutes academic literacy, the book contributes to this growing body of knowledge in this area and provides practical literacy activities that demonstrate to students the value in treating reading, writing, talking, listening, and viewing as tools for learning.

Teaching academic literacy is notorious for work-related pressures. One of these pressures is locating a good book that responds adequately to the specific needs of students while allowing the teacher a degree of freedom to develop one's own materials. In my experience in teaching academic literacy I found that by using the activities from the published course materials, I was not responding fully to the expressed needs of my students. I also noticed similar independence from published course materials by many of my colleagues. It is possible that the range of activities in this book may therefore not appeal to many users. However, in providing these activities in one book, the author has contributed to the orderly approach to academic literacy that teachers who are forced to rely on their own teaching materials may need. Users can now select early what activities they intend to use for what learning objective.

Another pressure point in teaching academic literacy is determining the content. This is a vital consideration given the misconception by students and fellow academics from other disciplines that academic literacy programs are intended for remediation purposes only. Remediation implies that teachers of academic literacy teach what students should have learnt earlier before coming to university, but did not. It also implies that some students can be exempted from academic literacy courses if they do not show a need in this area. This misconception is sometimes noticeable in the allocation of resources – especially the short time allocated to the course. Scanning the three-page Table of Contents of Seligmann's book one gets an idea of the vastness of the content of academic literacy in the 13 units (chapters) of this book. It is undoubtedly not by accident that the 13 units almost correspond to the number of weeks in a semester – Seligmann deliberately intended the book to conveniently serve as a course book.

In this book, Seligmann successfully demonstrates that the content of academic literacy is certainly not remedial. Instead it is a discipline with clearly defined content that equips students with knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Much of this content is certainly new ground for students entering university and vitally important. For example, in Unit 1 users of the book are engaged with issue linking language, teaching, and learning; and showing users how, against a multilingual social background, the role of language becomes a politically contentious issue that affects teaching and learning. This is certainly new knowledge for first year students. In Unit 2, the book focuses on the different genres, a particularly important topic for university students as they prepare to produce written texts. The unit uses a number of activities to introduce the concept of written genres, and to demonstrate how these are influenced by the author's purpose and audience. It identifies the language and structural features that distinguish one genre from another and demonstrates how understanding genres facilitates reading and writing. The textual conventions covered on p.36 are particularly useful for the novice academic reader/writer in internalizing the socially agreed organizational features of written texts. Since conventions are internalized through repeated contextual experience, rather than by abstract description, the section subsequently provides these in five short texts which the reader is asked to examine using a common set of questions given in Activity 2 (p.38). Similar activities are found in the rest of the book. For the students and their negative attitude towards academic support courses, such content depth relinquishes the view that this is another remedial English course book. Education students grappling with research projects, where they have to review academic journal articles need this knowledge, not as remedial information, but as new knowledge. Unfortunately, most of the teaching given to these students is concentrated on classroom-related issues alone. Yet as this book shows, academic literacy is a serious area of need for many student-teachers including those in in-service programs.

Many existing academic literacy course books focus on a small number of EAP themes (reading, vocabulary, writing, listening and speaking, critical thinking, learner autonomy, and assessment). However, in the 13 Units the author expertly shows that language is the main mediation tool in academic settings. Below, see how the action words (*underlining mine*) in the subtitle of each unit captures that notion of a tool:

- Considering the role of language in learning and teaching
- Identifying genres or text types in academic writing
- Linking personal and academic literacies with disciplinary discourse
- Developing an academic vocabulary to communicate effectively
- Applying skills and strategies to read successfully
- Interacting with texts to learn from subject content
- Recognizing discourse markers that signal text functions
- Translating information visually
- Engaging with the writing process
- Contesting academic issues through argumentation
- Structuring an argumentative essay
- Referencing and documenting your sources
- Preparing to hand in your paper

The book also has a glossary. The glossary is unfortunately, the book's weak element as there is no clear rationale for inclusion/omission in the contents of those two pages (pp. 317-318). However, this failing is redeemed by the much better idea which, for lack of a better term, I will call a 'running glossary' - this is

the author's use of the margins to define a particular word. This makes the content immediately accessible to the intended user. Boxes labeled '**Activity**' facilitate locating the work to be done, while the grey-colored sections titled '**Language focus**' draw the readers to a detailed examination of language-related matters the Unit has raised. In this way the book becomes a very handy workbook on academic literacy for lecturers and students. The *Activity* and *Language focus* sections target a student in first year who is grappling with unfamiliar texts for the first time. Academic literacy scholars should therefore find this book very useful as a course book.