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Threshold practices: becoming a student through academic literacies

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Student transitions into the university are often conceived of via an apprentice-type model, or as entrance into a 'community of practice'. This paper disputes the applicability of these models to the indeterminate and opaque nature of student experiences of academic writing, and proposes that emotional destabilization and struggles around identity are a normal part of both transitions and writing. With reference to student text/visual journals and in-depth interviews, it argues for extending the notion of 'threshold concepts', proposing academic literacies as 'threshold practices' which can lead to a reinforced sense of identity as a student. It concludes with implications for practice.

Keywords: the first year; academic literacies; literacy practices; communities of practice; liminality; threshold concepts; transitions

Introduction

The student experience of university in first year is widely regarded as an important area of both enquiry and development, particularly as it is recognized to be a period of vulnerability for some, who may find the environment unfamiliar and challenging (see Palmer et al. 2009). Therefore, it is important to investigate these processes of transition, to identify the points of significant challenge, and to gain insights into how students become more confident with their new identities. The aim of the paper is to argue (i) that commonly-applied models of transition, in particular the notion of 'communities of practice' do not adequately account for new students' experiences of academic writing; (ii) that confusion, indeterminacy and emotional destabilization may be seen as 'normal' features of the student transition; and that (iii) writing plays an role in student identity formation. It will then analyse first year journal and interview data focused on transition experiences and academic writing. On the basis of (i), (ii) and (iii), and in the light of the study findings, it will argue for a 'liminality' analysis, proposing academic literacies as 'threshold practices'. These are characterized as troublesome points of struggle which may also lead the individual to a fuller sense of being a student and belonging at university.

(i) Models of transition and writing

Arguably, the 'traditional' assumption in some quarters was that new students could learn how to participate at university via immersion and interaction with more experienced individuals. This implicit 'apprentice model' may have been more applicable in the elite system of the past, where small groups tended to be integrated in a relatively homogeneous context. This is not to imply a bygone 'golden age', as some students were marginalized then as now. However, the student body is now significantly more diverse, enjoys less contact with academic staff, and may not receive peer or family guidance on university participation. These changes mean that

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students cannot be assumed to learn practices and adopt new identities simply through exposure to the environment.

A good example of this can be seen in academic writing research, which has found students struggling to decode unfamiliar practices (see Ivanič 1998; Lea 1998; Lillis 2001), and has uncovered mismatches between staff and students surrounding requirements (see Lea and Street 1998; Jones, Turner, and Street 1999; Lea and Stierer 2000) and confusion around terms such as 'essay' and 'report', or verbs used in assessment (Williams 2005). As Haggis has argued, new students 'no longer necessarily "know what to do" in response to conventional assessment tasks, essay criteria, or instructions about styles of referencing' (2006, 522). The response has been largely to provide remedial, extra-curricular 'study skills' support. However, this approach has been criticized as a deficit model and the legitimacy of the notion of generic 'transferable skills' has been challenged (Lea and Street 1998; Wingate 2006). These challenges partly derive from work in new literacy studies, which moved away from a cognitive view of literacies, and towards a more socially-situated model, with Street (1984, 1988) proposing the notion of *literacy practices* building on Heath's (1982) *literacy event*. Crucially, writing is seen not as a 'skill', but as a complex, socially-situated set of meaning-making practices, a view which is becoming increasingly influential in research and development surrounding student writing.

Independently from this strand of research, the notion of 'communities of practice' (CoP) (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) has been influential in conceptions of student transitions into university. The model arose from research into learning in workplaces, and is recognized as a powerful tool in the investigation of the complex and socially-situated nature of these processes. However, as it has been applied to a range of contexts, some limitations have surfaced (Fuller 2007). The notion has also been applied to higher education, however, as Lea (2005) points out, it is often advanced as a top-down educational model (Rogers 2000; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). It has, however, also been applied persuasively as a research framework, for example by O'Donnell and Tobell (2007) in their investigation of mature students on an access course, highlighting struggles around belonging and identity and challenges posed by participation.

However, writing is not featured in O'Donnell and Tobell's data, and therefore the model is not tested against it in their analysis. This section will focus on this point: the extent to which the CoP model matches against student experiences of academic writing, drawing on a critique by Lea (2005). The characteristics of a CoP are defined by Wenger (1998) as; *shared enterprise*, *shared repertoire of norms, techniques and conventions*, and *mutual engagement in the maintenance of the community*. Looking at the first point, Lea argues that the enterprises of academic staff and undergraduate students are not 'shared', due to the gatekeeping function of assessment, which positions students as 'permanent novices' (2005, 193) in relation to the community of experts. The second point about a 'shared repertoire' is also problematic when applied to academic literacy practices, which are recognized to be plural, contested, unstable and largely tacit. As Barton and Hamilton point out, ethnographic research has shown fundamentally 'messy' social contexts lacking consensus, contexts which they argue are very different from the notion of the CoP:

> In ethnographies of everyday literacy practices… we encounter fields of social action that are not characterized by a stable or well-bounded shared purpose; they have diffuse and unclear membership without clear rights or direct channels of communication for negotiated meaning; there is often ambivalent engagement (which can also be seen in many classrooms and workplaces and other coercive communities) and incomplete repertoires of shared resources that leave many assumptions unarticulated… Viewed like this, the social world is a long way for the prototypical community of practice. (Barton and Hamilton 2005, 25)

Thirdly, the notion of 'mutual engagement' involving expert modeling of community practices may also be questioned, as this is not a standard feature of undergraduate coursework, which is predominantly written in individual mode, or less commonly in novice groups. The process does not routinely feature drafting, formative feedback, or other practices which might perform the function of expert-novice interaction, although these strategies may be used. Overall these criticisms point to weaknesses in the applicability of the CoP model when seeking to theorize the role of writing as it is experienced in by new students in transition.

(ii) Emotion and struggle in identity transition

Research has also revealed the prevalence of emotional struggle for many students in the transition to university, revealing students' sense of alienation, e.g., by Mann (2001, 2005) who characterizes the student as an 'outsider… crossing the borders of a new country… [with] limited knowledge of the local language and customs and... alone' (2001, 11). Other work has uncovered ambiguity among mature working-class students' in response to their new student identities (Reay 2002), the strong relationship between student identity and motivation (Haggis and Pouget 2002; Haggis 2004; Macaro and Wingate 2004), and the highs and lows involved in transition (Beard, Clegg, and Smith 2007; Christie 2008). Findings of this type complement an increased philosophical focus on the ontological (as opposed to epistemological) dimension of 'becoming' a student (Barnett 2007) and developing a voice (Batchelor 2006), all of which suggests that the transition into the new university environment inherently and 'normally' involves an emotional process of change which may be destabilizing and challenging in terms of student sense of identity.

(iii) Language practices, writing and identities

The experience of academic writing and the constitution of new identities may also be seen to be linked. The interrelationship between language practices and identities is widely recognized, for example by Butler, who argues that performative speech acts (Austin 1975), may be 'more constitutive of the subject of the utterance than they are constituted' (Butler 1997, 188), while Davies and Harre (1990) also emphasize language, describing identity as a repertoire developed via participation in specific discourses. Research has also uncovered a strong link between writing and the constitution of new student identities. Examples include Ivanič (1998), who finds a strong relationship between mature postgraduate students' writing and the struggle for selfhood while engaged in writing as 'boundary work', and Lillis (2001) who also links writing to 'non-traditional' undergraduate identity formation. Drawing on Bahktin's (1986) notion of struggle for meaning-making and Fairclough's point about subjects 'acting creatively' within discourse practices (1992, 91), she argues that 'meaning making is not just about making texts, but is also about the making of our selves, in a process of becoming' (2001, 48).

The previous three sections have argued that (i) the notion of the CoP does not fully theorize new students' experiences of academic writing, which is characterized by indeterminacy, opacity and lack of expert-novice interaction (ii) that emotional destabilization and struggles around new identities are a feature of the transition for many students, and that (iii) there is a relationship between academic writing and the negotiation of new student identities. A fuller theoretical perspective on the student transition would therefore need to recognize: the lack of determinacy surrounding literacy norms, the lack of expert guidance, the affective dimension of the student transitions into the university context, and the importance of writing practices to student identity construction. The next section will make a case for *liminality* as a potential candidate, and will then illustrate the applicability of this framework via analysis and discussion of the student data.

Liminality and threshold practices: an alternative perspective

In common with the research cited above, a recent study has revealed new students in transition and struggling to have a sense of 'belonging' at university (Palmer et al. 2009). However, in this case the authors persuasively suggest that students in transition undergo this period of struggle as a result of inhabiting a 'betwixt space', based on the notion of 'liminality'. The concept was first applied by Van Gennep (1909) in social anthropology to describe the 'in-between' status of individuals at 'threshold' points in rituals of transformation, and was developed by Turner (1969, 1974). It describes a state of indeterminacy, emotional destabilization and status ambiguity in transition. The concept is perhaps best-known in higher education via the notion of 'threshold concepts' (Meyer and Land 2005, 2006), which characterize challenging elements of disciplinary learning as cognitive 'gateways', leading to deeper territory of understanding. Thresholds are associated with 'troublesome' knowledge, whose nature centres on the 'episteme' or 'the underlying game' (Perkins 2006) based on tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966) which is only partially expressed.

In the context of student writing in transition, the notion of liminality may also offer us a recognition of the features identified in (i) as under-theorized by CoP above. In particular, the concept explicitly recognizes indeterminacy as a feature of the 'in-between' state. This focus may help to theorize more fully the opaque, often implicit nature of writing practices as experienced by students in transition. The notion of liminality also offers an explicit recognition of the destabilizing nature of (ii) the transition and (iii) academic writing as an indeterminate practice, in terms of student emotion and identity. The concept of liminality has already been applied to the analysis of student writing in higher education by Scott (1992), who contrasts 'rites of passage narratives' (1992, 4) used to illustrate ideologies underlying different authors' conceptions of writing in higher education. Rampton has also applied the notion to interaction among urban young people in multilingual friendship groups (1999), linking this to the use of interactional ritual to respond to indeterminacy (Goffman 1967, 1971). These studies form precedents in terms of using the concept of liminality to complement an analysis or discussion of language use. In the following section, data from a qualitative study into student transitions and writing is presented to illustrate how this analysis may help to shed light on the student experience.

Background to the study

This study investigated the experiences of new undergraduates in the diverse context of a UK post-1992 university, examining relationships between writing and transitions. A three-year longitudinal approach has been used in order to gain a picture of students' trajectories through their university careers. Offering voucher incentives, the study attracted nine volunteers from all faculties (with greater representation from social sciences), including mature and international students, with seven female and two male volunteers. Informed consent was obtained, with guarantees of anonymity. To maximize 'insider' perspectives, a journaling approach was used to elicit detail and immediacy about experiences in an unmediated, private format, offering a large degree of control over self-representation. Participants received prompts surrounding experiences of academic writing and 'being a new student', and produced handwritten or typed journals at whatever length and interval seemed appropriate. Visual methodologies of drawings and photographs were included in order to probe the more subtle, affective and abstract aspects of experience which may be difficult to express verbally (Rose 2007; Pink 2006). These methodologies also lend themselves to the expression of metaphor a non-textual 'discursive tool for the construction of realities, and the roles and positions of subjects and actors within them' (Fairclough 1992, 194). Three semi-structured interviews were held in first year, investigating

themes arising from the journals. Given the small data set, the transcripts were not coded electronically, but analysed through close reading alongside the journals and visual images for emergent themes. This paper focuses on the first year data.

Findings: indeterminacy and emotions surrounding writing

In common with the research cited above, coursework experiences are described throughout the data in terms which suggest indeterminacy, struggle and intense emotion, with writing emerging as a set of practices around which required norms of participation are not fully expressed or shared, but must be decoded through experience, or even through failure or disappointment. For example, Mico reports feeling 'gutted' as a result of what she considered to be inconsistent feedback surrounding references:

> I got well good feedback for some references but then I got my other sociology essay back and it said it was all over the place, but I hadn't done anything different, so I was confused! … Oooh… it says 'your reference page isn't in alphabetical order'… Seems silly now but I totally didn't think to do that. Gutted. They should tell you that when they teach you about references. Just for people like me, ha, ha. (Mico, journal)

Katie reports not knowing whether she was on the right track until the feedback came back:

> I wasn't used to doing that much stuff on my own so you like, you weren't sure whether you were doing the right thing. It felt like it might have been good to get a bit more like support… because like our first thing of whether we actually were doing the right thing was like giving a said hand in. So we didn't really know until our essay was like, got it back, whether we were at the right kind of level. (Katie, Interview 1)

Robbie also reports not knowing the writing requirements until after the process was over, which he describes as a kind of ordeal: 'Once you've gone through it then you know what's required… it's just you do have to grin and bear it for the first couple of weeks' (Robbie, Interview 1).

Louise also reports that she did not know how to improve her writing in first year:

> In relation to writing, I wish the lecturers and tutors could help me more in this crucial aspect of uni life. Maybe there could be classes dedicated on how to write essays… During my first year, I found it quite difficult on how to write to university standards. I wish there would have been more feedback on things that could have been improved on rather than just the good things. (Louise, journal)

Throughout the data, all the students report worry, fear, anger or a combination of these as a result of their confusion surrounding academic writing requirements. This sense of struggle is also reflected in the images, such as Louise's drawing of her face looking annoyed, with the caption 'doing my essay made me uneasy and annoyed! It really pushed me to the edge!' Marianne produced a photograph representative of several others in the data which interestingly showed books as 'symbolic objects'; heaped in disarray (Robbie), or in huge library stacks towering over the student as a tiny figure (Mico). Marianne poses holding her textbook upside down, which she explains in her interview:

> It means that I sometimes, or just in general, it's not just sociology, I sometimes read things and then I find myself thinking about something completely different and, you know, I have been reading it, it's just it didn't get through. I didn't take anything in. (Marianne, Interview 2)

These findings underline the indeterminate and unsettling nature of these new students' experiences of writing at university; a state of affairs to be expected via a liminality perspective, which predicts ambiguity and destabilization as a features of the transition into the new status of student.

Findings: status ambiguity

A further finding of the study was that all the students to some degree reported feeling tentative and ambivalent about their status as a student in semester 1, echoing findings in the literature reviewed above. Examples can be found in the journals, where the students images depicting 'how they saw themselves in relation to the university' on entering first year. Two metaphorical themes arose: the small individual outside the large, powerful institution represented by the building, and the arduous, risky but potentially exhilarating journey. Six students depicted themselves via images which suggest alienation. Katie's image can be seen in Figure 1, where she depicts herself as a tiny figure standing outside: Lisa presents herself as a statistic in Figure 2, with the caption 'the university sees me as a number'.

A very similar image to Katie's was produced by Jmuna, while Anna showed herself crushed by a building. Mico represented herself split between positive and negative symbols, while Louise drew herself surrounded by question marks. These drawings suggest alienation, marginalization, and ambiguity in terms of a sense of belonging, an interpretation which was confirmed in the interviews. The notion of struggle is also apparent in other images, with Marianne depiction of herself as 'David' climbing a mountain and the university as 'Goliath', and Robbie's drawing of a series of high stepping stones above him. Louise's photos show drawings of her own crying face, which she noted was a result of 'not being able to make friends easily', and her puzzled face as she 'felt confused on how to do certain things like referencing and citations'.

Further evidence of a fragile sense of legitimacy and a troubled 'in-between' status was provided by Mico, who grew up in an area regarded as socio-economically disadvantaged, and was the first member of her family to enter higher education. Here she refers to her background,

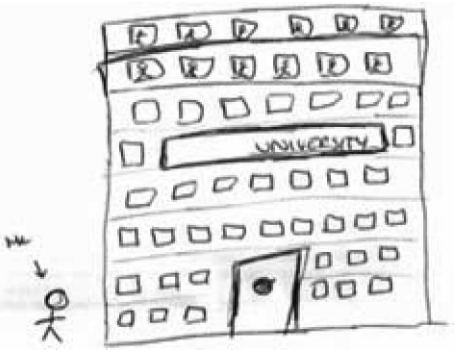

Figure 1. Image from journal (Katie).

Figure 2. Image from journal (Lisa).

which she links to her feelings of fear and low self-esteem. This extract reveals how she initially struggled to inhabit and accept the status of 'student', a feeling also mentioned by several other students:

> Sometimes I'm like I can't believe I'm at uni… I'm sitting with text books like piled up to here and I'm thinking this is really strange… It's just I feel a bit, not worthless but like what am I actually doing? (Mico, Interview 1)

> Like, my mum was an alcoholic and my dad was just total… like typically as a statistic I should not be at uni but I am… Like I was shaking when I started on my first day, completely, like terrified. I used to be really shy but I'm not, I never shut up now. (Mico, Interview 2)

These findings also demonstrate what would be expected applying a liminality perspective: that the students in transition felt ambiguous and troubled in their 'betwixt space'.

Findings: 'turning points', thresholds and literacy practices

The findings of indeterminacy above echo those of Palmer et al. (2009), revealing experiences of struggle, challenge, and indeterminacy surrounding the required writing practices in first year, and emotional destabilization in terms of their sense of identity as students. Students were asked to identify 'turning point' experiences; breakthroughs which caused their sense of belonging to increase, which tended to be significant social or personal events. The present study also revealed the importance of friendships and the social dimension of belonging, but the additional focus on literacies showed experiences related to academic literacies were also significant for the participants. When asked when they began to feel more confident at university, they identified receiving good marks or feedback on their writing. Their sense of identity and legitimacy as students seemed to be consolidated as they became more familiar with the academic literacy practices required of them. An example of this can be seen in Katie's interview, where she cites good marks as a moment when she felt knew why she was at university:

> It's quite a big step and then you've got like obviously, you're getting, like used to this whole new way of studying and things as well. So the first term you kind of do feel a bit lost and like why did I come. But then like once you get your results and stuff back you're kind of like 'actually I know why I'm here how'. (Katie, Interview 1)

This comment suggests that Katie's sense of having 'become' a legitimate student came about as a result of feeling that she had resolved the indeterminacy of the writing challenge. Other participants also identified success in writing as a 'turning point'. Anna cites getting a merit for an exam, while Sally highlights feedback:

> That's my difficulty, my lack of confidence because I'm not a native speaker… I feel I've managed very well. I've taken three exams and got a few merits… so I feel it improved myself, self-confidence. (Anna, Interview 1)

> Em, to start off with it [confidence] was quite low because I'm quite self-conscious… but as it's gone on it's, more confident and the assessments and knowing you're doing fine, you're getting feedback and it's really positive. (Sally, Interview 1)

Lisa links her increased confidence to finding written assessments less difficult that she expected:

> As myself as a student I was a bit unconfident because I wasn't sure what to expect… I think my confidence went up a lot because I realized that, well for now, exams and essays and all that aren't too hard. (Lisa, Interview 1)

This sense of a 'turning point' related to resolving writing ambiguities is also apparent in Katie's image in Figure 3 at the end of her journal contrasted with her earlier one. In the second

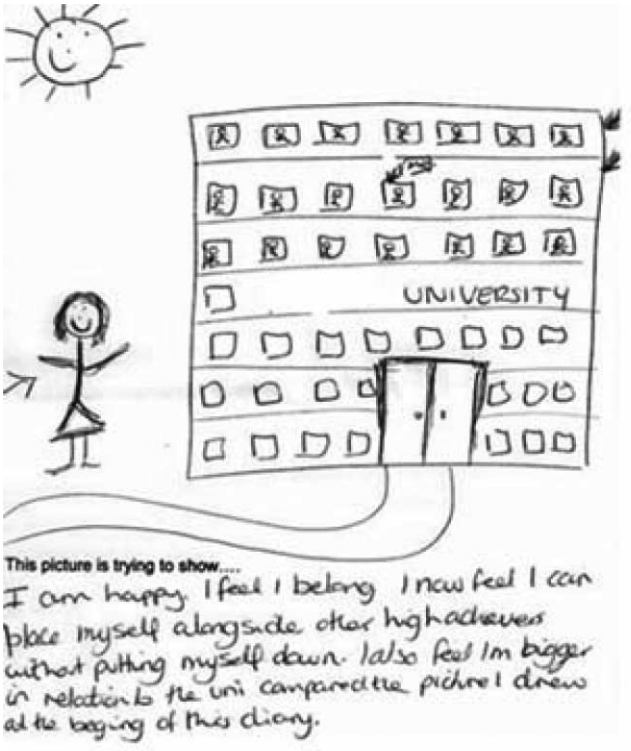

Figure 3. Image from journal (Katie).

image, she depicts herself as a smiling, larger figure outside the building which now has a path leading to a larger door, with the sun shining, where she is also pictured as a tiny figure among others inside. Her interview account suggests a pivotal role for her sense of understanding the requirements of literacy practices with regards to her sense of becoming a member of her student disciplinary community:

> Katie: Em, basically it's like I feel, like at the beginning I felt small towards like the university, like I felt like the university was like really big.
> Lesley: Yeah, it's a huge big building. Is that all folk at, in their classes, or…?
> Katie: That's kind of me thinking of people who like, because that's where like our psychology things are anyway, but em that's me kind of thinking of people who are like high achievers and me thinking that I'm not up there.
> Lesley: Right, right.
> Katie: And maybe that I don't actually belong in there. But then now I actually think that I do.
> Lesley: So you'll be up there with them?
> Katie: Yeah, I'm up there now, it's on one of the end pictures, I'm like up there. [points to image of herself in the building]. (Katie, Interview 2)

This data suggest that there was (at least partial) resolution of confusion surrounding academic writing requirements via engagement in the process, achieved through an emotionally demanding struggle with troubling, unfamiliar and tacit practices, and resulting ultimately in an increased degree of confidence and sense of legitimacy/belonging as students. In these respects, academic writing requirements exhibit very similar key features and functions as Land and Meyer's 'threshold concepts', and may be proposed as 'threshold practices'.

However, it must be recognized that the 'threshold' notion is not without its own weaknesses; and like the concepts of 'periphery' and 'centre' in the CoP, it can be misleading, with

the image of the doorway unhelpfully implying a defined, straightforward transition from 'outside' to 'inside'. There is a danger that the metaphor can lead to an oversimplified notion of a clear transition point; unlike in social ritual where the theory was developed, the notion of the 'threshold' cannot stand here for a clear temporal moment or observable set of rites. Although the students in the data seemed to report a sense of breakthrough, they will face new challenges. Instead it may be more useful to use the notion as one means of understanding aspects of a messy and complex process of learning and transformation over time.

Conclusions

While threshold *concepts* have been used to focus on the cognitive aspects of learning; by using the term *threshold practices*, this paper has sought to gain some theoretical purchase on the interplay between (i) the indeterminate, tacit nature of academic writing; (ii) the emotional and social dimension of the student transition; and (iii) the role of struggles around writing in identity formation. Although the data derive from a small-scale opportunity sample which does not necessarily represent the wider student population, the themes arising in the findings are closely consistent with a range of studies into both academic literacies and transitions to higher education. In proposing a liminality analysis to offer an deeper understanding of the role of writing in student transitions, the paper concurs with Hawkins' (2005) contention that sociocultural theory is best combined with a literacies perspective in order to understand how identities are negotiated in 'becoming' a student.

If the notion of 'threshold practices' has some validity in this context, possible implications arise in terms of theory and practice. In theory terms, there is already a concern to avoid the potential 'universalist/particularist impasse' (Collins and Blott 2002) if findings of ethnographic literacies studies are not linked to wider social and cultural contexts, histories and discourses (see Maybin 2000; Bartlett and Holland 2002) via extension beyond 'the limits of the local' (Brandt and Clinton 2002). Although sensitivity to issues of identity, voice and power are central to the literacies worldview, a linking with liminality may serve to address this point in this particular context.

In practical terms, the findings add to the already weighty evidence showing confusion surrounding requirements for student academic writing. Although these students (despite indeterminacy and confusion) were ultimately successful, many students do not achieve a positive outcome, and never gain an increased sense of legitimacy, which can lead to disengagement. Although there are major challenges associated with rendering fundamentally implicit writing requirements explicit, the data suggests that some of the confusion and worry experienced by these students might have been avoided, and that even tentative attempts to discuss requirements might have (at least partially) illuminated the scene. Lucas and Mladenovic (2007) argue for the potential of threshold *concepts* to unlock dialogue and uncover dissent surrounding tacit knowledge. Similarly, a recognition of academic literacies as *threshold practices* could open up discussion of tacit practices. Staff could explore with students how knowledge is textually constructed in their disciplines via analysis, practice opportunities and formative feedback (see Carroll 2005; Ganobscik-Williams 2006; Mitchell 2009), while still acknowledging the shifting and plural nature of these practices.

A further implication of a liminality analysis, as already advanced by Palmer et al., may be an acceptance of emotional struggles in transition as something to be expected. Linking liminality with writing also serves to reframe these struggles as, to some degree, a normal part of the academic process, as opposed to indicating a deficit, or a 'welfare' issue to be solved. This perspective challenges assumptions about shared knowledge and ownership of responsibility; asking practitioners to test the limits of what may be made explicit and what can only be learned

by (guided) experience, as we further uncover the links between literacy practices and the complex journey towards 'becoming a student'.

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