

Series Editor's Foreword

This monograph offers research-based perspectives and linguistically informed approaches to supporting language and literacy development in higher education. In this way it continues a theme established in the previous *Language Learning* monograph, Frances Christie's (2012) exploration of the role of language in supporting children's learning across the school years. As did Christie, here Caroline Coffin and Jim Donohue see language as central to teaching and learning, but rarely a focus of attention in the instruction students receive. Their motivation for addressing this issue in the context of higher education is the growing population of university students from diverse backgrounds. They argue that the linguistic diversity among students that instructors are encountering across all of higher education means that in every field, support for engaging in the discourses of the discipline as they learn the content of the discipline is crucial for student success.

To address that need, the authors have brought together findings from research programs and instruction they have been engaged in at The Open University in Milton Keynes as well as in other university settings over the past several years that illustrate how the achievement of disciplinary learning goals can be enhanced through what they call a *language as social semiotic* approach to teaching and learning. This approach calls for making a connection between the *meanings* to be developed and the *forms of language* through which those meanings are enabled.

Like Christie, the authors of this monograph draw on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (e.g., Halliday, 1978; 1994; Hasan, 2005) for their theoretical framework, as it enables them to approach the study of language in context with a rich set of analytic tools and constructs. In particular, the notion of *register* from SFL is central to their analysis, as they explore the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings that are at stake as students respond to the demands of the field, tenor, and mode of the discourse they are engaged with. The authors put this theory into dialogue with the sociologist Bernstein's (e.g., 1996) work on *critical socializing contexts* to establish the relevance and need for work on language learning in higher education. Additionally, they draw on the ethnographic approaches and orientation to ideology of academic literacies research (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998) and on the Vygostkian (e.g., 1978) notion of

semiotic mediation, engaging with instructors and students, as well as engaging students and instructors with each other, in mutual inquiry and learning. This mutual learning, at the center of the process of inquiry they describe, results in robust findings that offer innovative insights to inform tertiary pedagogy.

This set of theories and methodologies enables them to adopt a new perspective on the challenges students face. They present data from interviews with students that show how students come to higher education differently positioned in the ways they recognize and respond to the contexts of learning; what Coffin and Donohue refer to as the students' *semantic orientations*. To support students with different semantic orientations, the authors illustrate how the linguistic demands of the disciplines can be made explicit for learners through *metasemiotic mediation*, explicit interaction about language that enables mutual understanding, and scaffolding of the new knowledge to be learned.

Following a chapter that provides an overview of the volume and sets up the issues to be addressed, Chapter 2 introduces student voices that establish the kind of variation this work addresses. We find here that both multilingual students of varied backgrounds as well as English-speaking students from contexts not previously served by courses in higher education are the focus of the volume. The concerns these students raise show the different semantic orientations instructors will encounter and set up the issues to be addressed. In this and the next chapter, the authors show how the theory they draw on has enabled them to study student learning in higher education in collaboration with subject specialists and the students themselves, suggesting new methodologies for gaining insights into ways of supporting students and generating new pedagogical approaches that enable students to learn language and disciplinary content simultaneously.

Each of the next three chapters then presents a research study in a different disciplinary field, providing data and discussion about students' orientations and ways of addressing their language learning needs in the context of rich disciplinary work. In Chapter 4, the context is a Film Studies course where we see students attempting to adopt the abstraction and distance needed to write a *taxonomic film analysis* in ways that will be valued in the discipline. Film Studies students come with experience with everyday ways of making meaning about films, but adopting the more technical stance that the field requires calls for them to learn to see film as an object of analysis. Coffin and Donohue identify the linguistic resources students need in order to accomplish this and provide recommendations from their research about how to enable students to develop those resources. The chapter includes illustrative materials

from a syllabus developed in collaboration with subject specialists, and student outcomes provide evidence for the efficacy of this approach.

Chapter 5 turns the focus to Health and Social Care (HSC), where many students are returning to higher education from practical work in the field to enhance their credentials to move ahead. Students therefore bring much knowledge of the contexts of HSC, but often are not able to leverage that knowledge as they write arguments, often submitting work that does not make linguistic choices that enable their voices to be authoritative. While the research reported in this chapter was prompted by concerns from instructors about sentence-level writing issues, the authors show how those concerns could not be addressed in isolation from an understanding of the genre of argument that was expected. However, their research also found that students may resist adopting new stances they perceive as overly academic, so they developed an approach they call *mediated text analysis discussions* that engage students in conversations to reflect on the choices they made in their writing and consider alternative options. These discussions offer ways for instructors to gain insights into students' intentions, even when their writing is difficult to understand, and for the students to gain insights into the ways academic readers encounter their writing and what they expect. The authors show how students' different semantic orientations shape their written work, and their analysis of students' written texts and the changes that can be negotiated through the mediated text analysis discussions suggest new ways of addressing the writing of students unfamiliar with academic registers.

In Chapter 6, Coffin and Donohue address a very modern concern: how on-line and distance education can support students in their disciplinary meaning making. They analyze the genres and registers used by instructors and students in online forums, as well as interviews they conducted with instructors and students about their experiences in these contexts in Applied Linguistics and HSC courses. By conceiving of the online forum as a *macrogenre* with embedded genres of various types, this chapter offers insightful perspectives on new ways instructors can support students in online contexts. The authors show how the spontaneity, interactivity, and hybrid nature of online forums can be recruited by a skillful instructor to support students in moving from more contextualized, everyday ways of meaning making toward the more decontextualized ways of meaning making that are valued in academic writing.

The key contributions of the monograph are summarized in Chapter 7, where the authors make recommendations from their research for how language can be taught and learned in disciplinary contexts in higher education. This volume breaks new ground in bringing knowledge about language together

with content learning in sophisticated and discipline-appropriate ways and offers creative new approaches to inform and inspire the provision of support for students' learning in higher education.

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