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Clare Scully

Dublin Institute of Technology, clare.scully@dit.ie

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Media literacy and disciplinarity: A case study

Clare Scully

Abstract

Recent years have seen a number of changes and developments in Ireland's third-level education sector. Increasing concerns about student literacy issues have been accompanied by an apparent institutional logic in which generic 'one size fits all' modules are privileged on the basis of their expediency in the context of an underfunded, neoliberal educational landscape. While these modules may offer efficiencies at an administrative, teaching and practical level, there is little research that investigates their impacts and effectiveness on students in terms of disciplinary identity and knowledge, grades or quality assurance. As a contribution towards this topic, this exploratory paper discusses data and experiences gathered during the implementation of a discipline-specific 'Film and Media Literacy' module, delivered to a first year cohort of Film and Broadcasting BA students in Dublin Institute of Technology. On the basis of the experiences described herein, the paper makes a case for a disciplinary, rather than generic, approach to the teaching of a 'literacy' module in the context of media studies. After one year, the module discussed in this paper was found to be a flexible and effective teaching and learning model, permitting also identification of and engagement with student barriers to learning at first year level. However, the paper also argues for a more expansive and considered understanding of 'disciplinarity' in this specific context in order to more coherently address the perceived disciplinary literacy issues which were the instigation for the module.

Introduction

The 'Film and Media Literacies' module was developed in the context of a programme review, and is currently delivered to first year undergraduate BA Film and Broadcasting students in the Dublin Institute of Technology's School of Media.

The module was instigated by two lecturers with experience of teaching across the four year span of the Film and Broadcasting BA programme. While the workplace, industry and society that Film and Broadcasting students will enter upon graduation require disciplinary skills, it was observed (and frequently self-reported by students) that difficulties were being encountered related to the ability to engage with key disciplinary terms and concepts, particularly visible in the context of the final year dissertation. The aim was to address these observed issues by developing a module with a specifically disciplinary emphasis. In particular, the aspiration was to embed literacy habits at an early programme stage in order to address the difficulties students encountered in applying disciplinary content and concepts.

The module was therefore conceptualised as an 'educational response' (following Kellner and Share, 2007) to these perceived issues. Its underlying aim was to open a modular space for an explicitly disciplinary literacy, with a focus on the development by students of specific language and literacy skills, habits of practice and strategies that would be founded on and wrapped in the discipline of film and broadcasting studies. An initial understanding of 'disciplinary literacy' involved 'the use of reading, investigating, analysing, critiquing, writing, and reasoning required to learn and form complex knowledge in the discipline' (McConachie 2010: 16).

The structure of this paper is as follows. Firstly, there is discussion of a number of significant contextual factors that framed the development of the module, factors which reflect broader transformations in the Irish higher education landscape under neoliberalism (cf. Mercille and Murphy, 2015; Power et al, 2013; Lynch, 2012). Simultaneously, significant 'transformations' and tensions are taking place within the context of the Institutes of Technology (McGreevy, 2017). The module design and its implementation are next discussed, including approaches to content, pedagogy and assessment. Following this, preliminary

data and observations are presented and discussed, including reflections about the successes and weaknesses of the module to date. Finally, the paper makes a claim for an expanded understanding of the often ambiguous concept of ‘disciplinarity’, reflecting the idea that a discipline constitutes a ‘community of practice’ (Goldman et al, 2016) that extends beyond an understanding of ‘discipline’ as simply a branch of knowledge, encompassing a range of constructs which impact on module development, delivery and assessment as well as discipline identity.

The ‘literacy problem’ in Irish higher level education

While the aim was to devise and deliver a ‘standalone’ discipline-specific literacy module for first year BA Film and Broadcasting students, a number of significant contextual issues and tensions, often implicit, underpinned discussions around the module.

For example, within public and academic discourse, concerns have been voiced about a perceived decline in literacy standards amongst students (see, for example, this *Irish Times* article, ‘Universities offer “literacy clinics” for students’, O’Brien, 2016). Similarly, the stated aim of *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* is to address the ‘significant concerns’ of stakeholders (such as third-level institutions and workplace employers) ‘about how well our young people are developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they will need to participate fully in the education system, to live satisfying and rewarding lives, and to participate as active and informed citizens in our society’ (2011: 8).

A number of factors are relevant here in the context of Irish higher-level education. Firstly, the number of students attending third level is at its highest point (CAO 2016). O’Connor (2010) posits that this ‘is sought out as the most desired ‘strategy’ for school leavers who want to ride out the economic ‘storm’ and by jobless adults as they opt for the safety of a better qualification that may get them back to work’ (O’Connor 2010 cited in Power et al 2013). Within these numbers is an increasing cohort of ‘non-standard applicants’. While DIT’s (and other Institutes of Technology) policy relating to non-standard applicants and entry routes are underpinned by the principle of ‘equality of opportunity’, Harris and Ni Chonail’s 2016 research differentiates between the concepts of

opportunity and *outcome*, noting that '[w]hile students from target groups are accessing higher education, there has been an increase in non-progression rates (HEA, 2014)' (Harris and Ni Chonaill, 2016: 81).¹

The promotion of 'flexibility' through generic modules

At the same time, a less explicit but nonetheless significant 'logic' in which modularisation and generic skills modules are promoted seems to exist². This is underpinned by reforms envisioned by the 'Hunt Report' (2011), which argues that:

Irish higher education will need to innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts. It will need to do this while simultaneously enhancing quality and relevance, and connecting better with the wider needs of society and the economy, while operating in a more competitive globalised environment (2011: 10).

Similarly, As Donnelly and Harding (2015) contend, the 2012 HEA policy document ('A Proposed Reconfiguration of the Irish System of Higher Education') identifies the importance of 'comprehensiveness' ('ensuring that each institution will be able to offer a comprehensive range of programmes without unnecessarily duplicating capacity') and 'rationalisation' ('providing the opportunity to rationalise the number of programmes offered through the elimination of duplication while being able to maintain a comprehensive range of offerings') (2015: 2254).

Haynes (2016) describes the promotion of such corporate/managerial skills as integral to the establishment of the project of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), but also as 'incrementally undermining disciplinarity' (2016: 54).

¹For example, Harris and Ni Chonaill also find that issues relating to starting English language competency for students with migrant backgrounds means that they are more likely to gain access to Institutes of Technology than to the university sector. Their research also indicates that their 'English language deficits become particularly apparent in the area of academic writing and engagement does not always translate into successful outcomes' (2016: 79).

²The broader instigation of these 'logics' must be read in the context of what Mercille and Murphy identify as 'transformations that have taken place in Irish higher education under neoliberalism, and in particular, during the period of austerity since 2008' (Mercille and Murphy, 2015: 1). Rather than a land of saints and scholars, Mercille and Murphy envision Ireland as 'a prototypical neoliberal state' (2015: 1), noting that Irish higher education since the 1980s is characterised by systematic state intervention, including what Walsh refers to as 'greater monitoring of institutional activity and sustained official pressure to pursue explicitly economic functions' (Walsh 2014b.: 33 cited in Mercille and Murphy 2015: 5).

Relatedly, Mahon and Bergin discuss the ‘demoralising demands of efficiency and productivity [that] continue to escalate as our university system advances along market lines’ (Mahon and Bergin, 2017).

In this context, generic, inter-disciplinary ‘one size fits all’ modules become privileged on the basis of their expediency and as exemplifying manifestations of ‘efficiency and productivity’ in which Irish higher education is just one dimension of the prototypical neoliberal state. The ‘logic’ here is that there are greater efficiencies in running generic, transferable skills-based modules to cross-programme student cohorts than running modules to specific cohorts with the stated aim of disciplinarity.

The contextual factors outlined here also illuminate tensions between understandings and implementations of generic forms of literacy and those embedded in disciplinarity, as well as between literacy modules developed at institute level and those devised and delivered within individual schools and/or programmes. These tensions provoke a number of questions in which the question of ‘disciplinary difference’ or ‘disciplinary identity’ become central: is there a ‘conflict’ (from a disciplinary, educational, or institutional perspective) between generic literacy modules and those modules intentionally embedded in disciplinarity? If not, would generic literacy modules not work just as well (such as those being rolled out at institute/school level)?

The ‘Film and Media Literacies’ module

The module in question (entitled ‘Film and Media Literacies’) is currently delivered in the first semester in year one of the BA Film and Broadcasting degree. The context of a school and programme review in 2016 enabled the inclusion of new modules which form the basis of the current BA Film and Broadcasting programme document. The purpose of this section of the paper is to chart, in an exploratory way, the design, engagement with content, and pedagogical strategies of the module. Additionally, some reflections and discussion of both the strengths and weaknesses of the module after one year of delivery will be made. These reflections are based on preliminary data gathered from students as well as lecturer reflection, and serve to re-frame the discussion towards the necessity of an expanded understanding of disciplinarity in this context.

The approach to module content was underpinned by a 'wrapping' of content, pedagogical approach and assessment strategies within the unique language, habits and protocols of the discipline. In particular, the module focused on the strategic use of 'content' from other modules as a starting point for their further deployment and contextualisation in the Film and Media Literacies module. This approach allowed for the identification of disciplinary dimensions and applications of such content from both a learning and teaching perspective. In practice, this was achieved by working with disciplinary concepts or text that had been or were going to be the subject of a lecture (and/or assignment) in another module. These concepts and texts were then engaged with by way of explanation, application, discussion and periodically incorporation into group and class work or assignment in the 'Film and Media Literacies' module.

This specific teaching strategy of forging links between other module content and their application in this module sat alongside the notion of a broader learning outcome which was an aspiration that students would develop the habit, following Chauvin and Theodore (2015) of *thinking* and *exercising* literacy in the specific discipline context of film and broadcasting.

Further, lecturer familiarity with the content and placement of other modules and subject content within the overall programme design enabled an incremental and timed use of certain concepts and terms, so that they mirrored or followed their use in other modules (both theoretical and practical). The aim of such incremental introduction of disciplinary concepts and terms was to encourage students towards the adoption of a critical position in relation to their discipline. This pedagogical approach broadly follows an 'active learning' model, in which the emphasis was on 'doing' rather than 'thinking and talking about doing'. This aimed to address research (e.g. Eison 2010) that suggests that teaching concepts in the abstract is less effective than applying them in a practical context. A co-teaching model was adopted in which two lecturers taught the two-hour weekly module. This allowed for a cohesion and reinforcement of themes and content on a weekly basis. Additionally, this had the very real impact of creating a supportive teaching as well as learning environment.

Significant attention was paid to the design of assignments in this module, in particular the aspiration was that assignment types and briefs would relate to

disciplinary and subject-specific themes, elements and texts central to other modules in order to emphasise areas of integration between discipline modules. Further, these aimed to illuminate the relationship between content and form that is central to the discipline of film and broadcasting and the media arts generally. Therefore, the assignment briefs emphasised the importance of planning, reflecting, revision, re-writing/drafting then presenting/submitting. The range of assignments included formal written work, informal group work and public presentations. Additionally, in order to highlight the importance of the process of critical reflexivity to their work, each assignment required an individual 'reflective statement' from students in which they were guided through a series of specified and structured prompt questions relating to their reflections on the assignment in question. Students were subsequently encouraged to apply these reflections to future work.

Responses to the module: student feedback

Student and lecturer observations and experiences of the module are presented next with the aim that both sets of perspectives will inform further decisions and developments pertaining to the module.

Two sets of preliminary feedback were elicited from students at the end of the module in survey form. Firstly, students were asked a number of general questions, devised in a deliberately broad manner in order to elicit students' own perceptions about skills they had acquired throughout the module and their perception about how these skills could be applied to other areas within the programme.

Responses broadly indicated that the aim of the module to encourage students to identify specific links between media theory and its application in a wider context was recognised as important by student respondents. The question asked students how they applied specialised (i.e. disciplinary) concepts to their general work. One student responded that *'it saved a lot of time applying these skills directly to Film and Broadcasting as opposed to learning them in a more generic sense'*. Another responded that *'it is essential to connect these skills using the language of Film and Broadcasting'*.

The use of content from other modules also appeared to be endorsed by student respondents, one student writing that *'texts in Media Theory and Film Theory*

were much less daunting due to this module’ and ‘using texts and topics from other modules made them much more relevant and easier to engage with’. When asked to identify the skills acquired, a student wrote that ‘we gained two skills at once – both the language of F&B [Film and Broadcasting] and the ability to apply them in a broader context’.

A second set of data was elicited, this time asking students to address the more specific question ‘what were the most important skills you acquired during this module?’ The responses to this are presented in tabular form below:

Academic Writing Skills: working with texts and writing in the discipline.	Paraphrasing, summarising, condensing information, acquisition of new language and terminology, assignment preparation	74%
Communication Skills	Group work/discussion, interpersonal skills, presentation skills	55%
Research and referencing:	Using the literature and source texts	50%
Reading and decoding: engaging with disciplinary material	Focus on specialised academic texts, concepts, terminology and language	32%
Critical engagement with academic/visual texts	‘Reading’, applying, interpreting	23%

Notably here, while students appeared to readily identify disciplinary concepts as important (e.g. learning skills in a non-generic sense; applying them to a variety of theory modules; noting the significance of the ‘language’ of Film and Broadcasting) as key in responses to the earlier, general question, when asked to specifically identify what they perceived to be the most important skills, ‘reading and decoding’ and ‘critical engagement with academic/visual texts’ were ranked

lowest, with 'softer' skills such as communication skills and basic literacy skills ranked more highly.

This corresponds to a large-scale study of Irish students' experience of the transition from second to third-level conducted by Denny in 2015. Denny reports that students perceive a strong relationship between academic and 'soft skills', which is also evidenced here³. Denny's study also found that while students identified general support services as important, course specific support mechanisms provided by colleges were reported as much more effectual than general schemes targeted at all first year students (Denny 2015). The results from the two sets of data elicited in this paper would indicate that students identify both 'softer' and more complex skills as important in the first year undergraduate context.

In relation to grades for the module in its first year of implementation, students who achieved the lowest grades were non-standard applicants, reflecting an institute-wide issue (cf. Harris and Ni Chonail, 2016). One impact of the intensive approach and co-teaching model however is that it permitted the early identification of barriers to learning for students, such as general literacy and others. This may be significant as Denny's research found that for 50% of students, the challenges inherent in higher education do not dissipate or disappear even after a few months; i.e. the inability to adapt quickly to higher education has long term impacts (Denny, 2015). Clearly, while purpose of this module is not to solve these issues, its nature does permit their early identification amongst students.

While students articulated the benefits of both 'higher order' and 'soft skills' in the gathered data, the grades indicate that the highest performing students, unsurprisingly, were those who incorporated the highest level of disciplinary critical analysis in their graded work. Further, the emphasis of the module on 'active learning' is predicated on initial and extra-curricular work (such as initial reading and viewing) being undertaken by students outside of the classroom; this was not always carried out. 'Close readings' of texts in class are more meaningful when the students involved have already done an initial reading.

³ For example, in Denny's research 31% of students identified their own ability to manage their time 'very challenging', while 50% claimed to find critical assessments 'somewhat challenging'.

More motivated students did this extra work and therefore benefitted most from class time.

The exigencies of a new module made the advantages of distributing a general survey (practicality, speed and flexibility) attractive; however, the data gathered here is too broad to be generalisable. The lack of negative feedback to the survey indicates that students arguably responded as they felt they should rather than giving a more nuanced, realistic set of responses. Equally, students may have had insufficient time to reflect on the module and its meaningfulness (or not) for them. It would be interesting in this regard to elicit the students' retrospective views on the module; equally the relatively small size of the group would make it possible to interview different cohorts within the class (e.g. non-standard students, mature students, etc.). Responses will be elicited in future through the use of a variety of methodological approaches (initial survey, focus group, in depth interviews) in order to elicit richer and more meaningful data.

Overall, these initial findings suggest that further research, employing a variety of methodological approaches, would be helpful. Findings from this first set of data already indicate areas of significance for the module development, such as the link in student perception between the importance of soft and hard skills, which suggests that it is vital that both sets of skills must be engaged with in tandem in future iterations and evolutions of the module. Equally, however, the identification by students of the 'the language of F&B' indicates the relevance of this approach to the development of a disciplinary identity.

Responses to the module: lecturer feedback and discussion/reflection

In this final section, lecturer feedback and reflection is incorporated with a view to informing future considerations and developments for the module. Overall, after one year of delivering the module, the lecturers involved felt that both student feedback and lecturer experience indicated a strong endorsement for this integrated, non-generic and disciplinary approach.

A clear benefit for the lecturers concerned was the co-teaching model which was highly supportive and effective. Here, the collaborative approach created a relaxed classroom dynamic which helped to build a strong sense of group collegiality and cohesiveness. Of note was the fact that the lecturers in question both teach additional (theory) modules on the Film and Broadcasting programme

(as well as on other programmes within the School of Media). Their experience in the domain area was highly beneficial in teaching in a discipline specific manner, following Woolfolk's 2004 contention that a foremost characteristic of good teaching is expert knowledge of the subject matter and of teaching methodologies' (cited in Donnelly and Crehan, 2011). A combination of these factors, and the placement of the module in the first semester of year one was felt to be important in instigating the staking out and development of disciplinary identity for these students.

Following from this, the key reflection was that the understanding of disciplinary identity and the competencies initiated in this module require ongoing development and reinforcement within the programme. Achieving this within a five credit, one semester module is extremely difficult.

Based on the lecturer and reported student experience of this module, Goldman et al's (2016) elaboration on the concept of disciplinarity is both significant and helpful. They identify the notion of 'core constructs' that pertain to particular (even related) disciplinary areas. These are identified as: (a) epistemology; (b) enquiry practices/strategies of reasoning; (c) overarching concepts, themes and frameworks; (d) forms of information representation/types of texts; and (e) discourse and language structures. In other words, Goldman et al argue that the inherent 'disciplinarity' of a discipline encompasses a range of 'discipline-specific criteria' including the 'core constructs' mentioned above. Such an understanding could also include approaches to pedagogy/assessment, modular structure, placement within programmes. This could also foster the notion of disciplinary (as well as school/programme identity), ideally being substantially reinforced and consolidated at other points in the BA programme.

This, of course, also indicates against the argument that disciplinarity can be easily inserted into generic 'literacy' modules. The findings and reflections presented in this paper suggest the necessity of a long-term commitment to embedding disciplinarity and disciplinary identity throughout a programme. However, this runs counter to the apparent 'logics' of institutional and academic expediency and efficiencies that are emblematic of the landscape of contemporary Irish higher level education.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has outlined the prevailing context and subsequent development and implementation of a module entitled 'Film and Media Literacies' module delivered to first year undergraduate students undertaking a BA in Film and Broadcasting within the School of Media in the Dublin Institute of Technology. The paper argues for the importance of modules with a specific and stated disciplinary identity. Feedback from students and lecturers on the module emphasised the importance of disciplinarity to its success. The disciplinary identity of the module (and, potentially, others) can be further enhanced by use of 'core constructs' (Goldman et al, 2016) and other appropriate discipline specific criteria. However, the difficulties that inhere in developing modules such as this in the context of institutional and discursive emphases that appear to privilege values of efficiency as well as the prevailing context of organisational and cultural shifts faced by DIT as it moves towards technological university status are also acknowledged.

Irrespective of the questions raised here, this paper concludes that while generic modules may offer efficiencies at an administrative, teaching and practical level, there is insufficient existing research that investigates their impacts and effectiveness on students. There is clearly scope for further research in this area, particularly research that examines the perspectives of all concerned stakeholders. While this paper is limited in scope, it is possible that the context and experiences described herein are applicable to other situations and disciplines within the Irish third-level context.

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