

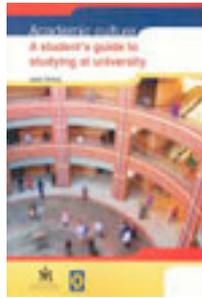
REVIEWS

Academic Culture: A student's guide

A Review by MARIA SIMMS

ACADEMIC CULTURE: A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY
By JEAN BRICK

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) 2006, Sydney, ISBN 978 74138 135 (pbk) ISBN 1 74138 135 5 (pbk) 263 pages



Jean Brick's book is an excellent guide to academic culture and skills for students and academics alike. Although she describes the book as being about academic culture it is much more than that. I found it to be a comprehensive, useful and very readable guide to English for a variety of academic purposes.

Academic Culture sits between the in-depth analysis of university culture and the nature of disciplines described by Tony Becher and Paul Trowler in *Academic Tribes and Territories* and the more skills-based texts such as Stella Cottrell's *The Study Skills Handbook*. Brick has combined analyses of academic culture with how the culture of different disciplines forms a basis for the knowledge and skills they expect of students.

The book gives a very informed account of the aspects of culture that are common to universities in 'Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the USA' (3) and what constitutes a discipline. The opening chapters explain academic culture as the 'attitudes, values and ways of behaving that are shared by people who work or study in universities' (2) and give a very useful account of the way disciplines work in an academic setting. Brick describes the features common to all disciplines (knowledge through debate and argument, academic position, substantiated evidence) then discusses their divergence from each other as due to the questions they ask, the methods they use to 'investigate' (3) and the style of texts they expect students to write. While this explanation of academic culture gives students insight to the

scholarly world they must negotiate, it also provides a rationale for the disparate research and writing methodologies in an academic institution.

As an academic study skills lecturer, one of the pleasures for me in reading the book was the layout of the chapters, which are designed to make complex information about university culture, thinking and practice, accessible and applicable. Each chapter opens with the topic heading, learning objectives and a word list. These are followed by discussion of the topic using texts as examples, a summary of the chapter's main points, then exercises that enable students (and teachers) to put the information into practice.

There is always room for new ideas on the more commonly explored topics of academic reading, writing, preparation for lectures and participation in tutorials, particularly for the specifics Brick uses to show how these things can be done. This information is often news to students and it would be hard to find an academic skills lecturer who is not on the look out for different approaches to familiar topics. I was also very interested to see how Brick tackled the more ephemeral topics which include academic thinking, the place of the student's voice in assignments and inductive and deductive reasoning.

Voice is an important element that many students do not understand. It can be difficult to explain but Brick does it very well. The chapter, 'Voices in Academic Texts', describes what is meant by voice and how to distinguish the writer's voice from other sources used in the text. The first two chapters on this subject lead logically into Brick's explanation of plagiarism. Using examples, Brick's chapter on academic integrity gives students (and academics) very clear guidelines as to what constitutes plagiarism and how much referencing needs to be done particularly in the tricky area of paraphrasing which is so often misunderstood and can lead to unintentional plagiarism.

I think the chapter on the differences between written and spoken text offers an invaluable aid to oral presentation. The student who races through their tutorial paper, head down from start to panting finish, often misses the subtlety of transferring ideas from a purely written form to writing for spoken presentation. While reading any paper in its entirety would not usually be desirable in a tutorial, writing a paper that is to be presented orally lets the student know there is a stylistic difference in work that is written to be spoken and this includes how to attribute sources of information in spoken material.

If I have a quibble with Brick's journey through the highways and byways of academic thought, culture and practice, it is with her discussion of inductive and deductive reasoning. Brick argues that most 'lecturers in English-speaking universities expect students to use a deductive approach' while inductive reasoning is used more often by our 'foreign counterparts' (38). While this may be true, there is a belief that in Western universities the

inductive process of moving from the specific to the general to arrive at a probable conclusion is more widespread in the humanities and that deductive reasoning, with its logical progression from correct premise to proven conclusion, is the preferred methodology of the sciences (although I believe the two modes are more mixed and matched than this would suggest). I think it would have been useful for Brick to extend her discussion of this topic to how various disciplines in English speaking universities can apply the two kinds of reasoning. However, the chapter provides a lively discussion of what constitutes inductive and deductive reasoning that will not go astray for anyone interested in academic culture and practice.

Overall this is a terrific source of information about academic culture and the skills students need to succeed at university. It's one to include in every university library.

References

- Becher, T and Trowler, R (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines* (2nd ed), Society of Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Philadelphia.
- Cottrell, S (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook* (2nd ed), Macmillan Basingstoke, Palgrave.

