BOOK REVIEW

A compass to navigate academia

Navigating Academia. Writing Supporting Genres

John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak, 2011
University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor
ISBN 978-0-472-03453-6 (pbk)
120 pp.

Junior academics and researchers with English as an Additional Language (EAL) tend to work on the periphery of the academic discourse community, and can struggle to "build a credible image as a competent member of [their] discipline" (Swales & Feak, 2012, p. 1). John Swales and Christine Feak offer insight into the hidden genres used by discipline insiders – emails, applications, or references, as examples – and, in doing so, provide a compass that enables outsiders to navigate the path from early postgraduate study to an established academic career.

Navigating Academia: Writing Supporting Genres, published by the University of Michigan Press, is a recent addition to the highly successful *Michigan Series in English for Academic and Professional Purposes* collection. The authors have revised and expanded *English in Today's Research World* (2000) by dividing it into smaller, specialised volumes, of which *Navigating Academia* is the fourth to be published. The original is highly regarded, but since its publication, the research world has changed dramatically. Electronic communication has altered the speed and ease of academic discourse. Levels of formality have decreased, and corpus research has improved knowledge of the linguistic features of academic genres. This modernised volume encompasses these changes, and is informed by the authors' long teaching careers, published research and corpus data.

The book is divided into 7 sections, organised to mirror early academic career progression. After *Opening Orientation*, it moves onto *Getting into Graduate School*; *Finding Your Voice in the Academic Community*; *Establishing Yourself in Graduate School*; *Supporting the Publication Process*; *Writing Acknowledgements*; and finishes with *Moving On to an Academic or Research Career*. Each section is consistently structured with a balance of target genre examples, textual analysis activities, discussion questions, writing tasks and language focus points. *Establishing Yourself in Graduate School*, for example, includes small grant applications, letters for research assistant positions, fellowship applications, and letters of recommendation. The language focus points include positive and less positive language. Nuances of tone are given priority over lexis or syntax, and is reinforced with discussion of the positioning of writers and readers within the academic hierarchy.

The book is accompanied by an online commentary. In contrast to other instructors' guides that only provide answer keys, task feedback includes authorial opinions, such as "in our considerable experience in using this task in classes and in workshops, most people choose message 4 as most important" (Swales & Feak, 2011, p. 34). I found this approach engaging, and would use it to stimulate class debate, although it could be disconcerting to users who would prefer to be given "definitive" answers.

A major strength of *Navigating Academia* is the tone. Swales has been described as a writer with "a clear personal attitude and a strong interpersonal connection to his readers" (Hyland, 2012, p. 16). The supportive presence of both authors is apparent throughout. They reveal personal writing weaknesses with surprising candour as they encourage users to develop a scholarly, yet collegial, tone in writing. My impression was of an interested mentor offering advice rather than of a distant textbook writer. A second strength is the authors' sensitivity to cultural and disciplinary variations, although the text is firmly embedded in the North American college context. Points of comparison are made in statements, such as "American letters tend to be very positive and enthusiastic, whereas British ones tend to be more neutral and guarded" (Swales and Feak, 2011, p. 51). Users are also repeatedly encouraged to conduct investigations into texts from their own context to confirm learning points.

My main reservation about *Navigating Academia* is that it assumes language competence lacking in EAL students who enter Australian universities with the minimum required English level of IELTS 6.5. For instance, below IELTS 8, learners don't have a command of lexis sufficient to convey precise meanings flexibly or fluently (IELTS, n.d.) Therefore, some of the tasks that focus on the more subtle differences in meaning or nuances of tone may be challenging for some users. Consequently, instructors should be aware of the limitations of the text's scope and supplement accordingly. Also, despite the inclusiveness of the tone, the online commentary excludes users working in countries with less access to technology. Another minor criticism is that the size and layout of the book is not user-friendly. It lacks space for writing, and is textually dense and visually unappealing.

Overall, this is a worthwhile book that would be a valuable resource for both longer academic preparation courses, and shorter workshops offered to research higher degree (RHD) students already enrolled in their programme. Many activities stand alone, so instructors could dip into this text according to the needs of their learners, and, indeed, Swales and Feak (2011, p. xv) advise users to be selective in their use of the materials. This book could also be used for self-study purposes. The writers speak directly to learners, using the second person pronoun, asking them to reflect on current preferences and practices, and the online commentary is very comprehensive. However, I do feel that these tasks could be exploited more fully in a group setting, allowing for discussion about differences of opinion, and providing the opportunity for deeper reflection.

In a market saturated with writing textbooks, *Navigating Academia* stands out in its focus on difficult-to-access genres and emphasis on social academic practice. Swales, in an interview, once stated, "I am much less sure than I used to be that I am a language teacher. I have come to believe that my classes are, in the end, exercises in academic socialisation" (Hyland, 2012, p.162). With its emphasis on writing as a means of engaging with and joining discourse communities, this guide truly does help learners navigate academia.

References

Hyland, K. (2012). *Disciplinary Identities. Individuality and Community in Academic Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambride University Press.

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