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Citation: Sambell, Kay (2010) Studying Early Childhood: Part 2 - Reading, writing and producing assignments. Nursery World, 28. pp. 15-18. ISSN 0029-6422

Published by: Haymarket Publishing

URL: [http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/featur...](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/featur...<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1095347/studying-childhood-reading-writing-producing-assignments>)
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Studying Early Childhood

Part 2: Reading, writing and producing assignments.

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Reading, writing and producing assignments.

When studying early childhood at degree level, it's vital to become fluent in appropriate ways of talking and writing about relevant ideas and concepts. This helps you produce effective assignments during the degree itself but, most importantly, also develops essential skills, qualities and dispositions you'll need in the longer term.

In the first part of this series we saw that 'learning' at university is not simply a matter of acquiring more information. Instead, it's about developing high order thinking and complex and subtle understandings about the issues and challenges that tend to preoccupy early childhood specialists. From this viewpoint, when we say individuals understand something, what we are really saying is that they are capable of relating to a topic in the way that a specialist in that discipline does (Ramsden, 2003).

Learning for the longer term

When people have 'learned' in this way it means they know or are able to do, on demand, things they didn't know or couldn't do before (Sadler, 2007, p.390). So, as well as trying to gauge the quality of your achievements, your lecturers will hope that you'll experience the assignments they set as learning events in their own right: that is, as activities that help you to develop your 'academic literacy' in early childhood studies. Academic literacy encompasses much more than straightforward competence with the mechanics of writing, such as grammar, citation and so on, important as these things are when you are producing university assignments. Instead the term conveys a sense of operating with fluency, confidence and competence within the identified domain (McDowell, 2004).

In short, the idea is that, having mastered a topic, students will be able to exercise their new accomplishments effectively and independently now and in the future, and in a range of different circumstances, responding to *any* unseen questions or challenges which are posed to them within the subject domain. This type of learning is poles apart from producing something simply to warrant marks or because you're told to: it's about the sort of enduring learning that is useful for the longer term (Boud & Falchicov, 2006).

It's important to remember that developing this sort of deep-level understanding doesn't come easily to anyone: it is only achieved by grappling long and hard with the debates, concepts and ideas of the subject community. That's why academic reading is such a vital element of your degree. It's a key way your lecturers expect you to learn: so that you gradually develop a deeper, interlaced, extensive appreciation of early childhood issues and ways of thinking that you will use well beyond university.

Active reading is the foundation stone for each assignment.

Reading widely in the academic domain is your main window on the world of disciplinary specialists. It's where you witness them having conversations, as they put forward and share their views of particular issues with each other. The early years expert community develops particular forms of argument, asks specific sorts of questions and has particular ways of addressing them, but these gradually shift and develop as ideas are discussed, new connections are made and principles are revealed and debated. In other words, no expert community is static; it constructs and maintains knowledge, not just by examining the world and 'discovering' novel ideas or new facts, but by negotiating, debating and discussing concepts, ideas and values within the community.

When you are reading, see yourself, then, as trying to become part of that informed, reasoned debate, genuinely getting to grips with the concepts, theoretical frameworks,

evidence-bases and discourses of the community, so that you can *use* them, rather than simply know they exist to put them in an assignment.

Active reading: the key to becoming critical.

In order to ‘hear’ the conversations disciplinary specialists engage in, you must approach your reading actively. You should set out to *understand* anything you read, looking for its messages and meanings, rather than simply seeing it as a block of information to remember or ‘theory’ to acquire.

You will be expected to draw upon and refer to reading when you hand in your assignments. But your lecturers don’t just want to see a lot of unrelated strings of information which attempt to show off how much you have read. Showing how busy you have been is not enough: they want to see how far you can *understand, use* and *apply* relevant ideas and theories. When reading, your lecturers want you to gain *far* more than a set of facts about children’s development: they want you to approach the topics they teach critically.

‘Critical’ in this context does not mean you have to disagree with everything, it means weighing up and thinking questioningly about other people’s ideas, looking for the meanings beneath the surface, contrasting different interpretations and theories, principles and assumptions about children, childhood and children’s worlds. It means tuning in to the ways in which people disagree, and, even more importantly, thinking about the *reasons* why they disagree. It entails identifying complex and messy issues, and logically following through and teasing out what different viewpoints might mean. It involves always asking ‘why?’

As one student puts it, this feels quite different from the demands made of her before university, when she felt that her teachers simply expected her to include specific material in her assignments, adding in information which they told her to read:

*At college, I mean – you really couldn't go wrong. You knew all you have to do is put in the things they tell you. If that goes in, then really, you're going to pass. But [at university] it's like, well, you've got the criteria, but you've got to get an angle. You've got to look into it more – **much** more. It's really affected the way I'm going about reading.*

This student now sees reading as a matter of 'looking into' something, rather than gathering things to 'put in'. Students who do well in assignments tend to see the whole business of academic literacy in this way: they try to make sense of theory they read and forge it into something of their own. In our book we called this process 'reading into writing' (Sambell et al, 2010, p48).

STRATEGIES FOR TACKLING ASSIGNMENTS EFFECTIVELY.

Below are a few pointers about how you might productively tackle your assignments. The first section focuses on reading, the second on your own writing. It's important, however, to see these as integrated processes.

APPROACHING READING EFFECTIVELY.

Try to read critically, with questions in your mind, rather than just noting what other writers say.

To read critically you could try to

- Identify the line of reasoning in the text. Ask yourself “Where’s this writer coming from?” Delve. Look for their ‘hidden agendas’. Consider how they define terms.
- Try comparing different theorists’ views of something. Look for points of difference and points of similarity between the two. A good assignment often shows that you realise that whilst some theorists may overlap and share overall perspectives, they also have minor points of difference.
- Avoid plagiarism by taking down the full bibliographic details of texts you read, using whichever system (e.g. Harvard) your lecturers require. Develop a system for note-taking which enables you to discern which are direct quotes (don’t copy too many) and which are your own thoughts, so that you don’t mix them up and accidentally plagiarise.

Working out lecturers’ expectations.

However they are worded, all assignments titles contain a central question which has to be addressed. Students who lose marks often do so because they don’t address this (Race, 2007).

Before you start reading round, make sure you know what you are looking for.

- Examine the title very carefully. What exactly is required? Think about how it might relate to all the perspectives, material, debates and so on that you have been encouraged to think about during the specific module.

For example, is the title *really* asking you to compare different perspectives on an issue or phenomenon? This would be fairly common, for instance, on introductory units, when

lecturers are often trying to get you to recognise and then discuss different perspectives on a 'term' (e.g. 'childhood', 'play', 'learning', 'care', 'education', 'independence', 'needs'). You often are required to show, therefore, that you realise that there are different knowledge claims, which lead, in turn, to controversies of definition (Mitchell, 2003).

PRODUCING A GOOD ASSIGNMENT.

It's worth observing, too, that academic writing often compares and contrasts theoretical perspectives as a matter of course. Look, for instance, how far authoritative books, chapters or journal articles establish the territory they're exploring by offering an initial overview of the varying perspectives of previous work in the field. This helps set out the key debates and allows the reader to see where the writer's work fits within the disciplinary community. Try to emulate this in your own work.

Develop an argument

Tutors really want to see *your* line of thought- your argument- in your writing. So don't simply give them unrelated strings of other people's ideas, even if they are suitably acknowledged, as this will get low marks, because it is a passive approach. Nor should you just give them back their lecture: lectures are just the springboard for your own study and besides, lecturers know what they think- they want to hear your ideas. Never put (Kay Sambell, PowerPoint lecture, 2010) as a reference: you *must* read round the topic.

- Rather than simply describing (or 'putting in') what you have read, try to *make points* about its significance. Identify connections between different perspectives you have encountered, comparing and contrasting elements of your reading, so

that you are acting like an author, rather than a tape-recorder that purely repeats back material it has recorded. Use quotations sparingly in your assignments.

- Try to create your own structure, rather than copying the ways in which material is structured in the things you read.

Get an angle on your writing.

You are usually marked on how well you select, organize and re-present information to meet the requirements of the title. You need to show how well you understand the area and how far you are able to make links and connections between different perspectives on a topic. So try and choose an angle that interests you. Everyday situations or popular debates might spark ideas, as the following student explains:

“I look for controversies in newspapers – that gets me started asking questions, which I then follow up in the library. Like, for instance, I got the idea of doing smacking on the Children’s Rights module, because there was an article on it in the papers.”

Avoiding plagiarism

The main way of avoiding plagiarism (and, incidentally, becoming an active learner) is to develop your own academic ‘voice.’ Before you start your assignment, practice informally ‘teaching’ someone else about what you have read, as it will help you rehearse the ideas by speaking them aloud in your own words, and allow you check the extent to which you really grasp the material you are studying. If you do this, you are, in effect, giving yourself a ‘dry-run’ at summarizing the main ideas and outlining different viewpoints on themes and issues when you come to write your assignment. In this way you will avoid simply repeating stuff unthinkingly.

Avoid final, absolute language: sounding cautious

When writing your assignments, try to use language that shows you realize that the definitions you've drawn on in your wider reading are relative and provisional. By incorporating secondary reading in the following way, you show these are not your personal ideas, but traceable to a range of sources. This helps you achieve an academic, theorized tone while comparing and contrasting the secondary reading. For example,

Sambell (2009) and Gibson (2010) both suggest that [x]. On the other hand, Miller (2007) puts forward the opposite view, asserting that [y].

Furthermore, by talking about your sources or theorists in a tentative way, you'll avoid falling into the trap of sounding like you think one is right and the other wrong.

Create a good impression

Finally, it's vital to create the right impression by getting the basics right. Your work should look professional, and have an academic and scholarly tone similar to the authoritative texts that you've read. This usually means conforming to the conventions of scholarly writing (your lecturers will make clear if they want some other format). Most universities have ample additional support on hand for the technical (rather than conceptual) elements of the writing process and there are lots of Study Skills Guides to help you with the specifics: make sure you check them out. In particular, it's extremely important to reference correctly, but don't let this convention faze you: it swiftly becomes automatic.

Conclusions

This all means it's important not to leave your assignments until the last minute! Build up steadily, run your ideas past others, and ask if you are not sure about your

interpretation of what's expected. Above all, try and treat assignments as learning experiences. Experiment and take risks so you find out what works for you!

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