MBA STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMIC WRITING:

A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores MBA students' experiences of academic writing, and endeavours to determine the difficulties experienced by MBA students during the writing of their dissertations especially in terms of academic literacy.

Case study research design and mixed methods were used to generate both quantitative and qualitative data in this qualitative study. A constant comparative method of analysis was used to identify categories and themes within the data.

The results of this research showed that the majority of MBA students, while at Business School X, viewed their identities primarily as business professionals as opposed to students of business in an academic setting. Findings of the study showed that MBA students' identities as readers and writers are strongly framed by the business genres they encounter in their professional capacities. The study also revealed that MBA students writing their dissertations desire to produce a professionally relevant research document as much as one that meets the requirements of academic rigour. It is within this arena of academic research writing that a dilemma exists for MBA students with reference to the purpose, format and value of the dissertation as a vehicle for reporting research findings.

Recommendations are that academic literacies and genre pedagogy are mainstreamed into the course design of the MBA programme at Business School X and that the repurposing of the dissertation as a genre be evaluated in terms of business relevance.

KEY WORDS

academic literacy, discourse communities, communities of practice, writing identity, genre, research, higher education, MBA

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

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Deborah Jean de Coning

_______ day of July in the year 2010

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all my family.

To my parents, Ros and Don Liebenberg, thank you for your love and support.

To my husband, Andre de Coning, a special thank you for your patience,
love and tireless support and for giving me the space to complete this project.

To my two erudite felines, Bella and Bobbin, who took a paws-on approach to being my 'purr'sonal research assistants, thank you for your non-judgmental companionship at all times.

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To my supervisor, Stella Granville, thank you for your guidance and belief in me and for introducing me to the world of Academic Literacy.

To the MBA students it was my privilege to work with, thank you for sharing your experiences with me and for making this study a reality.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AACSB	Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business
BICS	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
CALP	Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills
CHE	Council on Higher Education
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EOP	English for Occupational Purposes
ESL	English Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
HE	Higher Education
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
LOLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
MBA	Masters in Business Administration
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PHEI	Private Higher Education Institution
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning

<u>MBA STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE STUDY</u>

"What are the difficulties experienced by MBA candidates, with particular reference to academic literacy, when undertaking research and writing dissertations at Business School X?"

CHAPTER 1 <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

1.1 Introduction and Rationale

The motivation for this study came from my time spent as an academic librarian in a business school library. Many of the students coming into the library had completed the coursework component of the MBA programme and were about to embark on their dissertations. During my interaction with them it became evident to me that there was a disparity between the level of buoyancy MBA students displayed after the successful completion of their coursework; the passion they felt for their research topic; their professionalism as business people and the ineptitude and frustration they experienced as they embarked on their research journey. Many students viewed the dissertation as a difficult hurdle to cross before attaining the MBA qualification.

Ever since the emergence of management as a discipline and the establishment of the first business schools in the United States in the late nineteenth century, the debate has raged as to whether the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) is an applied degree or a more theoretical degree. While most Masters degrees are academic, requiring a high-level component of research, the MBA is regarded as a business training qualification and is widely viewed as as much an applied degree as an academic one. (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 70; *Financial Mail*, 2009, September 18, p. 36).

Although much sought after by both individuals and employers, the MBA qualification straddles a tightrope between the academy and business. Historically, the MBA has battled for legitimacy as an academic qualification in its attempts to conform to academic norms while retaining its relevance to business practice. Both in South Africa and abroad there remains an ongoing challenge as institutions strive to maintain equilibrium between the professional relevance and the academic rigour of the MBA (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 79).

By its nature, the MBA degree is one in which the curriculum is grounded in the business world and MBA candidates are exposed to multidisciplinary theories that are designed to place them at a competitive advantage when practising in their business arenas. The blend of academic rigour and business applicability is characterised by the use of case studies and the practical application of theories during the coursework component of the MBA programme. However, in deference to the academy, the MBA (a postgraduate qualification on level 8 of the 8-level National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and on level 9 of the 10-level Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF)) - contains a significant research component. The research aspect requires that MBA candidates undertake an academically-appropriate research study and produce a corresponding dissertation. Academic research presents many challenges for students, not only in terms of the nature of the reading and writing required to successfully complete such a project, but also in the way that many professionals have to learn, as business students, how to operate within an academic community that may be somewhat unfamiliar to them.

1.1.1 Research Aims

Since it would appear that the presence of a research component in the degree may be the determinant of the level of professionalism or of the academic character of the MBA, the purpose of this study was to explore the MBA students' experiences of academic writing during the research component of the MBA programme. I was curious to find out if the tension that exists around the identity of the MBA qualification had any effect on the students or if such a tension characterised their identity as producers of academic text. I wanted to find out what it was, specifically, that presented students with difficulties when embarking on the research component of the MBA.

The research question that guides this study can thus be expressed as follows:

> **"What are the difficulties experienced by MBA candidates, with particular reference to academic literacy, when undertaking research and writing dissertations at Business School X?"**

Further to this main research question is an exploration of the nature of discourse communities and identity, and what the impact of being a member of more than one discourse community might have on MBA candidates with reference to the academic reading and writing required of them during the research component of their MBA degree.

1.2 Context

1.2.1 The Study Site – Business School X

Business School X, a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) in Johannesburg, South Africa was the research site for this study. Business School X is accredited by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and amongst other qualifications is also an accredited provider of an MBA degree.

The MBA qualification provided by Business School X can be viewed as a generalist MBA, and is made up of a core number of taught business disciplines including Finance, Marketing, Human Resources, Operations and Strategy delivered across a two-year phase of coursework. The degree culminates with a research element as a result of which students are required to develop a research question and write a dissertation. Prior to 2009, students did not attend a taught research methodology module but attended a shortened dissertation workshop that provided guidelines for developing a research question. Once the research proposal is accepted by the research department at the school, the students have a supervisor allocated to them.

Since 2009, a full research methodology class has been initiated as part of the current curriculum at Business School X. By implication, at the time of writing, there has not yet been a cohort who has completed a dissertation after having attended such a class. It is important to note that the samples used for this study were from cohorts that attended only the shortened dissertation workshops and who submitted dissertations during 2008 and 2009; or who were in the final throes of preparing dissertations for submission in early 2010.

1.2.2 The Sample

Essentially the MBA degree is one that encompasses the world of business and commerce, and thus the majority of candidates accepted onto the MBA programme are either already in the business world, or have their sights set on a career in the business arena. The student profile at Business School X is diverse across characteristics including age, gender, language, prior education, profession, nationality and culture. While the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) at Business School X is English, many students at the school are South African English Second Language (ESL) speakers or ESL speakers from African countries including Malawi, Lesotho, Zambia, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast. Consequently, for the majority of students at Business School X, English is not their first language.

Admission onto the MBA programme is governed by the quality assurance criteria relating to admission in general and to recognition of prior learning. However, the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) also made it possible to use admission criteria other than formal academic qualifications alone through the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). RPL thus made Higher Education (HE) accessible to select individuals who, for a variety of reasons, had acquired professional experience without necessarily having obtained the required degree (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 88). However, no more than 10% of the student intake for a given year may be made up of students who have entered via the RPL route. Limits to admission based on RPL are in place to ensure that students with limited opportunity for succeeding are not admitted to an HE programme.

In terms of the 8-level NQF (in operation when the samples in this study were admitted to the degree) admission onto an MBA programme required at least a first degree or equivalent as well as work experience. However, the 10-level Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) sets an honours or postgraduate diploma or equivalent as the minimum requirement for admission. Institutions may set additional requirements but may not decrease the minima as set.

Where students have been admitted via RPL and have not had a formal undergraduate university education, the MBA could be first time that they are being exposed to a postgraduate academic environment and the expected level of reading and writing skills required within such an environment. The same could apply to students who are graduates of more vocational or professional programmes - such as engineering - and who have not previously completed an advanced level academic research component as part of the qualification. Ultimately postgraduate study poses new challenges to all students entering this academic community of practice for the first time.

1.2.3 The Higher Education Landscape in South Africa

While reference has been made earlier to the tension existing between professional relevance and academic rigour in the nature of the MBA degree, it will be useful to examine Business School X and its provision of the MBA programme against the backdrop of the legislative structure of the South African educational landscape.

In 2002 the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) began a review of all MBA programmes then being offered in South Africa. The review culminated in a report titled *The State of the Provision of the MBA in South Africa.* By the end of the review process in 2004, seven MBA programmes were granted full accreditation, fifteen were given conditional accreditation and a further fifteen were de-accredited (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. vii). In terms of this report, Business School X's MBA was provisionally accredited in 2004, and in 2005 was fully accredited. The report highlights and elaborates on the admission criteria and the level descriptors that pertain to candidates admitted to an MBA programme.

In South Africa, the MBA, as a professional master's degree, is situated at Level 8 PG 2 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Among the level descriptors or applied competencies that graduates from a professional master's degree should have acquired during their studies are the following:

1. A comprehensive and systematic knowledge of a field/discipline and a depth of knowledge in some areas of specialisation;
2. A coherent and critical understanding of the theories of the field/discipline; an ability to critique current research and advanced scholarship and ability to make epistemological judgments based on evidence;
3. An understanding of a range of research methods, technologies and techniques. The ability to select them appropriately for a particular research purpose.
4. Ability to identify, analyse and deal with complex real-world problem issues using evidence-based solutions and theory-driven arguments.
5. Efficient and effective information retrieval skills; the identification, critical analysis and evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data; an ability to engage with research and current scholarly or professional literature.
6. An ability to present/communicate academic professional work effectively, catering for a range of audiences (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p.88-89).

From the level descriptors listed above, it can be seen that not only is there an indication of the importance of disciplinary discourse, but the significance of scholarly practice is also emphasised. Criterion 5 highlights the importance of the research component, while criterion 6 states that the ability to communicate 'academic professional work effectively' is an applied competency. This underscores the importance of the level of academic literacy required at this level of study.

The research component of the MBA includes the writing of a dissertation and is consequently an opportunity for candidates to synthesize the knowledge and skills acquired on the MBA programme. An acceptable post-graduate level of academic literacy is clearly required for the successful completion of the research element of the MBA programme. It is significant to note that the report identified research, both as research production by the unit's faculty and research education for students, as the second academic area where most MBA programmes seemed to be experiencing difficulties (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 61).

For the MBA to be an accredited postgraduate programme on the National Qualifications Framework, the research component is one with which the qualification must comply. By the same token criterion 1 and criterion 2 refer to a sound knowledge of a discipline as well as a coherent and critical understanding of the theories of a particular field as applied competencies. As a result, a nuanced blend of professional and academic competencies is required by graduates of the MBA programme.

While it is imperative for business schools such as Business School X to operate within the legislative framework provided by the legislation and the HEQC's quality assurance requirements in order to provide a legitimate MBA qualification, it is also crucial for the school to keep in touch with the business sector so that the qualification offered remains professionally relevant and so that '...gaps between employer expectations and higher education outcomes' can be addressed (Griesel & Parker, 2009, p. 1). Studies have indicated that MBA qualifications do not necessarily have the impact that students and organisations expect (Groenewald, 2009).

I have outlined the rationale for, and context of the study above, and it is against this backdrop, then, that I would focus this study on the MBA candidates at Business School X and their experiences of academic writing. This study endeavours to determine the difficulties MBA candidates at Business School X experience in terms of academic literacy when writing their dissertations during the research component of the MBA programme.

Chapter two of this document contains a discussion of the literature relevant to and informing the study, while chapter three outlines the research design and methodology used to conduct the research. In chapter four the data generated is analysed and the findings discussed while concluding comments and recommendations for further study are covered in chapter five.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

While I have attempted to review the literature on Academic Literacy under various theme subheadings, it becomes clear that there are no clear-cut boundaries to these themes. The themes are not mutually exclusive and the overarching theme of academic literacy is a complex and multi-facetted one. The thread of identity, although not discussed separately in the literature review as a theme, is woven through all the sections in the literature review bringing them together to form a textured backdrop for the case study at hand.

I will firstly review some of the literature that explores the notion of academic literacy - reading and writing in higher education settings.

2.1 Academic Literacy – Reading and Writing within Disciplines

The term 'academic literacy' has come to be applied to the "... complex set of skills (not necessarily only those relating to the mastery of reading and writing) which are increasingly argued to be vital underpinnings or cultural knowledge required for success in academic communities, from elementary school onward" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 4).

Learning in higher education, for the student, involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. Lea & Street (1998, p. 158) suggest that "academic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study."

According to Lea & Street (1998) one of the perspectives that education research into student writing in higher education has fallen, is that of academic literacies. The academic literacies approach views literacies as social practices. It views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemologies and identities rather than skill or socialisation.

An academic literacies perspective treats reading and writing as social practices that vary with context, culture, and genre (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984, 1995 as cited in Lea & Street, 2006). Lea & Street (2006) suggest that literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as varied social practices associated with different communities. An academic literacies perspective also takes account of literacies not directly associated with subjects and disciplines, but with broader institutional discourses and genres.

In attempting to understand some of the difficulties faced by MBA students in terms of academic writing and the genre of the dissertation in particular, the following excerpt from Lea & Street (1998, p. 159) may be especially pertinent:

> An academic literacies approach ... sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy is the *requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes.* This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of linguistic repertoire. A student's *personal identity* ... may be challenged by the forms of writing required in different disciplines... (Emphasis mine).

Lea & Street (2006) have argued that approaches to student writing and literacy in academic contexts should be conceptualized through the use of three overlapping perspectives or conceptual models: a study skills model, an academic socialization model and an academic literacies model.

Briefly, the study skills model focuses on the surface features of language and on the transfer of acquired writing and literacy skills from one context to another. The second model – academic socialization – is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. In this model it is envisaged that students will acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking and using literacy that typifies members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The third model, academic literacies, which is similar in many ways to the academic socialization model, is concerned with making meaning, identity, power and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in a particular academic context. This model, however, views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced and situated (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369).

What is important to note here is that these three models are not mutually exclusive and that they could be applied to any academic context. The authors posit that the models are useful for the development of curriculum and programme design and provide an approach for teaching which moves away from the student deficit model and towards an understanding of the writing and literacy requirements of entering higher education for all students.

Lillis and Turner (2001) in attempting to make sense of what is involved in student writing draw on two perspectives. The first perspective highlights 'non-traditional' student writers engaging in academic writing, and the second perspective focuses on a cultural-historical tradition of scientific rationality. It is the second perspective that may have bearing on the difficulties experienced by MBA students when in engaging in academic writing.

The rationalist way of writing that was employed by scientists such as Newton in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to report their experiments and take their readers through the reasoning process associated with the experiments was the precursor to "... creating a style of argumentation that continues to hold sway evaluatively as good academic discourse... The need to persuade forced Newton to pay attention to his use of language. It was during these times that the academic discourse of scientific rationality became institutionally embedded" (Lillis & Turner, 2001, p.64, 65). Perhaps the dilemma for business students is that they perceive their dissertation as a means to persuade a business audience of their research findings, yet they are required "...300 or so years on from Newton ... to write with a similar degree of precision and control...", a product of Newton's time (Lillis & Turner 2001, p.65).

Although academic literacy can be narrowly defined as "the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in [university]" (Spack as cited in Braine 2002, p.60), Braine (2002) states that the acquisition of 'academic literacy' that is essential for graduate studies is more than the ability to read and write effectively. He maintains that students are required to acquire advanced academic literacy by adapting quickly to both the academic and social culture of their host environments.

Stacey & Granville (2009, p.327) comment that "academic literacy needs to be developed throughout an individual's academic life to enable participation in the heart of academic enterprise – being able to examine, refute, agree with, unpick or apply – to interact with the ideas of others and to do so in disciplinary approved ways." This is the end point of advanced academic literacy where postgraduate students should be when they write their theses or research reports.

One of the areas that requires a high level of advanced academic literacy is the literature review of the dissertation. Boote & Beile (2005, p.1) state that "...a thorough, sophisticated literature review is the foundation for substantial, useful research." Good research, in their view, strives to advance collective understanding which cannot be done without first understanding the literature in the field.

While the focus of Boote and Beile's (2005) study is on doctoral educational research, there are parallels that can be drawn in terms of the academic business research being undertaken by the MBA candidates in this study. Boote & Beile (2005, p. 3) maintain that in traditional disciplinary research, where a researcher is communicating with a well-defined audience about commonly accepted problems and where disciplinary research often is based on a canon of shared knowledge, the researcher's literature review is somewhat easier to construct. They claim that in education research they are often faced with the challenge of communicating with a diverse audience which makes it difficult for them to assume shared knowledge, methodologies, or even commonly agreed-upon problems (Boote & Gaudelli as cited in Boote & Beile, 2005, p.4).

A parallel can be drawn here, as MBA candidates are communicating with a dual audience of both the academic and the business discourse communities. Because MBA candidates are not writing for a "well-defined audience", it is all the more important for them to be able to construct a literature review that will form a good foundation on which their research can be built.

In order to achieve some, if not all the objectives set out above, student researchers will need to be able to identify and obtain relevant literature sources to be able to complete a comprehensive literature review; and for this a broad range of skills and knowledge is required. Being suitably 'information literate' in this research context is vital for students to achieve success particularly when completing the literature review.

2.2 Information Literacy – Reading for Information

Information literacy can be broadly defined as "…the ability to recognise information needs and to identify, evaluate and use information effectively" (Bruce, 1999, p.33). Elmborg (2006, p.196), however, brings together information literacy and academic literacy by stating that " If literacy is the ability to read, interpret and produce texts in a community, then academic information literacy is the ability to read, interpret, and produce information valued in academia…”.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (2000), as cited in Boote and Beile (2005), defines information literacy as:

> An intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information – activities which may be accomplished in part by fluency with information technology, in part by sound investigative methods, but most importantly, through critical discernment and reasoning.

Bruce (2004, p.1.) states that information literacy has become recognised as “…the critical literacy for the twenty-first century…” and “… is viewed as the foundation for learning in our contemporary environment of continuous technological change.” Various information skills models have been developed, but I would use Doyle’s (cited in Bruce, 2004, p.2) attributes of the information literate person to outline the information literacy skills I feel are needed by the business students that form part of this study. Doyle describes the information literate person as being one that:

- recognises that accurate and complete information is the basis for intelligent decision making;
- recognises the need for information;
- formulates questions based on information needs;
- identifies the potential sources of information;
- develops successful search strategies;
- accesses sources of information;
- evaluates information;
- organises information;
- integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge and
- uses information in critical thinking and problem solving.

Zaporozhetz, (as cited in Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 5) reported that doctoral candidates felt their library skills were inadequate and that most dissertation chairs and students saw the literature review as a relatively routine activity that doctoral candidates should be able to complete on their own with little help from their advisors. Zaporozhetz also noted that many of the education doctoral students tended to be mature accomplished professionals, qualities which made it more difficult for them to admit that they may lack library search and information synthesis skills and knowledge. The analogy here is that many MBA candidates fit the profile described by Zaporozhetz in that they are mature, accomplished professionals who have undergraduate qualifications in fields or disciplines that may not have required a research component, and who may thus find it difficult to admit that they lack information literacy skills.

While mastery of the academic and information literacy skills discussed in the literature review thus far may not be totally dependent on whether the student is learning in his/her mother tongue or not, the following literature reviewed gives some indication of the challenges facing students who are studying in English and for whom English is not their mother tongue.

2.3 The Complexity of being an English Second Language (ESL) Speaker

When describing the context for the study earlier, mention was made of the multi-dimensional nature of the student profile at Business School X. While English is the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) at the school, many of the students at the school do not have English as a mother tongue. Students are required to engage in class debate and submit assessment tasks in English. The dissertation is also written in English.

Much has been written about the challenges facing ESL students and higher education institutions. Diverse student populations at universities and the academic dilemmas that result from their presence in classes are, according to Zamel, (1995, p.515) "...slowly reconfiguring the landscape and blurring the borders within what was once a fairly well-defined and stable academic community." It is often the trait of the 'well-defined and stable academic community' to insist that students should adopt the "specialized discourse of the university" without taking into account the difficulties faced by students who are learning in a second language. Shaughnessy, (as cited in Zamel, 1995, p.519) refers to ESL students as 'strangers in academia'.

English has undoubtedly achieved the status of a global lingua franca which enables mutual understanding across many fields, activities and cultural groups. (Crystal, Pennycook as cited in Tietze 2008). Not only has English become the accepted language for global academic activity, but also the lingua franca for international trade and business. Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (as cited in Tietze, 2008, p. 373) have even coined the term of 'Business English Lingua Franca' (BELF) as a neutral and shared communication code that is used for conducting business within the global business discourse community.

There can thus be "... no denying the dominance of English in today's world and as a lingua franca of the international business scene" (Bacha & Bahous, 2008, p. 76). That English has become accepted as the lingua franca of the business community is a phenomenon which has had an impact on business schools and universities throughout the world. In the global business arena, the MBA graduate, who may now be in an executive position in a multi-national company, will be expected to communicate- in whatever form- be it an oral presentation or written business report, in English.

Business students who have English as a second language are thus required to communicate in English in their professional environments as well as in their academic environment at the business school. The type of English proficiency required may however differ between the discourse communities of the business world and that of academia.

As Cummins (1996) says, ways of conceptualizing the nature of language proficiency and its relationship to other constructs have been debated since ancient times. He refers to misconceptions regarding the nature of language proficiency that are common amongst educators in North America, one of which could well be applicable to the context of this study.

Cummins states that a common misconception is that an individual's ability to converse fluently in English is taken as an indication that all aspects of "English proficiency" have been mastered to the same extent as native speakers of the language. Thus "...conversational skills are interpreted as a valid index of overall proficiency in the language" (Cummins, 1996, p. 52).

A close relationship is assumed here between the two faces of language proficiency – the conversational and the academic. Cummins, when referring to the distinction between contextualised and decontextualised language, uses the terms '*basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS)' and '*cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP)'. Contextualised language or BICS is where meaning is supported by contextual or interpersonal cues, such as the gestures, facial expressions and intonation present in face-to-face interaction. Decontextualised language or CALP is usually associated with higher order thinking skills such as hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting or classifying; language functions which are related to learning and the development of cognition (Cummins, 1996, p. 56,57).

As Biggs (1996) posits, the essential aspect of academic language proficiency is the ability to make complex meanings explicit in either oral or written modalities by means of language itself rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues. Supervisors of students completing dissertations may assume, because of an MBA student's surface fluency in English (BICS) that the student is equally proficient in the academic processes required for academic writing (CALP).

Because this study focuses on professionals as business students in an academic setting, the literature pertaining to discourse communities is an important element of the literature review which I will explore in the following section.

2.4 Discourse Communities – where Identities are Forged

The notion of discourse community is relevant to the study of academic literacy because it stresses the participatory, negotiable nature of learning and the fact that learning is not always based on overt teaching (Flowerdew, 2000, p. 128).

Gee (1996, p.131) provides the following definition of a discourse:

> A discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artefacts' of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'

From this definition we can identify an individual as belonging to a particular social group. Gee (1996, p. 137) distinguishes between two broad sorts of discourses in any society – primary and secondary discourses. Primary discourses constitute a person's first social identity which is formed early in life during their primary socialisation as a member of particular families within their socio-cultural settings. Secondary discourses are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socialization within various public groups and to which membership is gained by mastering, through acquisition, the social practices that define a particular discourse.

So for example, a Kenyan student at Business School X who grew up in a Kenyan family, in Kenya, has as his/her primary discourse the social identity of being Kenyan. Throughout his/her life the student may gain membership to more than one other secondary discourse, such as being a scholar at a local school; becoming a member of the business community as a professional, and as a student studying for an MBA at a business school.

Berkenkotter et al (1991, p. 191) report that studies carried out show that

> ...students entering academic disciplines need a specialized literacy that consists of the ability to use discipline- specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions to serve their purposes as writers. Academic disciplines have been characterized as *discourse communities...* Academic or professional discourse communities are not necessarily located in specific physical settings, but rather their existence can be inferred from the discourse that members of a disciplinary sub-speciality use to communicate with each other. In this sense, the discourse that one group of like-minded people use *defines* the community and is its product as well.

Swales (1990) proposes six defining characteristics for identifying a group of individuals as a discourse community:

1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of *common public goals*.
2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members, although the *participatory mechanisms* will vary according to the community.
3. A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide *information and feedback*.
4. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
5. In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis (Swales, 1994, pp 24-27).

Flowerdew (2000) suggests that to acquire membership of a discourse community, an individual has to learn the conventions that underpin Swale's six criteria. This is normally done by some form of formal or informal apprenticeship. Bizzell, as well as Bartholomae, (as cited in Flowerdew, 2000, p.129), argue that students entering academic disciplines must learn the genres and conventions that are commonly employed by members of the disciplinary discourse community, as well as learning what Bazerman (as cited in Flowerdew, 2000, p.129) calls the conversations of the discipline. Such issues and problems, Flowerdew notes, are developed through study and collaboration on research projects with experienced practising scholars.

In defining business discourse, Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken (2006, p.3) state that "... business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done." Business discourse can thus be viewed as "... social action in business contexts." When students enrol at the business school, it is inevitable that they bring their acquired professional or business context and experience with them, as members of a business discourse community.

Candidates admitted onto the MBA programme enter what is ostensibly an academic discourse community for which they need to acquire, according to Gee's (1996, p.131) definition of discourse above, "...the ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artefacts' of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'...", in this case the business school community.

For the duration of the completion of the coursework which can be regarded as more business and operations specific and where assignments are based on business scenarios and case studies, the discourse community may be one where the student as a business professional may feel that the discourse community is more business driven. However; once the coursework is completed, students are required to complete a research report which requires a high level of academic literacy. Completing the dissertation successfully and meaningfully is underwritten by the students' ability to access and obtain legitimate membership within an academic discourse community.

An interesting dilemma arises when looking at a business school as a discourse community. In the case of Business School X, the majority of lecturers are independent contractors who are industry specific specialists. Whilst they may have been lecturing for many years, they may not necessarily be academics or scholars first and foremost. The question then arises as to the nature of the discourse community within Business School X.

Should business be the main discourse, then the emphasis in assessment criteria may be placed on business related content and application, with a lesser focus on academic literacy as part of the assessment criteria. Were the academy to be the main discourse of the business school, then the relevance of the research question pertaining to this study might be in doubt.

Discourse communities are important because it is within these communities that novice scholars become inducted into their disciplinary discourse communities through various forms of apprenticeship (Flowerdew 2000, p.128). It is thus that some of the literature relevant to communities of practice within discourses will now be examined.

2.5 Communities of Practice

The sort of knowledge that is required in order to be accepted into a discourse community is not always acquired in the formal setting of a classroom. Flowerdew (2002) explains how this type of knowledge is acquired through learners' involvement with it. Thus knowledge can be seen as a process and not a product, and as only being valid when activated within the discourse community.

Learning, when viewed as situated activity, has as its core a process what Lave & Wenger (1991) call *legitimate peripheral participation.* They draw attention to the point that

> ... learners inevitably participate in communities of practioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, about activities, identities, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 29).

Flowerdew (2002, p.131) elaborates on Lave & Wenger's notion of *legitimate peripheral participation: legitimate* because anyone is potentially a member of what Lave and Wenger call the *community of practice* or discourse community; *peripheral,* because participants are not central but are on the margins of the activity in question; and *participation* because the learners are acquiring knowledge though their involvement with it. To maintain membership of the discourse community, scholars need to engage in continual legitimate peripheral participation.

Of particular note in this context, is that students at the business school are part of more than one community of practice, namely the business discourse community as well as the academic discourse community, each having its own particular discourse. Willis (as cited in Lave, 1993, p.80) uses the notion of double articulation to describe how people are engaged in complexly interconnected 'situations' for extended portions of their everyday lives.

Firstly, business students are members of the business community and represent diverse roles within that community. Some are what Lave (1993, p.68) describes as legitimate peripheral participants within the practice, such as junior or trainee managers who are still learning as they participate in business. Others are executives, professionals and industry leaders within their organisation or business community and take on the role of a master in their community of practice. Secondly, business students need to acquire membership of the academic community at the business school, a context wherein they may find themselves newcomers to the graduate academic discourse and legitimate peripheral participants in the academic community of practice.

When considering Lave and Wenger's cognitive apprenticeship model, Belcher (1994, p. 24), sees the learner as "... someone who joins a community by consciously becoming an increasingly more active participant in it." She adds that an apprentice's willingness to identify with, be changed by, and contribute to the evolution of a community may determine his/her membership in it. A legitimate peripheral participant is thus a newcomer to a community of practice, who participates to a limited extent and with limited responsibility in the actual work of an expert (Belcher (1994, p 24).

To become members of the academic discourse community, MBA candidates need to participate in the academic community as set out by Lave and Wenger above. This should occur throughout the duration of MBA programme, however, membership of the research academic community becomes especially significant when students embark on their dissertation, as the dissertation can be "… a rite of passage into the targeted discourse community" (Swales 1990, p.187).

For graduate students the acquisition of academic literacy is more than the ability to read and write effectively. Braine (2002, p. 60) notes that graduate students "...need to build interactive relationships with their teachers, thesis supervisors, and peers, and develop effective research strategies and good writing skills ..." A good relationship with one's supervisor, as a mentor would ensure that a student gains entry to the discourse albeit as a legitimate peripheral participant. Thus the relationship between the graduate student and his/her supervisor becomes very meaningful in the way that the student is mentored through the research process. The relationship between the student and the supervisor can be seen as one of student/mentor or as being one of apprenticeship.

It is widely accepted amongst students on the campus of Business School X that completing the dissertation is a stumbling block for preventing the timeous completion of their MBA degree. Thus I feel that it would be of interest to explore briefly some of the literature pertinent to the supervision of postgraduate research study.

2.5.1 Supervision

Belcher (1994, p.25) realised while teaching a dissertation writing class, the "...extent to which the advisor/student relationship, that is, 'social co-participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), impinged upon the students' socialization in their disciplinary communities of practice." Belcher studied three graduate student/mentor relationships within different disciplines to explore what they could illuminate of some students' attempts at functioning as literate members of their professional communities. She noted that while there are in fact graduate students who succeed in becoming full-fledged contributing members of their research communities without effective mentoring, the cases in her study pointed to the mentoring relationship as a determining factor in the academic and professional success of some students.

Berkenkotter et al (1991, p. 193) make the assumption that graduate students are initiated into the research community through the reading and writing they do, through instruction in research methodology, and through interaction with faculty and their peers. Boote & Beile (2005, p.13) go so far as to suggest that the "…standards and criteria of good literature reviewing are part of the hidden curriculum of good graduate programmes and perhaps part of the tacit knowledge passed on from mentors to candidates."

Supervision of postgraduate study has become the focus of a growing scholarship, and the relationship between student and supervisor has been described as a complex one. "Expectations, expertise, efficient use of time and empathy are all important ingredients of the student-supervisor relationship" (Phillips & Pugh as cited in Mackinnon, 2004, p.399).

Areas of potential difficulties experienced in the student-supervisor relationship have been reflected in the literature. A useful overview of the literature on postgraduate supervision has been provided by Johnston (as cited in Mckinnon, 2004, p.399):

> Much of the literature relating to postgraduate supervision has focused on its complexity, highlighting issues such as unclear, differing and sometimes incompatible expectations of students and supervisors, problems with interpersonal relationships between supervisor and student, diversity in the roles required of supervisors, lack of institutional policies or guidelines to support postgraduate students and the sense of isolation experienced by postgraduate students.

In looking at various models for supervision, Lee (2007) outlines some conceptual models of research supervision. In the functional model, the most prominent activity of the supervisor is rational movement through the required tasks, while in the critical thinking model the supervisor is evaluating and challenging the student's work. Supervisors who adopt the relationship development model supervise according to their experience using emotional intelligence and a range of experiences to draw on.

Where the supervisor adopts the view of enculturation as a model for supervising, the aim is for the student to become a member of an academic discipline. (Leonard, as cited in Lee, 2007, p.685). In the enculturation model, the supervisor will also provide some specific expertise but will also be a gatekeeper to many more learning resources, specialist opinions and networks. The model that has as its most prominent activity mentoring and supporting the student in the construction of knowledge is the emancipation model. As a result of being exposed to this model of supervision, the student may experience personal growth and reframe his/her knowledge. The mentoring process involves providing educational tasks and activities which include progressing the candidature, mentoring, coaching the research project and sponsoring student participation in academic practice (Lee, 2007, p. 686).

Dysthe (2002) suggests that that in the act of supervising and mentoring graduate students, professors represent the disciplinary culture and discourse society into which the graduate student is being socialized. Dysthe investigated students' and supervisors' views of what constituted good supervision, particularly as it related to the development of written texts. She then identified three distinct models of supervision. The first, the teaching model, describes a traditional teacher-student relationship defined by an emphasis on asymmetry, status difference and dependency. This model is often driven by a joint focus of both student and supervisor on effectiveness in relation to producing an acceptable thesis (Dysthe 2002, p. 518).

Dysthe's (2002) second model is the partnership model, which is more symmetrical, and where the student's thesis is seen more as a joint project. She notes that there seems to be a more conscious pedagogical philosophy behind this model, and that the supervisor aims at fostering independent thinking. Thirdly, the apprenticeship model is characterised by the student's learning by observing and performing tasks in the company of the supervisor. This model is distinguished from the partnership model in that the supervisor assumes a much clearer authority base that is recognised by both parties.

Dysthe concludes that the conceptualizations of supervision as teaching, partnership or apprenticeship are not mutually exclusive, as elements of one may appear in another. She notes that most supervision processes that students and professors related to her seemed to include all aspects of all three models but were dominated by one of them, sometimes depending on the phase of the thesis work (Dysthe, 2002, p. 536).

It is thus clear that the role of supervision is both pivotal and complex. Mutual expectations of the supervisor and student need to be negotiated and managed in order for successful outcomes of the relationship to be met.

I have reviewed some of the literature relating to communities of practice and how the business student may gain entrance as a legitimate peripheral participant to the academic discourse community. The role of the supervisor has also been explored in terms of facilitating entrance to the research academic discourse community.

MBA students are faced with being members of dual discourse communities and communities of practice – those of business as well as the academy. A dilemma presents itself to the MBA student in terms of mastering - as well as distinguishing between - the genres and conventions that are commonly employed by members of these discourse communities respectively.

I will now explore the notion of genre and the influence it may have on business professionals as students in a higher education academic setting.

2.6 Genre

Much has been written on the concept of genre and most of the literature I have read and reviewed on the topic has referred to Swales's (1990, 2004) conceptualisations of discourse communities and also of genre. I find Swales's frameworks of these concepts to be particularly useful in the context of my study and it is thus that I will focus in this section of the literature on the work of Swales.

While the dissertation comprises of different chapters each with a genre of its own, for the purposes of this study I will refer to the dissertation or research report as a singular genre in terms of academic writing as well as in terms of form and purpose.

One of Swales's (1990) defining characteristics of a discourse community is that a discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims. These may involve the appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discoursal elements and the role that texts play in the operation of the discourse community.

Swales (1990, p.58) defines genre as comprising a

> ... class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.

Swales claims that a communicative event as highlighted in the definition above comprises not only the discourse itself as well as its participants, but also the role of that discourse and the environment of its production and reception. He further claims that the main feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes. Swales suggests that is not uncommon to find genres that have sets of communicative purposes. When purposive elements come into conflict with each other, the effectiveness of the genre as sociorhetorical action becomes questionable.

As will be explored further in the following section of literature reviewed on the writing identity of the business student, business students often experience role conflation when writing the dissertation. The dissertation could be seen to have a set of communicative purposes, in that the student is writing for both an academic audience who will mark him/her for the purposes of meeting the requirements of the MBA; as well as writing for the business community for whom they endeavour to present their research findings and recommendations and from whence the research question emanated. Whether or not these purposive elements come into conflict with each other or not and the effectiveness of the dissertation as a genre are issues that should be considered when looking at MBA students' experiences of academic writing, notably the dissertation.

Of relevance to the business student, especially those studying in a part-time capacity is the observation that the "...knowledge of the conventions of a genre, (and their rationale) is likely to be much greater in those who routinely or professionally operate within that genre rather than in those who become involved in it only occasionally" (Swales, 1990, p.54). Consequently then, active discourse community members tend to have the greatest genre-specific expertise due to their being familiar with and most professionally involved in those genres.

For business students who are mostly already members of the business discourse community and who are newcomers to the higher education academic discourse community there will be different genres particular to each discourse that they will need to master. Genres vary significantly along a number of parameters such as purpose and the mode or medium through which they are expressed. Prepared- text genres also vary in the extent to which their producers are conventionally expected to consider their anticipated audiences and readerships (Swales, 1990, p. 62).

Swales in his later work, reviews the value and viability of the 'easy adoption' of definitions such as the one given above as he feels that they can prevent one from seeing newly emergent genres for what they really are. He posits a change of focus to rather explore genres through a metaphorical lens (Swales, 2004, p. 61).

One of the metaphors that Swales uses to explore genre is that of frames of social action. He uses a characterization of genre put forward by Bazerman:

> Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the

communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the familiar (as cited in Swales 2004, p. 61).

In terms of looking at genre expertise, Beaufort (as cited in Swales 2004, p.61) produced a model of five areas of knowledge that impinge on communicative expertise. The four that overlap in the shaping of an expert text are subject matter knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, writing process knowledge and genre knowledge. According to Beaufort, then, genre knowledge is often a necessary but never a sufficient condition for discoursal success.

It can thus be seen that the notion of genre is a complex one that has a deep impact on the discoursal identity of an individual as a professional, as a student and thus as a writer and producer of academic texts. I will now examine some of the issues that may affect business students' identity as writers.

2.7 Discourse Dilemma or Discourse Dexterity? The Business Student's Writing Identity – A Delicate Juggling Act

Ivaniĉ (1998, p. 23), points out that identity in relation to writing may refer to one or more aspects of the identity of a writer writing a particular text – the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, self as author and possibilities for selfhood. Discoursal identity "...is constructed though the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written"(Ivaniĉ 1998, p. 25).
Ivaniĉ highlights that research on discoursal identity needs to address several related questions, which may be used later in the study when considering the data collected. They are:

1. *What are the discourse characteristics of particular pieces of writing?*

2. *What are the social and ideological consequences of these characteristics for the writer's identities?*
3. *What characteristics of the social interaction surrounding these texts led the writers to position themselves in these ways?*
4. *More generally, what processes are involved in the construction of a discoursal self, and what influences the shape of discoursal identities?* (Ivaniĉ 1998. P. 25.)

Students in professional courses such as the MBA may often find themselves engaged in writing tasks that require the assumption of more than one identity. Price (2007) refers to role conflation – the blend or fusion of roles especially in reading or text - that is often found in academic-professional writing. Price notes that "... students are aware of the fact that while the assignment attempts to simulate a professional task, the assignment is set within the university, and that students are writing for their lecturer as well as for the imaginary client" (2007, p. 04.1).

Zhu (2004) conducted a study that identified and defined writing assignments required in undergraduate and graduate business courses, and examined the characteristics of several types of assignments and the skills demanded by them. Results showed a diversity of assignments in terms of genre types. While some assignments represented genres more common in the university context, others represented genres more connected to the business discipline (Zhu, 2004, p.130). Zhu found that while both categories of genres were tied to the curriculum, they seemed to cast students into different primary roles.

Zhu (2004, p. 130) points out that "...the more common academic genres cast the writers essentially in their institutional role (i.e. writers as learners); the disciplinary genres on the other hand, initiated students into their professional role (i.e. writers as business people) by allowing students to solve real worked problems and employ business communication devices."

Results from Zhu's study indicated that although the business genres shared a problem-solving and decision making orientation, “...the tools with which to solve problems and make decisions differ in different business areas and assignments.” Zhu further concludes that “... the diversity and preferences for different problem-solving and decision making tools and information sources suggest that 'business' may not constitute a single and unified discourse community ” (Zhu, 2004, p. 131).

The dilemma posed by the business student’s participation in two discourses may often cause difficulty with writing. Ivaniĉ (1994, p. 6) suggests that “... when writers feel ‘stuck’ they tend to assume that it is something to do with the content of what they are writing.” Ivaniĉ further points out that it may well be that the writer feels, without being able to identify or analyse it, uncomfortable with the self that they are projecting as they write.

This perhaps sheds light on the difficulty MBA students have in terms of the dissertation, whereby they are conducting business research, yet are producing an academic document ultimately destined for a corporate environment that will be assessed by an academic.

It is possible that MBA students at Business School X battle to construct multiple textual identities for themselves, especially as many are ESL speakers. The expectations of the business community or employer for the students to obtain the qualification and to contribute in terms of the research question being addressed in the dissertation is compounded by the pressure on the students to show themselves as being credible members of the academic community and to ascribe to the discourse of academia so that they will obtain the minimum requirement to pass the dissertation and obtain the MBA qualification.

Seshadri and Theye (2000) undertook a study to compare business professional’s perceptions of writing quality with those of business faculty. The writers hoped the findings would help business teachers to better understand the aspects of writing desired of future business professionals. The most significant finding of the study was that "... business professionals perceive writing quality differently from business faculty" (Seshradi & Theye, 2000, p.20).

The study indicated that business professionals expect writing to reflect clear logical thinking. While both groups (professionals and faculty) valued organisation and focus; faculty emphasised purpose, theme and appearance in writing. Where business faculty emphasised spelling and grammar, business professionals gave more emphasis to wording, style, sentence structure and content. Seshadri & Theye (2000, p.21) came to the conclusion that business professors emphasise the process of writing while business professionals focus more on the product.

Interesting to note is that Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001) as cited in Bacha and Bahous (2008, p. 77) report that although faculty find usage errors more annoying than executives, the latter rated many errors as serious. They stated that as members of business discourse communities, business readers tend to read rapidly for meaning and that perceived errors slowed them down.

The literature has shown that writing for business students can pose a dilemma in terms of mastering and differentiating between the writing conventions of two discourse communities – those of business and the academy. Perhaps a generic skill that needs to be acquired is that of discourse dexterity!

I will now consider literature that suggests ways that programme design can play a role in helping to equip students as producer of academic texts to master some of the conventions demanded by the academic discourse community.

2.8 Programme Design

In this section I would like to review some of the literature pertaining to an academic literacies approach to course design which includes certain aspects of genre-based pedagogy, as well as consider the role of research and the dissertation as part of the MBA programme design.

Findings from academic literacies research during the last decade have indicated a complex relationship between the acquisition and development of subject-based knowledge and writing in higher education. These findings all point to the difficulties experienced by students when trying to master the conventions of writing in any particular context (Lea, 2004, p.740).

Lea (2004) notes that supporting this relationship between writing and learning is not generally regarded as the concern of course designers, usually subject specialists primarily concerned with course content who therefore often overlook the ways in which writing and textual practices are generally central to the process of learning.

Lea (2004) suggests some principles of an approach to course design based on an 'academic literacies' model, as well as an indication of possible limitations (see Appendix A) which she intends to be generative to the broad contexts of higher education. She argues that that the knowledge obtained from academic literacies and student writing research needs to be embedded into mainstream course design across the broad curriculum of higher education. Further, she recommends that course design should include a more complex understanding of the ways that both students and academic staff interpret and engage with all the texts associated with study, not just written assignments (Lea, 2004, p.753).

Many scholars have argued that genre knowledge plays a fundamental role in advanced academic literacy (see Bhatia, 1993; Kern, 2000; Swales, 1990 & Wennerstrom, 2000 as cited in Loudermilk, 2007). Because the language, organisation and rhetoric of academic and professional writing are so different from those of ‘everyday’ English, it is necessary even for native speakers to acquire these sociolinguistic conventions (Loudermilk, 2007, p.191). Students need to master the conventions of many different genres in order to succeed in their academic and professional careers.

Although a critical component of academic success, genre conventions are seldom explicitly taught at university courses; and, states Loudermilk (2007, p. 191), “... students are expected to acquire discipline-specific genre knowledge slowly over a period of years, through continuous exposure to genre-specific texts and the arduous process of writing and re-writing.

What is significant is that academic literacies need to be explicitly taught. Lea & Street (2006, p.371) write about a project where students were required to interact with different categories of text that were defined as different genres and modes. They wanted students to be aware of the different language and semiotic practices (the uses of signs and symbols) associated with the requirements of different genres in academic texts.

Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken (2007), commenting on business discourse teaching refer to a project undertaken by Bhatia & Candlin (2001) where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) formed part of the programme design for undergraduate business students in Hong Kong. While their studies pertain to undergraduate business students, a parallel can be drawn with MBA students as many MBA students do not necessarily have a business-related undergraduate degree. In terms of genre, MBA students may have had to learn the genre conventions of an undergraduate discipline other than business, the genre conventions of their profession as well as the genre conventions required by postgraduate research study.

Recommendations adapted from Bhatia & Candlin's Hong Kong English for Business Education Project include the incorporation of a well designed programme for English for Academic Purposes as well as a genre-based English for Specific Purposes course (see Appendix B).

When considering the importance and role of research within the MBA programme, the debate of whether the MBA is a professional or an academic degree comes to the fore once again. The Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) highlights the role that research plays in achieving curriculum renewal and relevance as well as understanding the changes that globalisation has brought about in world economies. The AACSB also notes that students should develop an academic interest in research because the renewal of business practices depends upon it (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p. 103).

The purpose of the research dissertation within the design of the MBA programme as set out above is two-fold – curriculum and business renewal. As mentioned before, while there are many sub-genres within the research dissertation, for the purposes of this study, the dissertation will be viewed as a genre of academic writing. In discussing 'communicative purpose', Swales contends that

> ...a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style (as cited in Askehave & Swales 2001, p.97).

While the rationale for the genre of the dissertation is dictated by the academic discourse community there is nonetheless a tension with regard to purpose in terms of form and audience. "Askehave argues that if we want to discover and identify the purpose of a text, we cannot avoid investigating the context in which the text is used” (Askehave & Swales, 2001, p. 203).

It is evident that programme design is a complex and multi-facetted aspect of scaffolding a student’s academic learning experience and one that should be planned with an appropriate level of insight into the profile of the business student in a higher education setting.

In Chapter 2 I have reviewed and discussed the literature that will contribute to creating a context for this research study. This study aims to determine the difficulties experienced by MBA students, with particular reference to academic literacy, when undertaking research and writing dissertations at Business School X. Chapter 3 outlines how the research was planned and executed.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The research strategy for this study was considered in light of my attempts to enter "... the social world of the research subjects and understanding their world from their point of view" (Saunders et al, 2006, p. 107). This research study was thus guided by an epistemology of interpretivism.

An interpretivist approach to research falls under the umbrella concept of qualitative research. Cresswell (2008, p. 46) describes qualitative research as, "...research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyses these words for themes; and conducts the enquiry in a subjective biased manner."

A research paradigm is a way of examining social phenomena from which particular understandings of the phenomena can be gained and explanations attempted. Accordingly this study adopted an interpretive research paradigm in that it looked at the subjective ways "... that humans construe reality through means that include, but that exceed rational argument" (Davis, 2004, p.99). Davis also notes that of particular importance in viewing phenomena subjectively, is language. This is an important consideration in the context of this study because of the connection between language and academic literacy.

Because this research study is concerned with the context in which events take place, I followed an inductive approach to the study by generating data and analysing and reflecting on the themes that the data generated.

3.2 Research Design

The purpose of this study is partly descriptive as well as exploratory. It is descriptive in that it attempts to "...portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations" and will be a forerunner to an exploratory study. An exploratory study is a valuable means of finding out "... what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light" (Robson as cited in Saunders, 2006, p. 134,133). In this study I attempted to portray an accurate profile of MBA students at Business School X and endeavoured to gain new insights into their experiences of academic writing.

Case study research responds well to an approach which "... seeks to understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 181). This approach can be described as interpretative and subjective. A case study can provide a unique example of "...real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles" (Nisbet and Watt as cited in Cohen et al 2000, p.181).

This study made use of a case study research design. In this instance, the site for the case study was Business School X, and examples of "real people in real situations" were samples of students at Business School X who were at various stages of the dissertation process.

Hitchcock and Hughes (as cited in Cohen et al 2000, p. 182), outline the hallmarks of a case study. Highlights that pertain to the case study approach are that:

- It is concerned with a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case.
- It blends a description of events with the analysis of them.
- It focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, and seeks to understand their perception of events.
- It highlights specific events that are relevant to the case.

While there are many strengths of case study research, there are also possible weaknesses which should be borne in mind. Limitations of case study research are that the results may not be generalisable except where other readers/researchers see their application; and that they are prone to problems of observer bias, despite attempts made to address reflexivity (Nisbett & Watt, as cited in Cohen et al, 2000, p. 184). Being aware of these potential limitations at the outset of the research process is valuable when attempting to ensure validity and reliability.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the research problem, I collected both quantitative and qualitative data which comprised a mixed methods research design. Quantitative data collection techniques generate or use numerical data whereas qualitative data collection techniques generate or use non-numerical data, largely made up of words or text. In this study, quantitative research provided me with an opportunity to gather data from a large number of people and generalize the results, whereas qualitative research permitted an in-depth exploration of a few individuals (Cresswell, 2008, p.562).

The sampling strategy that was used was that of non-probability sampling. In this case I targeted a particular group, being fully aware that it did not represent the wider population. This sampling strategy is justified in that the research undertaken was small scale research, and in this instance, case study based. In this research there was no intention to generalize findings beyond the case study in question.

Two groups of subjects were identified for the study:

- individuals who had completed their dissertations in 2008 and 2009 and
- individuals who had been in a cohort together while completing their two year coursework component of the MBA programme and who were at different stages of the dissertation process.

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of both groups of subjects. In purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to be included on the basis of their typicality. In this way they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs (Cohen et al, 2000, p.103). Limitations of such sampling are that it does not represent the wider population and is deliberately selective (Cohen et al, 2000, p.104).

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethics clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand to conduct this research (Protocol: 2009ECE64).

As part of the ethics clearance procedure before the commencement of this research, permission was obtained from the principal of Business School X to use the school as the research site on condition of anonymity, hence the use of Business School X as the name of the school. Similarly, members of the focus group have been given pseudonyms to protect the identities of the individuals involved as well as the identity of the school and all respondents to the online survey were collected in a manner that ensured complete anonymity.

All participants were issued with participant information sheets and participation in both the online survey and the focus group was voluntary. In the case of the online survey, submission of the completed survey was an indication by the participant that participation was voluntary. Participants in the focus group interview signed informed consent forms agreeing to participate in the interview as well as signing an informed consent form indicating agreement to being audio-recorded.

Following is a discussion of how the data was collected from the two samples of subjects mentioned above.

3.4 Research Methods – Data Collection

The data collection techniques that were employed in this case study were an online survey and a focus group interview. The online survey generated quantitative numerical data that could be interpreted and represented on a graph or by statistics and also generated qualitative data that were non-numerical of nature in the responses to some open-ended questions posed in the online survey.

The focus group interview generated qualitative data. Group interviewing is a research technique that takes advantage of group dynamics to produce new and additional data. The evolving relations among group members can also be a stimulus to elaboration and expression (Frey & Fontana, 1993, p. 32).

In using two different methods of data collection in a mixed-methods approach to the study, I looked to the particular strengths and limitations inherent in each of the methods to complement one another in a unified research design. Where focus groups can never claim to be representative of a much larger population that surveys can obtain, surveys lack the flexibility of qualitative approaches to pursue particular issues in any greater depth. Surveys are also less adept at capturing the kind of in-depth contextual detail that focus groups can provide (Wolff, Knodel & Sittitrai, 1993, p. 119).

Data was collected from a relatively large sample of eighty-seven MBA graduates and graduands who had completed their dissertations in 2008 and 2009 by means of the online survey. A focus group interview with seven MBA students generated more in-depth contextual data. Using two different methods of data collection in this study allowed for triangulation, demonstrating validity, and also allowed the strengths and limitations of both the online survey and the focus group interview to complement each other. The data collected from both the online survey and the focus group enabled me to illustrate and confirm findings, as well as clarify and elaborate results so that an in-depth profile and context of the case being studied could be constructed.

Having outlined the research approach and design above, I will discuss in more detail how I approached the execution of two data collection methods used, namely the online survey and the focus group interview.

3.4.1 The Online Survey

Having worked with MBA students I knew how busy their private and professional lives are. I thought that it was unlikely that they would take the time to complete a hard copy questionnaire and return it to me by post. The following factors were taken into consideration when choosing an online survey as a means of data collection:

1. The sample was comprised of business professionals with extremely pressurised schedules.
2. The sample population was no longer regularly on campus.
3. The unreliability of the local postal delivery services.
4. The location of participants residing in provinces other than Gauteng and in countries other than South Africa which may have compromised participation and response had traditional postal services have been used.
5. The survey could reach participants who were travelling on business trips where they otherwise may have been excluded from participating by not having received a hard copy of the survey.
6. Using electronic mail (email) is an accepted and generally preferred means of communication in today's business environment with obvious benefits of convenience and ease in terms of responding to the survey and submitting it by a mere mouse click.
7. Complete anonymity for respondents was guaranteed as the submitted surveys did not reflect email addresses or I.P. addresses of computers used to complete the survey.

Participants were sent an email with an invitation to participate in the online survey (see Appendix C) presented as a link in the body of the email. Attached was the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix D) outlining the purpose of the study as required by the Ethics Committee of University of the Witwatersrand. The fact that the survey was inadvertently sent out late at night turned out to have fortuitous results in that the email containing the survey link appeared in the recipients' email inboxes early the following day. The initial response was good; and the survey results indicated that most responses received were completed and submitted before noon of the following day. A week later a follow-up email was sent out, this time purposefully late at night to thank participants and to offer those who had not had an opportunity as yet to click on the link and complete the survey. Once again, a good response was received and thereafter the survey was closed. A total of 42 responses were collected from 87 invitations and thus a 48,3% response rate was achieved.

A participant information sheet was attached to the email, wherein it was stated that a submitted survey would be an indication of the participants consent to partake in the study.

3.4.2 The Focus Group Interview

Focus groups are a form of group interview, with the emphasis on the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher (Morgan, as cited in Cohen et al, 2000 p. 288). In this way the participants interact with each other rather than with the interviewer, so that the views of the participants can emerge. It is from the interaction of the group that the data emerge. Focus groups are contrived settings bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular theme or topic where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes.

In this purposive sample, eight students who had been in the same cohort during the coursework component of the MBA programme were invited to participate in the focus group interview. They had all completed the coursework component of the MBA programme, but were at different stages of the dissertation process. The students were invited by email with the participant information sheet attached (see Appendix E). There followed a two week period of email communication in an attempt to set up a suitable time for the interview. Seven of the eight invited participants were able to attend the interview which was held in a syndicate room on the campus of Business School X.

The fact that the participants were known to each other as well as to the researcher enabled a relaxed atmosphere in which participants were open with each other and interacted with a measure of trust as well as a level of debate which indicated that responses were heartfelt as well as questioning. A digital recording device was used to record the interview and which enabled the data to be stored in an MP3 file format. I had a list of prepared questions (see Appendix F), but as the interview progressed, I followed the flow of the discussion, occasionally directing it with a guiding question. The interview lasted one hour and twelve minutes.

Also present was someone who took field notes. Informed consent forms were signed by the participants indicating their willingness to take part in the interview as well as to be audio recorded.

3.5 Method of Analysis

According to Cresswell (2008) there are six steps commonly used in analysing qualitative data. He states that qualitative researchers first collect data and then prepare it for analysis. This analysis initially consists of developing a general sense of the data, and then coding description and themes about the central phenomenon (Cresswell, 2008, p.244). Two points made by Cresswell that were significant for me were that qualitative research involves "... a simultaneous approach of analysing while you are also collecting data," and that it is interpretive research, "... in which you make a personal assessment as to a description that fits the situation or themes that capture the major categories of information" (Cresswell, 2008, p.245). The data analysis approach described above resonates with the one used in this study.

Also of use to me in the analysis of data was the constant comparative method, whereby I constantly compared data. These comparisons led to tentative categories or themes that were then compared to each other and other instances (Merriam 1998, p 159). As described by Merriam (1998, p. 179), I found that devising the categories or themes was largely an intuitive process, although systematic and informed by the study's purpose; my orientation and knowledge as an investigator, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves.

The online survey was completed first. I made use of an online survey service which analyzed the data as the online survey replies were submitted online. The quantitative data were expressed in graphs and the quantitative data from open-ended questions in the online survey were listed by question. I used some of the questions and findings from the online survey as a guiding framework for the focus group interview which was held about a week after the online survey was closed.

Because of the manner in which the results of the online survey were made instantly available, I was able to gauge some of the trends that emerged from the online survey as the results came in. Consequently, I had already gained some idea of the findings of the online survey at the time of conducting the focus group interview. While I had prepared a framework of possible questions for the focus group interview, the discussion took off after minimal input from me. During the discussion, I was able to listen intently and simultaneously begin with a preliminary analysis of what was being said, comparing it to what had emerged from the online survey. Where the discussion touched on issues that had been highlighted in the online survey, I was able to probe and direct the discussion by asking strategic questions that would provide more depth and context to the research question.

For me the transcription process was important as I was constantly making sense of the data by looking for and identifying broad themes generated by the data as well as being able to start identifying chunks of data that elaborated on some of the findings from the online survey.

The focus group interview was transcribed and translated to thirty pages of text. I used the focus group data as a primary source for identifying the broad themes by which I categorised the data. Quantitative findings from the online survey were used to contextualise language and education profile of the sample as well as support, augment or differ with the findings generated by the focus group data. Findings from both the focus group and the online survey were used to complement each other, illustrate and confirm findings as well as clarify and elaborate results. Together the findings from both data collection methods used helped to build a textured portrayal of the case study at hand.

Once I had identified the broad themes that had emerged from the data, I was then able to break each one down further into categories and allocate codes which I then used to sort the data from the focus group transcription.

In this chapter I have discussed the research approach and design as well as the methods of data collection implemented in this study. What follows in Chapter 4 is a thematic analysis, as outlined in this chapter, of the data generated by the online survey and the focus group interview and a discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter the findings of the data collected in the study are presented and discussed. A mixed method research design was used to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was generated by an online survey sent out to a sample of eighty-seven MBA students at Business School X who had completed their dissertations during 2008 and 2009. The online survey also yielded some qualitative data from open-ended questions posed in the survey. In the discussion of the data analysis that follows, data from the online survey and the focus group will be used in a complementary manner and discussed together in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of this case study.

Qualitative data was collected during a focus group interview that was conducted with seven students who had all completed the coursework component of the MBA programme and who had been in the same cohort. The respondents had also been co-members of a study group during the first two years of their study. Theoretically, thus, they could all have been at the same stage of completion of the dissertation. However, students in this group were at different points of progress in the dissertation process with one student having already submitted his dissertation.

The key below provides some biographical background to each member of the focus group. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of respondents. Where the name Debbie appears it is where I have participated in the focus group as the interviewer.

Chad: A forty year old South African student for whom English is a second language. He completed most of his schooling as well as his post-school qualification in English. Five to ten years have passed since his most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. His post-school university qualification prior to admission to the MBA programme is in the field of humanities, and he is currently employed in the aviation sector as an onboard manager.

Elizabeth: A thirty-five year old Kenyan student for whom English is a second language. She completed most of her schooling as well as her post-school qualification in English. Less than five years have passed since her most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. Her post- school university qualification prior to admission to the MBA programme is in the field of finance and computer science and she is currently employed in the NGO sector as a finance technical advisor.

Emile: A thirty-nine year old Nigerian student for whom English is a third language. He completed most of his schooling in English. Less than five years have passed since his most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. His post-school professional qualifications prior to admission to the MBA programme are in the field of information and communication technology and were completed in English. Emile is an entrepreneur having had experience in the financial banking sector as well as in the information and communication technology industry.

Jaco: A thirty-six year old South African student for whom English is a second language. He completed most of his schooling in a language other than English and his post-school qualification in English. Less than five years have passed since his most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. His post- school university qualification prior to admission to the MBA programme is in the field of banking and commerce, and he is currently employed in the banking sector as a small business services manager.

Lihle: A thirty year old South African student for whom English is a second language. He completed most of his schooling as well as his post-school qualification at a Technikon in English. Less than five years have passed since his most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. His post- school university qualification prior to admission to the MBA programme is in the field of electrical engineering, and he is currently employed in the telecommunications sector as a marketing manager.

Nicki: A thirty-nine year old South African student for whom English is a second language. She completed most of her schooling as well as her post-school qualification in English. A period of 5 – 10 years has passed between her most recent post- school qualification and admission onto the MBA programme. Her post- school university qualification prior to admission to the MBA programme is in the field of education, and she is currently employed in the broadcasting and communications sector as a financial administrator.

Thabo: A forty-four year old South African student for whom English is a second language. He completed most of his schooling as well as his post-school qualification at a Technikon in English. Less than five years have passed since his most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. His post- school university qualification prior to admission to the MBA programme is in the field of finance, and he is currently employed in the energy sector as the head of cash management.

Respondents to the online survey and members of the focus group had recently been engaged or were currently engaged in academic writing during the completion of their dissertations. Although the samples were different in terms of specific selection criteria and the method of data collection used, the common denominator was engagement in academic writing as students at Business School X. Using a mixed method approach allowed all the information about the case to be brought together which, according to Merriam (1998, p. 194), initiates the more intensive phase of data analysis in a case study.

The methods of data analysis used in this study have been discussed in detail in chapter three. I will firstly present data obtained from the online survey that describe the contextual background to the sample in terms of language usage and post-school academic qualifications of online survey respondents.

4.1 Description of the Online Survey Sample in terms of Language and Post-school Academic Exposure.

Questions were asked in the online survey to establish a perspective for the sample in terms of language and post-school academic exposure. The same questions were posed to members of the focus group in a shortened online survey so that corresponding contextual information for describing the focus group participants could be obtained. It should be noted that the questions from the survey are not discussed in numerical order in the data analysis; rather they are discussed as part of the themes to which they bear relevance.

Question 1 of the online survey intended to establish how many of the sample had English as their mother tongue:

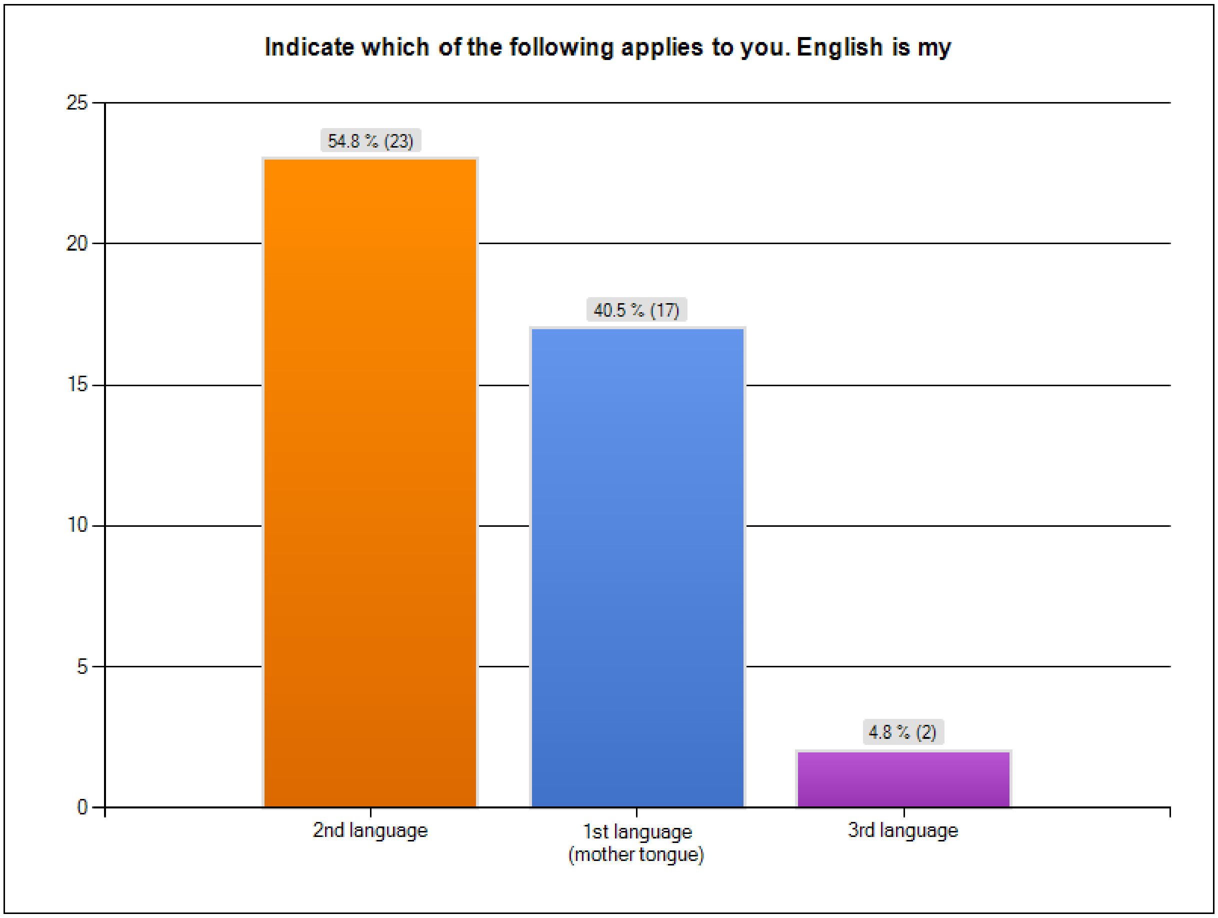

Figure 1 – Question 1 of Online Survey

Figure 1 above shows that of the online survey sample 40.5% of the respondents have English as a mother tongue; 54,8% of the respondents have English as their second language and for 4,8% of respondents, English is a 3rd language. Figure 1 shows that the majority of the students in the online survey sample do not have English as a first language. This is significant because the majority of students at Business School X are reading and writing academic English at a higher education post-graduate level in their second language.

Question 2 of the online survey enquired in which language/languages respondents had completed most of their schooling. Of the respondents, 71,4% had completed the majority of their schooling with English as the medium of instruction; 21,4% completed the majority of schooling in another language (Afrikaans and French) and 7,1% completed the majority of their schooling with a combination of English and another language (Finnish, Kiswahili and Tshivenda). From these results it can be seen that the majority of the sample had completed most of their schooling in English.

Question 3 had as its goal to determine the nature of post-school education the online survey respondents had been exposed to and to gain possible insights into respondents' exposure to academic writing within various academic settings.

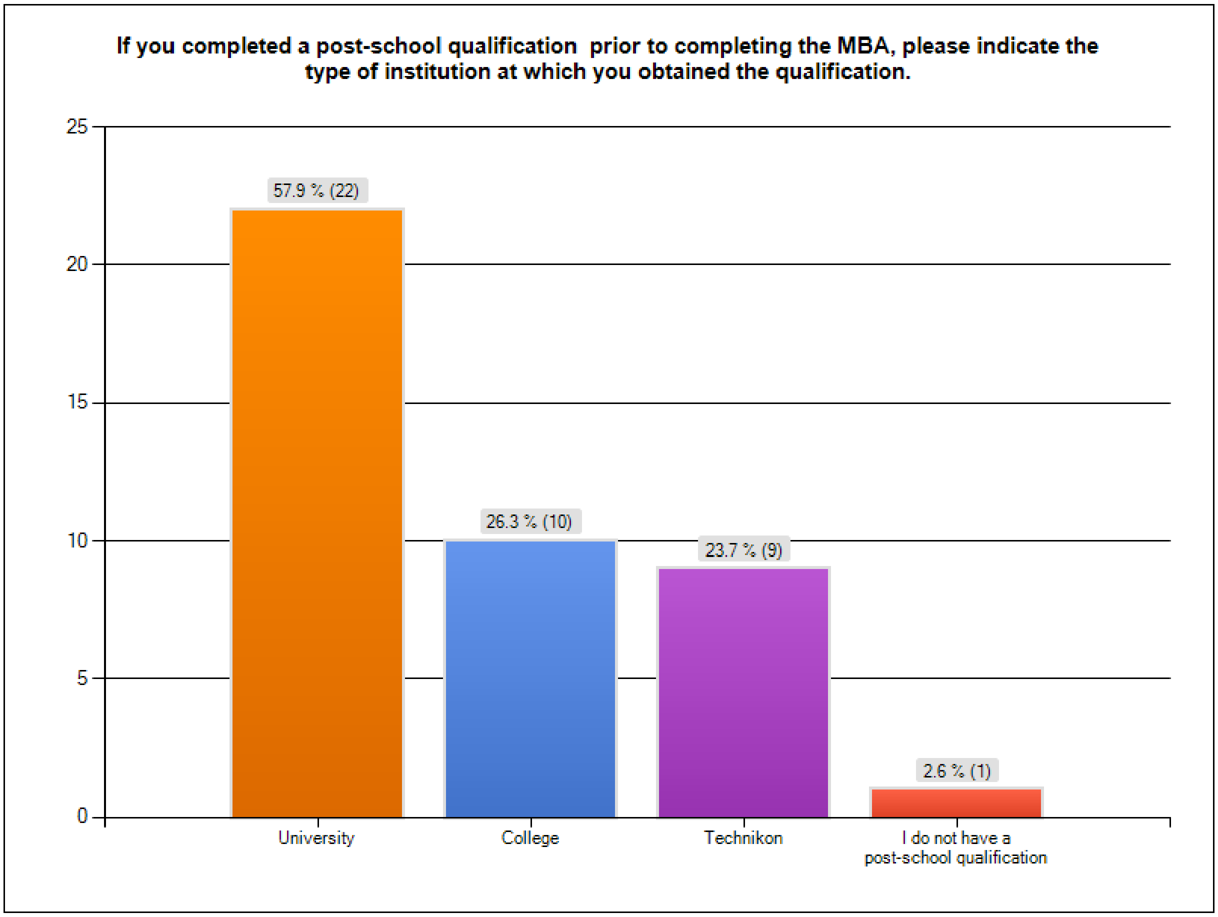

Figure 2 – Question 3 of Online Survey

57.9% of the thirty-eight respondents answering question 3 had obtained post-school qualifications from a university, 23,7% from a Technikon and 26,3% from a college. One respondent did not have a post-school qualification. Of the forty-two respondents, four did not answer the question.

In retrospect, I believe that had the wording of the fourth option been "The MBA is my first post school qualification" instead of "I do not have a post school qualification", there may have been a more complete response as the former statement may have been more self-affirming than the latter, which could have created a negative perception of inadequacy on the part of individuals for whom the MBA was a first post-school qualification.

From the results to question 3, it becomes clear that most of the respondents in the online survey sample had attended university and could have been exposed to and had experience of academic writing in a higher education institution.

In question 4, the respondents were asked in which language they had completed their post-school qualifications, to which 41 responses were recorded. 87,6% of respondents had completed their post-school qualification in English, while 4,9% had completed their post-school qualification in a language other than English (Afrikaans) and 7,3% completed their post- school qualification in English and another language (French, Finnish and Afrikaans).

The findings show how the use of English as the language of teaching and learning becomes more predominant in higher education institutions. The results also show that most of the respondents in the online survey sample completed a university education in English, a language that is not their first language. English Second Language (ESL) students face many challenges at higher education institutions and Zamel (1995, p.515) states that students are often expected to adopt the specialised discourse of the university without the difficulties they face when learning in their second language being taken into account.

These findings are significant in terms of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 which outlines the challenges that may be faced by students who are learning in English, a language not their mother tongue.

Question 5 of the online survey was directed at ascertaining the time period that had lapsed between the respondents last formal institutional academic activity before their admission to the MBA.

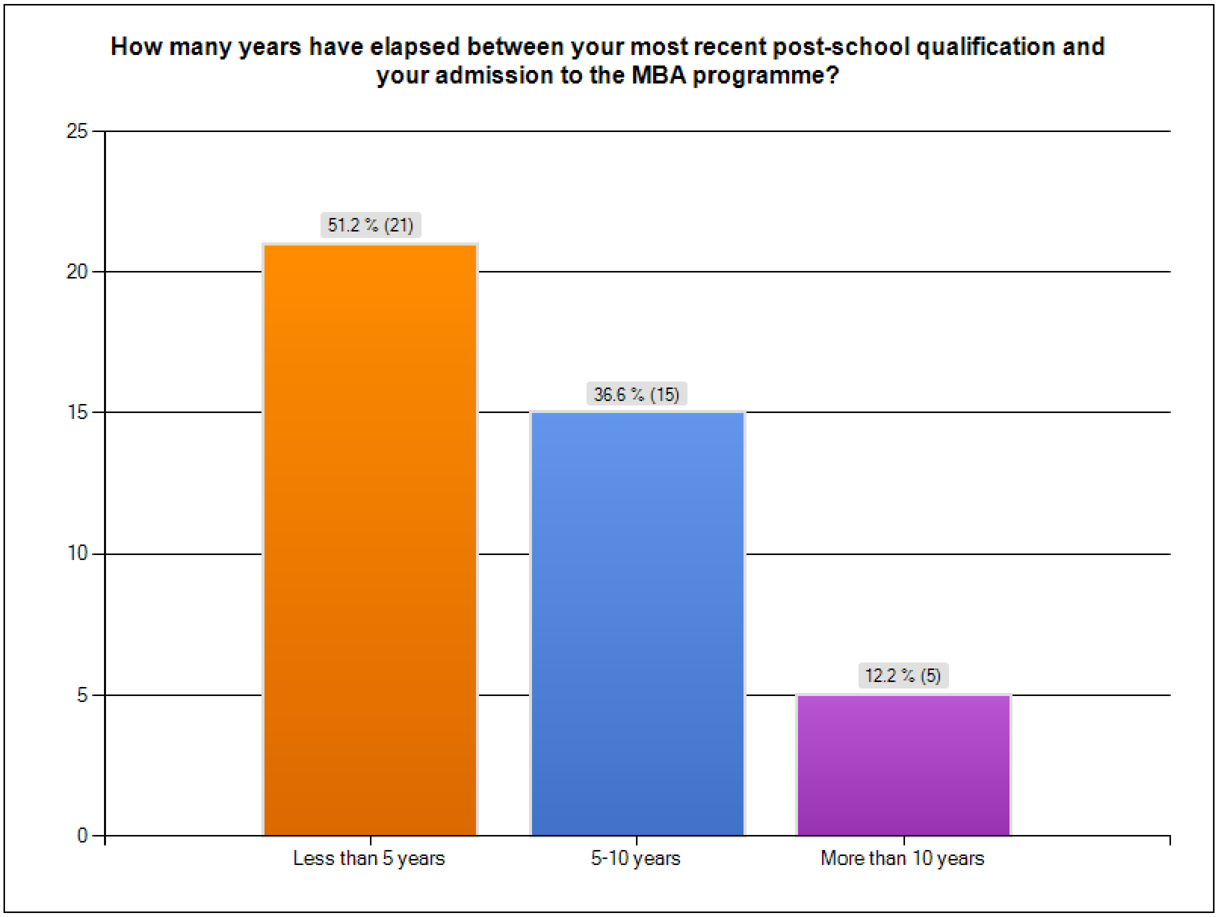

Figure 3 – Question 5 of Online Survey

The graph in Figure 3 shows that 51.2% of the 41 respondents to this question had completed their most recent post-school qualification less than five years before admission to the MBA programme. 36,6% had completed their most recent post-school qualification between five and ten years prior to their admission to the MBA programme and for 12,5% of the respondents more than ten years had lapsed between their most recent post-school qualification and admission to the MBA programme. The finding was that for the majority of MBA candidates, less than five years had passed since the completion of their most recently completed post-school qualification.

The responses to Questions 1 to 5 of the online survey as discussed above provide a context for the rest of the survey in terms of respondents' language usage and post-school academic exposure. I will now consider the broad themes that emerged from the data generated from the online survey and the focus group.

4.2 Discussion of Themes

4.2.1 Identity

The identity of individuals is significantly shaped by the discourse communities to which they belong. While a person's primary discourse identity is formed early in life within familial socio-cultural settings, individuals may acquire membership of more than one secondary discourse community by mastering the social practices that define those particular discourses (Gee, 1996, p.137). Belonging to more than one secondary discourse community may result in a stronger affiliation to the specific discourse that moulds and defines the person's dominant secondary discourse identity.

An overarching theme emerging from this study has been the dominant secondary discourse identity of MBA students defined by their membership of the business discourse community. The notion of identity has a considerable role to play in the execution of reading, writing and academic literacy skills.

Data generated from both the online survey and the focus group gave a strong indication that while at Business School X, business students identify strongly with their professional business identities. Question 18 of the online survey set the tone for this study by asking respondents if they viewed their identity as an MBA student at Business School X primarily as a professional fine-tuning their executive capacity or as a student learning about business; or as confusing.

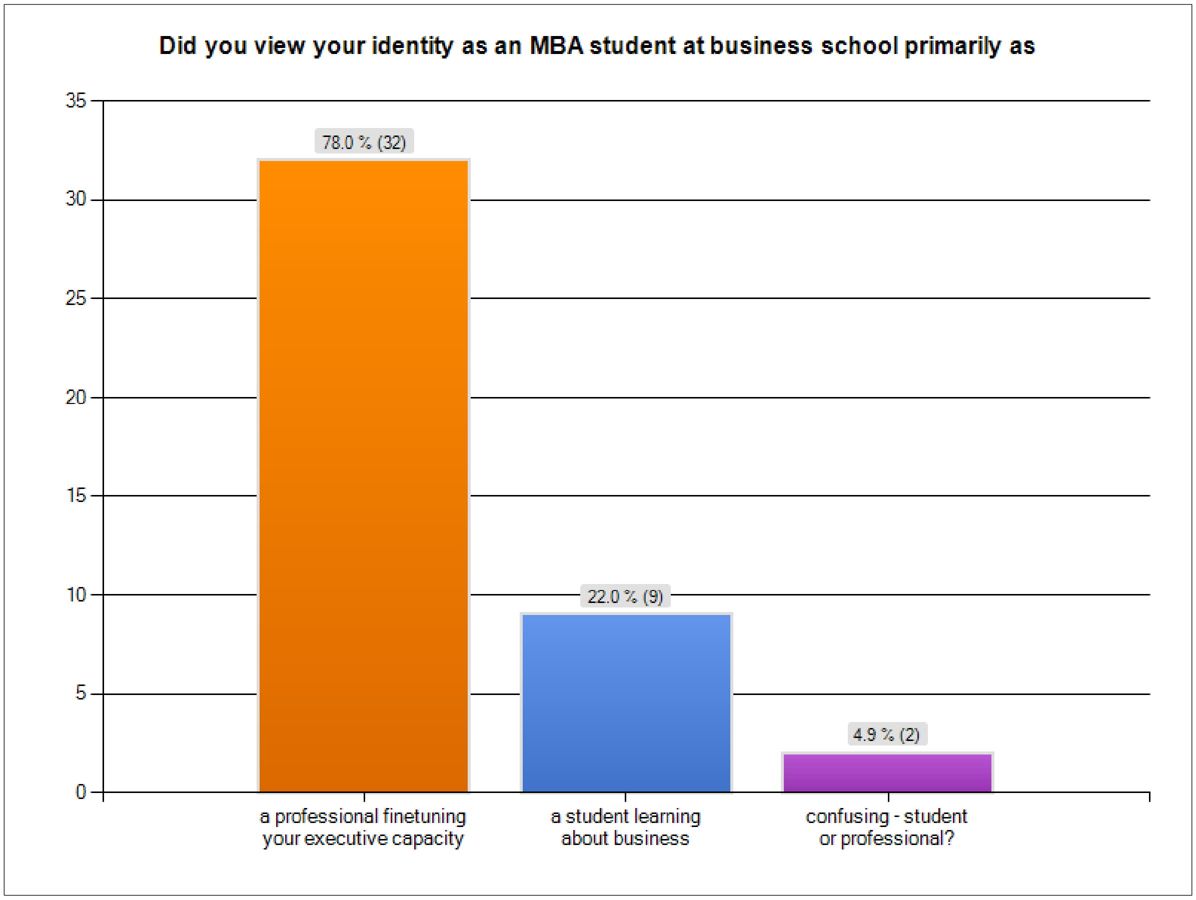

Figure 4 – Question 18 of Online Survey

Looking at Figure 4 above it can be seen that 78% of the online survey sample viewed their identity at the business school as *primarily* that of a professional fine-tuning their executive capacity. 22% viewed their identity primarily as that of a student learning about business and 4,9% viewed their identity at the business school as confusing.

The findings above resonate with Casanave's (2002) observation that many of the graduate students she has interacted with over the years entered their graduate programmes seeing themselves not just as graduate students but as professionals.

Members of the focus group also identified themselves primarily as business professionals as can be seen from the comments below:

Emile: ...see what I'm saying, some of us are thinking, living, business in the blood, you see the difference ... The challenge is that I'm sitting and I'm expected by whoever is going to mark, that I should I should think academically … I'm thinking business.

Lihle: I walked into the MBA already an entrepreneur, I had a business that had made some money already, right,... and I'd been through the pain of going through the ropes of going into business, doing presentations, going for tendering, schmoozing people, how to write... you know, and then we did the project ... how we sat down, how we interacted with the government bodies, the type of reporting that we had to get out … and it's still sitting on the internet, one of the most beautiful reports you'll ever see.

The preceding comments show that Emile and Lihle identify themselves as primarily belonging to a particular social group, the business sector. Gee distinguishes between two broad sorts of discourses in any society – primary and secondary discourses. The data above suggests that the secondary discourse of business is one to which Emile and Lihle have been "...apprenticed as part of their socialization within various public groups and to which membership is gained by mastering, through acquisition, the social practices that define a particular discourse" (Gee 1996, p. 137).

While it can be argued that the respondents should also become apprentices within the academic discourse community in order to master the social practices and conventions that define academic discourse, it seems that business students consider the academic discourse community one they are just passing through on their journey of professional development.

Ivaniĉ (1998, p. 23) points out that identity in relation to writing may refer to one or more aspects of the identity of a writer writing a particular text. Discoursal identity "...is constructed though the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written"(Ivaniĉ 1998, p. 25). The discourse characteristics of texts also relate to the genre and style of text used within a discourse community, hence the significance of the discourse characteristics of the genres of business writing and how these impact on business students as consumers and producers of academic texts.

Casanave (2002, p. 13) views others' as well as her own identity as being in a state of flux and as being inextricably linked to writing –related practices. She says that individuals are constantly assessing who they are talking to in particular settings in their writing which helps to determine *what* can be said and *how* it can be said. This has bearing on the ambiguity MBA students grapple with when assessing audience and appropriate style during the writing of their dissertations: business relevance as demanded by their professional sectors versus the academic rigour required by the academy.

Aspirant members of a discourse community must adhere to and demonstrate a range of participatory requirements as mandated by the discourse community in question. The academic discourse community within higher education postgraduate institutions calls for students to master and display appropriate academic literacy skills as participatory requirements of the academy. The discussion that follows draws attention to findings from the study that shed light on the experiences of MBA students at Business School X with reference to academic literacy as a participatory requirement of the academic discourse community.

4.2.2 Discourse Participatory Requirements

Flowerdew (2009) suggests that to acquire membership of a discourse community an individual has to learn the conventions of six criteria that Swales (as cited in Flowerdew 2000, p. 129) lists for defining a discourse community. These are

1. common goals;
2. participatory mechanisms;

3. information exchange;
4. community-specific genres;
5. a highly specialised terminology and
6. a high general level of expertise.

These criteria provide a framework for exploring what is required of an individual who aspires to acquire membership of a discourse community, be it business or academic.

During the data collection phase it was my intention to determine whether MBA students at Business School X experienced any differences between the participatory mechanisms required for the dual discourses of business and academia. The following section explores reading, writing, and information literacy as categories that emerged from the theme of discourse participatory requirements.

4.2.2.1 Aspects of Reading

When considering reading as a prerequisite to participation within a discourse community, concepts such as genre, volume of reading, reading for information and synthesis come to bear on the discussion and can be viewed as aspects of reading. Question 12 of the online survey intended to establish the reading genres most frequently read and used by business students in their work context for professional development.

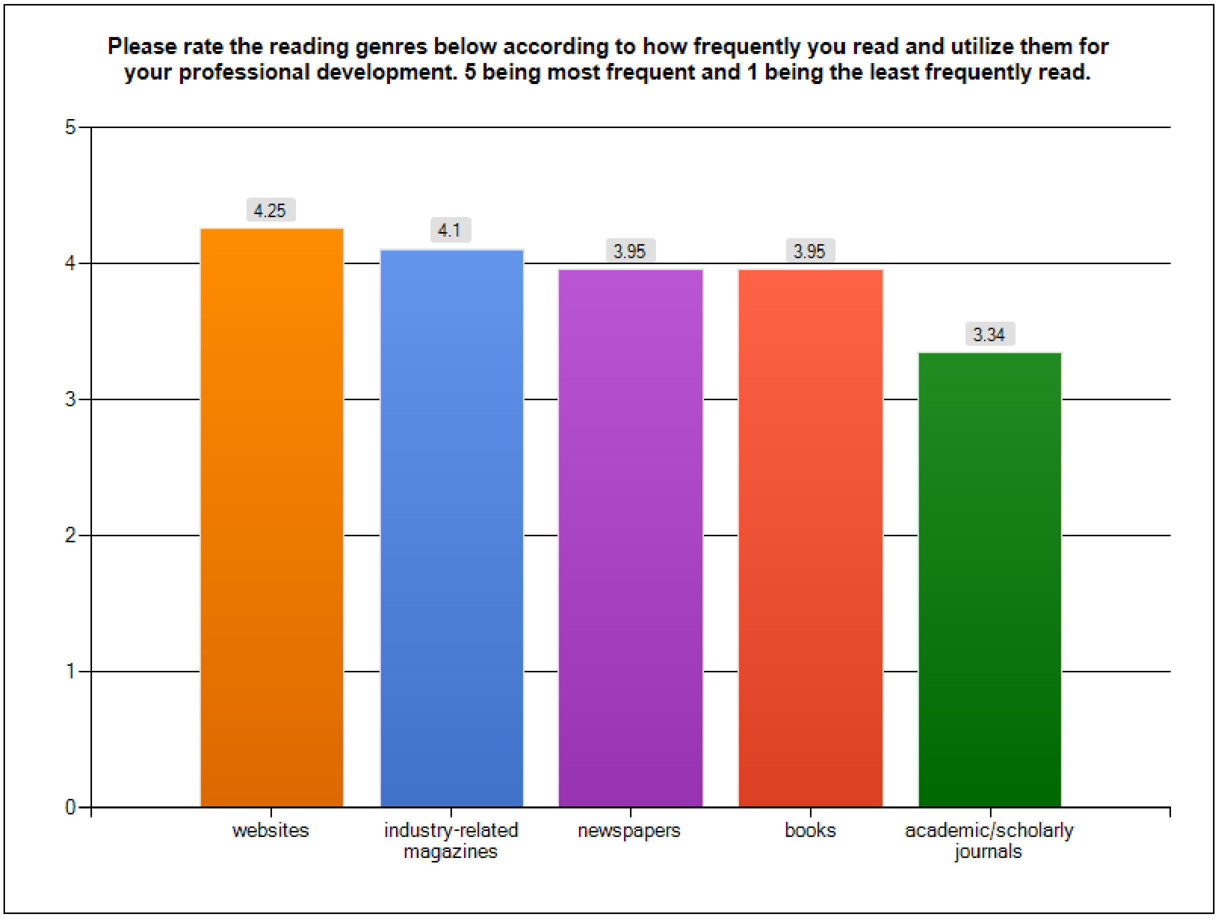

Figure 5 – Question 12 of Online Survey

In Figure 5 respondents rated the frequency of their reading of certain genres for professional development. The graph shows the rating average per genre. The most frequently read genre for professional development was websites followed by industry-related magazines. Newspapers and books were followed by academic/scholarly journals which were the least frequently read genre. Other genres mentioned by respondents that were read for professional development were white papers, blogs and annual reports.

Question 13 of the online survey set out to ascertain the reading genres most frequently used for the purposes of the literature review when completing their dissertation during the research component of the MBA degree.

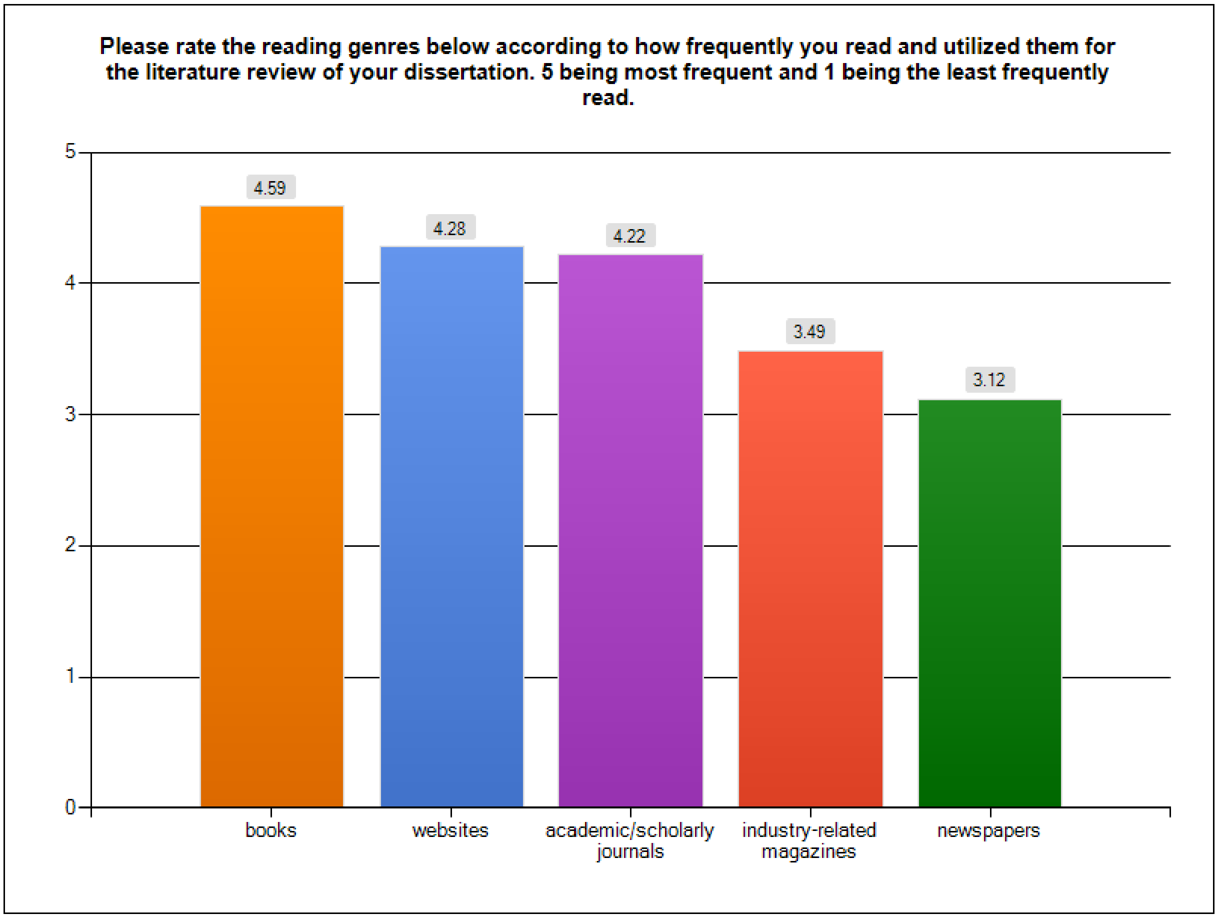

Figure 6 – Question 13 of Online Survey

Figure 6 indicates how respondents rated the frequency of their reading certain genres for the literature review of their dissertation. The graph shows the rating average per genre. Books were the genre most frequently read and used for the literature review followed by websites. Academic/scholarly journals and industry-related magazines were followed by newspapers which were the least frequently read genre used for the literature review.

The two genres least frequently read for professional development - books and scholarly journals - were among the three genres most frequently read and used for the literature review. The genre most frequently read and used for both professional development and the literature review (although very generically termed in the survey) was websites. It should be noted that while there are a diverse range of genres within the meta-genre of 'websites', for the purposes of this study, the genre termed websites refers to the electronic media platform from which the websites were retrieved. Figures 5 and 6 therefore show the dichotomy in the frequency of genres being read for the literature review and those being read most frequently for professional development.

This data speaks to Swales's (1990, p.25 -26) criteria for defining a discourse community, where he lists participatory mechanisms and community-specific genres as conventions that individuals have to master in order to become members of a particular discourse community. While reading is a participatory mechanism for both the business and the academic discourse communities, there is - as indicated in Figures 5 and 6 - a difference in the frequency of use of community-specific genres required for participation in the two discourse communities.

When identifying 'participatory mechanisms' for the academic discourse community, reading and writing are skills and conventions required by students - with synthesis being an essential element of both - in order to be able to assimilate and communicate the knowledge acquired within the academic discourse community. Information literacy, with reading and synthesis being vital components, is a significant participatory mechanism that must be acquired in order to function successfully in an academic discourse community.

4.2.2.2 Information Literacy

Question 14 of the online survey endeavoured to ascertain what students considered to be the most challenging facets of completing the literature review. Figure 7 represents the average rating of difficulty experienced per aspect of completing the literature review. The volume of reading (3.83) was rated as being the most challenging aspect of completing the literature review, followed by synthesis – bringing many ideas together in a coherent piece of writing (3.44). Sourcing relevant literature (3.41) and expressing what I understand coherently in writing (3.1) were followed by expressing others' ideas in my own words (2.88).

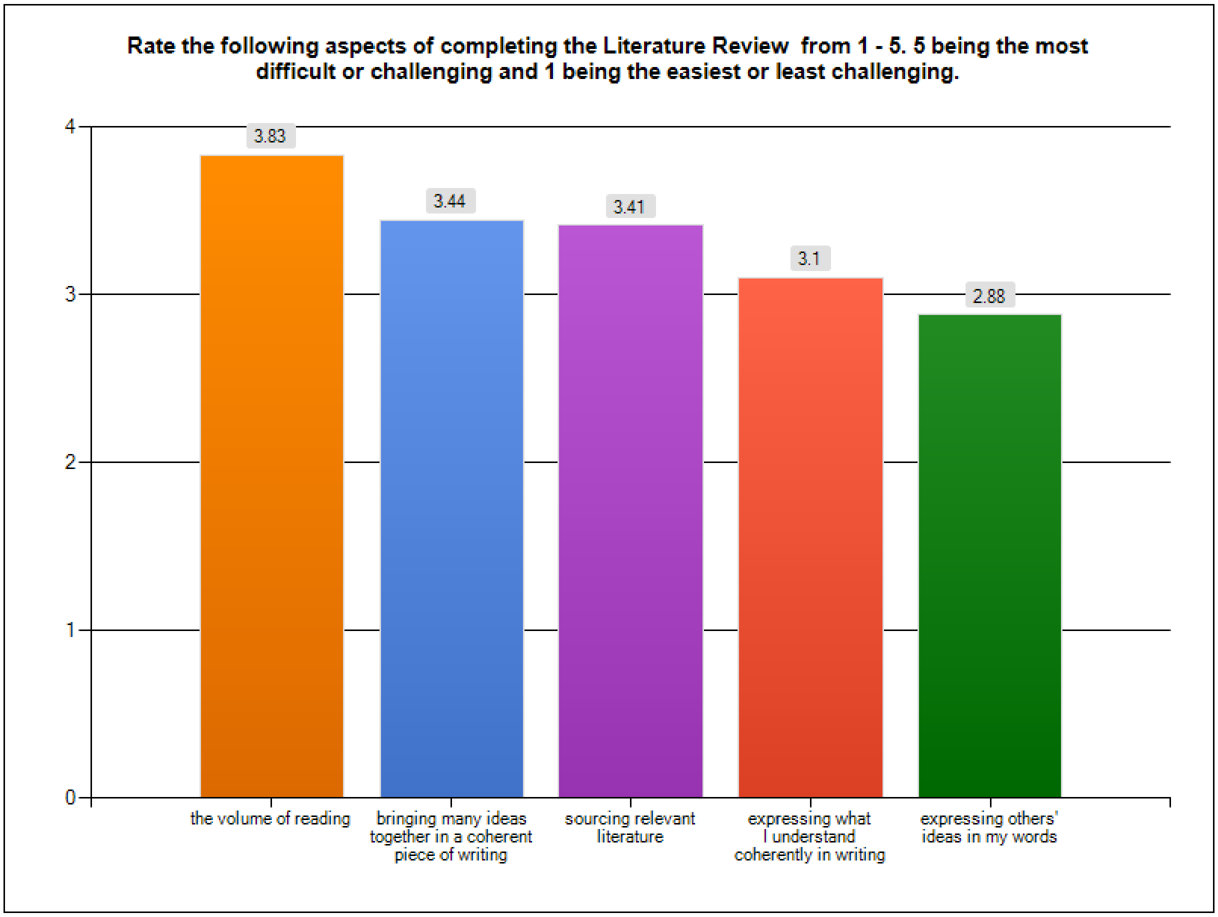

Figure 7 – Question 14 of Online Survey

The findings from the responses to question 14 indicate that apart from the volume of reading which the majority of the online survey respondents said they found the most difficult aspect of the literature review, two other difficult aspects of the completing the literature review were those of bringing many ideas together in a coherent piece of writing (synthesis) and sourcing relevant literature. Sourcing relevant literature, the volume of reading and synthesis are skills that form part of information literacy. The concept of information literacy was further explored during the focus group interview and the findings of the online survey resonated with data generated during the focus group.

During the focus group interview respondents were asked to talk about some of the difficulties or challenges they had faced during the literature review phase of their research study. Attention was drawn to the matter of reading for information. Emile's comments confirm the findings from the online survey where respondents rated the volume of reading as being the most challenging part of completing the literature review.

Emile: The challenge is, is that I'm sitting and I'm expected by whoever is going to mark, that I should I should think academically - I'm thinking business. When I pick book [sic], I'm looking for reference points, first and foremost. When I pick a report, I'm looking for the cover sheet... When I had to be reading the nitty gritty... I couldn't sit down to crystallise , I had difficulty - that there may be the fear of - I have to read this - so much book, I sense there's so much internet, you know how many times I've come to the library, how many times I've emailed you …

Debbie: So would you say that's the volume of reading?

Emile: The volume of reading (affirming).

In the above extract Emile is explaining how he looks for information from a business point of view, based on his experience of the genres he is accustomed to reading. He is looking for perhaps a summary or a reference point to guide him to the essence of what has been written. Bazerman's characterization of genre as a frame of social action (as cited in Swales 2004, p.61), is exemplified in Emile's observation above. Bazerman posits that genres are

> ...the locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other *and the guideposts we use to explore the familiar* (emphasis mine).

I would argue that Emile is attempting to use the familiar genre conventions of the business discourse community as guideposts to navigate and make sense of - what are for him - the unfamiliar conventions of academic genres. When confronted with reading genres of a more academic nature, Emile became overwhelmed by the volume of reading and information available and could not 'crystallise' or synthesise what he had read into a meaningful whole.

Emile's observation: "... I had difficulty - that there may be the fear of - I have to read this - so much book, I sense there's so much internet, you know how many times I've come to the library, how many times I've emailed you …" is in contrast to Zaporozhetz's (as cited in Boote and Beile, 2005) finding that students who are mature, accomplished professionals may find it difficult to admit their vulnerability with regard to library search and information synthesis skills. Emile openly admits during the focus group interview how he had difficulty with information synthesis skills and often came to the library for assistance.

When considering the genre of reading required for the literature review, Chad expresses how academic reading is unfamiliar to him, assuming that those who come from an academic background will know the 'natural progression of things' when looking for information in a book. Perhaps he means that sourcing information in academic texts is a more natural activity for an academic? Chad observes that business people will 'pretty much struggle' when reading for information:

Chad: I think ... those who come from an academic background... have it a little easier than your business guys in that they sort of know the natural progression of things when one's sifting through information in a book. Your analytical guys, your business people, they'll pretty much struggle in that department ...

In the following extract, Emile expresses how he struggled with reading for information.

Emile: Seriously, there was a night I sat, I went through ten books and I was sitting by the internet after I had finished that I night - I thought to myself , so what did I get? Honestly. I couldn't even make meaning, at that point in time I had more than enough and I'm looking - what did I get out of here? If I was purely a professor or whatever, I could think through. I couldn't think through that, and I left everything and I went to bed.

In terms of Doyle's information skills model, (cited in Bruce, 2004, p.2) Emile displays some of the attributes of an information literate person in that he recognised the need for information and identified potential sources of information. However, when it came to the attributes of being able to assess sources of information as well as evaluate and organise information, Emile's level of information literacy skills left him feeling discouraged and he "... couldn't think through ... and I left everything and I went to bed." As a result it is uncertain whether he was able to successfully integrate new information into an existing body of knowledge when synthesising what he had read for his literature review.

It becomes clear from the data that being information literate and being able to read for information are conventions that must be acquired as 'participatory mechanisms' in order to succeed in an academic discourse community.

Thabo: What I struggled with in terms of the literature review, is to find something that is more relevant to my topic, you know and before you get that you have to go through a number of books, and it is so tiring ... it's so much work...

Chad: And in the final analysis, what ends up happening is you end up settling for peripheral information. 'Cos you are battling to find exactly what is relating to your subject matter. And whatever is closest to what you need you'll end up rounding it off and just putting in there. So I think a lot of dissertations coming in, when you come to the literature review, you wouldn't get a true reflection of what you are supposed to achieve.

Reference is again being made to the volume of reading required when sourcing relevant literature by Thabo. The six (what I would call ‘middle order’) attributes of Doyle’s attributes of the information literate person are once again proving to be problematic for the respondents. The attributes of information literacy emerging as problematic from both Thabo’s and Chad’s responses above are those of being able to:

- formulate questions based on information needs;
- identify the potential sources of information;
- develop successful search strategies;
- access sources of information;
- evaluate information and
- organise information.

(Doyle as cited in Bruce, 2004, p.2)

While I have called the above ‘middle order’ attributes, it is significant to note that mastering these attributes is crucial in terms of successfully mastering the higher order attributes of information literacy, those of being able to integrate new information into an existing body of knowledge and being able to use information in critical thinking and problem solving.

It appears that members of the focus group were challenged in terms of information literacy in that they stated that they battled with ‘access to information’ and ‘finding exactly what was relating to their subject matter’. It may well be that not having a well thought through research question, or a clear understanding of the research question, led to difficulty with identifying sources of information. It would seem that students may have been looking for a book which provided information covering their topic specifically. In the following exchange between Lihle and Thabo, some interesting insights with regard to information synthesis emerge:

Lihle: My topic, the one I’m doing right now, there’s not much information on it, but what's driven me to keep going with it, is the understanding that for society to be progressive, you need to have people who keep producing information, and the reality is that I haven't taken an existing body of knowledge, so to speak, and simply transcribed it or, you know, worked around it. What I've done is, I've literally had to take bits and pieces from different management practices to make up this whole...

Thabo: I'm just trying to find out from Lihle, I don't know, he hasn't been to maybe chapter four I think, where you are linking your theory to your findings. Now if you don't have much theory, you are going to find it a little bit difficult, because now you have to relate what you ...

Lihle: No, I have a lot of theory, but I'm saying theory does not come from the same stream.

Thabo: Oh, okay. Oh, all right.

Lihle: It's not all sitting packaged nicely in a stream - that belongs to that; it's actually picked from different parts that have a string that I've been able to thread through all those parts, you know there, to sew it all together.

Lihle's analogy of sourcing information encapsulates the higher order information literacy attribute of integrating new information into an existing body of knowledge. Lihle has come to the realization that he will have to source and synthesise information that is relevant to his research question in order to create a "... thorough, sophisticated literature review ..." that will be the "... foundation for substantial, useful research" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p.1).

Elizabeth also had to synthesise information due to a lack of current literature on her chosen topic and industry and her comments bear out Lihle's observations above.

Elizabeth: I mean the same thing that's happening to Lihle is happening to me; when I went to look for information about low cost airlines; it doesn't exist because the industry started only very recently, the low cost airlines were born only not so long ago. So for me there was no literature that exists, and the only

> literature I've seen for aviation is prior to 2001 and that's invalid because now we're in 2010, that's a decade later and I mean, things have changed drastically. So mostly I'm getting my information from journals, from magazines, from newspapers. So for me there's also no concrete … I have to pick, pick, pick and put it together to make sense. ..

Elizabeth is making sense of the fact that, as Lihle says, information is not always sitting 'nicely packaged', and she unknowingly has to implement and master the higher order attributes of synthesis and information literacy.

In this section I have presented data and discussed findings pertaining to MBA students' experiences of academic literacy with particular reference to aspects of *reading* as a participatory requirement of the academic discourse community.

I will now discuss findings generated by the data relating to the experiences of MBA students at Business School X with regard to *writing* as a participatory mechanism of the academic discourse community that should be acquired in order to successfully complete the dissertation.

4.2.2.3 Aspects of Writing

Reading and writing are often inextricably linked and are not mutually exclusive. In question 10 of the online survey it was my intention to find out the nature of the participatory mechanisms, in this case, the reading and writing tasks that respondents were required to perform in their professional capacity within the business discourse community.

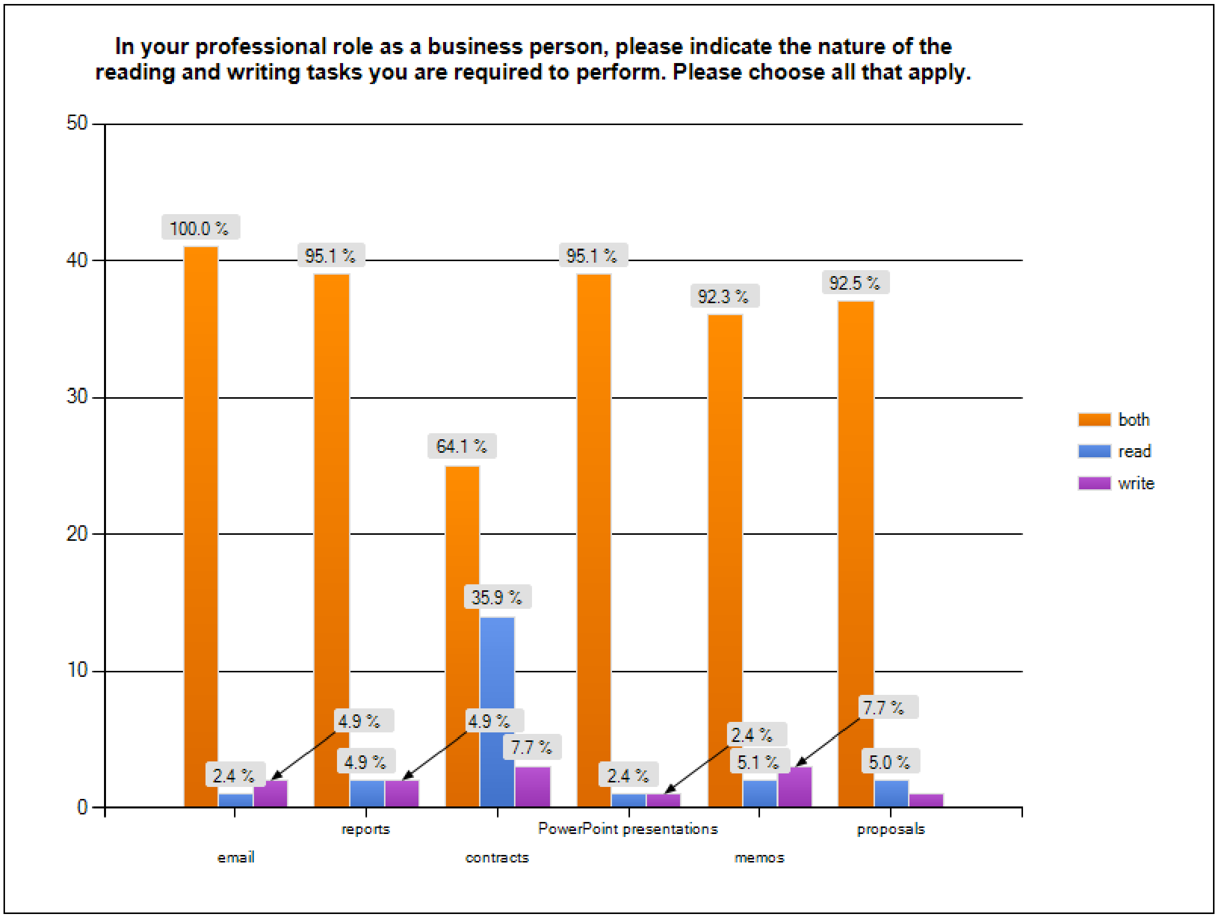

Figure 8 – Question 10 of Online Survey

In Figure 8 it can be seen that emails formed the predominant (100%) reading and writing task performed by business students in their professional roles, followed by reports and PowerPoint presentations of which 95, 1% of the respondents were required to perform as tasks. Proposals and memos followed closely with 92,5% and 92,3%% of respondents being required to perform these tasks respectively. Only 64,1% of respondents were required to both read and write contracts as professional tasks. Other reading and writing tasks added by respondents as being required of them in their professional roles were the writing of training manuals, policy and procedure documents, technical standards and the analysis of financial reports.

Ivaniĉ points out that discoursal identity "...is constructed though the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written” (Ivaniĉ, 1998 p. 25). In an attempt to explore the characteristics of the texts used by MBA students in their professional capacity, question 11 of the online survey was open-ended: How, if at all, are the reading and writing skills required for the professional tasks listed in question 10 different to the skills required for writing a dissertation?

Some of the differences noted by respondents were those of “reasoning and business application”. Another respondent stated that skills required were “... not that different, except the reports to be shorter in real life (sic)”. Another noted that the skills required “... are very different, as in business it is more realistic, a dissertation is purely theory.” The latter two comments reflect how strongly the students identify with the business discourse by referring to business reports as being part of ‘real life’ and to the skills used in business being more ‘realistic’. Do students conversely, then, see the world of academia as far removed from the business world which they describe as being ‘real life’ or ‘realistic’?

Reading and writing texts used in the business discourse community were seen as being easier to work with as can be seen by the following responses to question 11:

> “Work-related text is sort of more ‘relaxed’ in writing style. It is easier to write work-related text when you know your topic and work completely, but [with] academic writing there are always some details to focus on that you are not aware [of] or familiar with which make writing more challenging as well.”

From this response it can be deduced that for the respondent academic writing is difficult, because the topic and the task are unfamiliar in nature to the writer.

Other comments from the online survey respondents that noted a difference in writing style between professional tasks and academic writing were:

> “Email writing is a succinct, to the point writing style. Dissertation writing needs to be fleshed out.”

> "The MBA is academic, and there is a prescribed way of writing. In my day to day job, I write what I think my receiver will understand."
>
> "Corporate tasks are more concise and to the point."
>
> "... reports and memos are relatively short and simple and easier to understand."

Business writing as described by the respondents above is seen to be concise, clear and easy to understand whereas academic writing, by implication, is perceived as being long-winded and difficult to understand.

Seven online survey respondents mentioned that the use and requirement of referencing in the writing of dissertations was the major difference between business writing and academic writing:

> "Referencing is not an issue in [the] business set up."
>
> "The references in writing a dissertation require regular checking to ensure that it is correct. The tasks in question 10 do not require this and only a casual reference [will] suffice."
>
> "In business we do not consistently have to refer back to academic literature."

Findings from the focus group data elaborate on the difficulties experienced with academic writing in terms of adapting to a writing style different to what students had been used to in their business environment:

Emile: It's not the basic English that's a problem, but I suddenly realise I cannot drop my consulting out. I do a lot of report writing. I realise that report writing English is different from this academic writing.

The above excerpt suggests that academic writing is a complex and complicated task for Emile. The dilemma posed by the business student's participation in two discourses may often cause difficulty with writing. Ivaniĉ (1994, p. 6) suggests that "... when writers feel 'stuck' they tend to assume that is something to do with the content of what they are writing." Ivaniĉ further points out that it may well be that the writer feels, without being able to identify or analyse it, uncomfortable with the self that they are projecting as they write.

Question 15 of the online survey asked respondents whether it was their professional or academic expertise that they felt had made the most significant contribution to the writing of their dissertation.

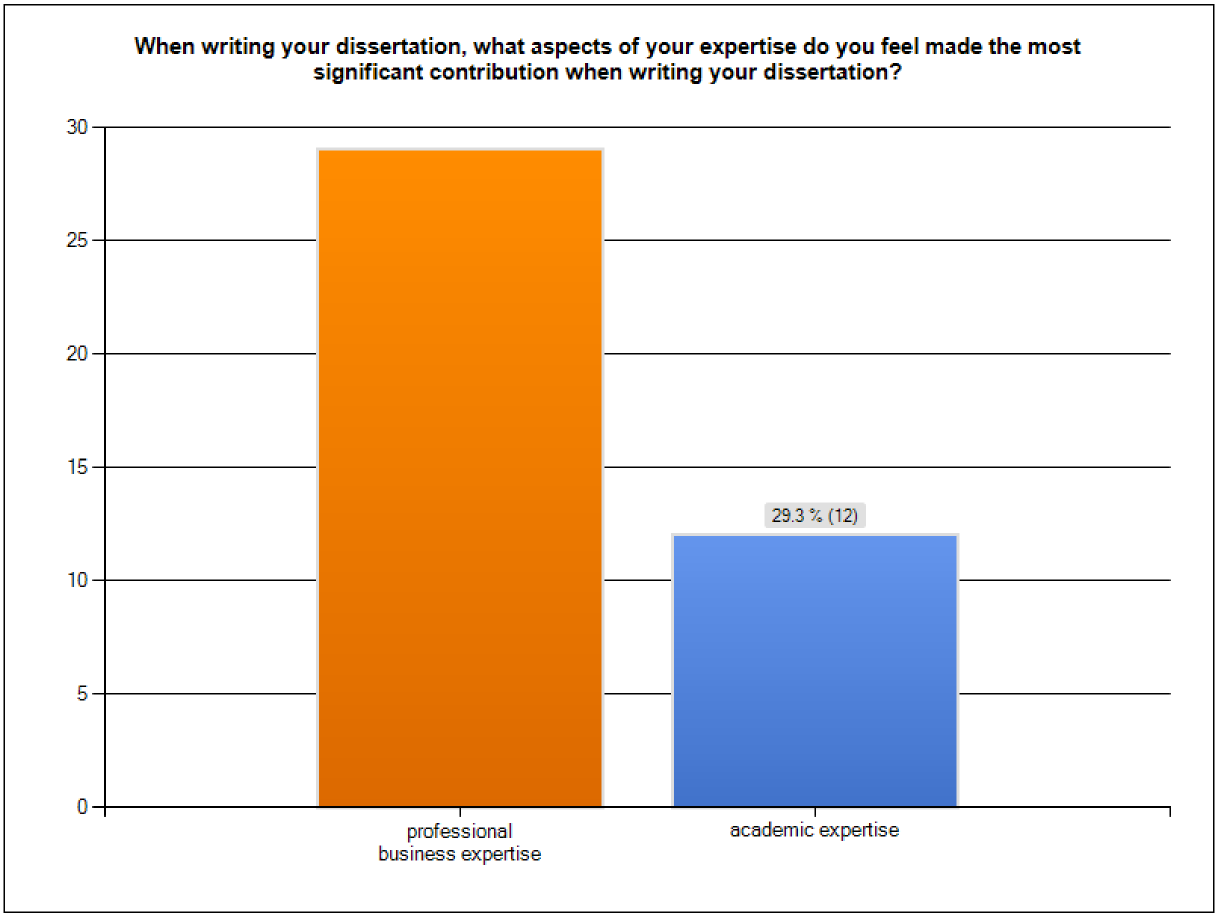

Figure 9 – Question 15 of Online Survey

The findings depicted in Figure 9 show that 70, 7% of respondents felt that their professional business expertise had made the most significant contribution when they wrote their dissertations, while 29.3% felt that their academic expertise made the most significant contribution to the writing of their dissertation. These findings thus confirm the earlier finding that academic writing for the majority of MBA students is framed by their professional business identity.

Data referring to the difficulties experienced by business students attempting academic writing emphasise the dilemma MBA students experience when attempting to communicate what they want to convey to their audience.

Emile: One of our lecturers, my supervisor, he told me, Emile, I could send this in for proof reading, I'll mark it - but go and add some more figures... More pictures and then I remembered him for precisely that - enough figures to represent this model makes sense. Now we talk about writing, we talk about model representations, theories and other stuff; it's a different ball game. It's not the English language, *per se*, but how do you communicate that in what is being expected ... in the work place

Emile is attempting to find a middle ground where he can position himself and feel comfortable in terms of writing for a dual audience. Evident from Lihle's input below in referring to business writing is the clarity of purpose experienced in the business discourse.

Lihle: And those (business) documents ... have a clear objective. You know, you *know* this is what we're doing. Our intention is to find a market, develop a market, do the finances, launch a product, and little pieces of information come from all over the place and we put it together to be very specific. With the dissertation I find that, we've got a lot of um... I feel, theory based concepts, I mean, conceptual things. And some them not entirely applying immediately to my immediate business environment. And I think that's where, for me, the difference is.

Lihle points out how he experiences the difference between the clarity and practicality of the professional documents he works with to the more conceptual theory based academic writing of the dissertation. He feels that theory-based concepts do not always relate to his immediate business environment.

In his observations above, Lihle alludes to the purpose of the dissertation in terms of professional relevance and his comments lead to a discussion on the data categorized under the theme of purpose.

4.2.3 Purpose

Tandem to the theme of identity is that of purpose. When considering the purpose of the dissertation the data shows that purpose is significant in terms of audience. Further, the format or writing style used in the dissertation is important in terms of audience as whoever is reading the dissertation can be assumed to be reading it through the lens of a particular discourse – in this case either the discourse of the academy or of business. The irony is thus that the meaning that the *reade*r makes when reading the dissertation will ultimately determine the value of the dissertation as a document.

One of Swales's (1990) defining characteristics of a discourse community is that it utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims. The dissertation can be seen as an example of such a genre. Swales (1990) defines genre as comprising a

> ... class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.

Based on findings that showed that the majority of respondents identified themselves primarily as business professionals during their tenure at Business School X, it would stand to reason that business students would motivate developing a document that is of value to their particular profession and work environment. They do however realise that the key to completing the MBA, as an academic qualification, is firmly held in the hands of academics. Students are thus faced with the dilemma of role conflation – are they writing for an academic audience or a business audience? The following extract illustrates this dilemma:

Debbie: So when you write your dissertation, what audience do you have in mind?

Lihle: I write for the academics who are grading me (laughter). I want to pass - end of story.

Lihle's statement above also embodies Casanave's (2002, p.3) metaphor of academic writing as being a game. She says that the word 'game' seems to depict people's sense that academic writing consists of rule- and strategy based practices, done in interaction with others for some kind of personal and professional gain. She elaborates by explaining that the academic writing of students, teachers and researchers can affect course grades, graduation, hiring, promotion, tenure, and reputation. Lihle knows that he is writing to pass, which may then lead to professional gain in terms of promotion and reputation.

Emile finds it challenging to identify a writing style in terms of an audience:

Emile: You see actually that's the challenging part... what I thought about dissertation when we were in class during our syndicate; I was looking at a marketable document. You put on the table at the boardroom, clear it. But suddenly I realised, no, that they not going to take this (accept this at) from school, you will stay here forever. That changed my perception about the book. Now if you look at the dissertation as something we can take to the field, *apply* it in the field, but the way it is currently we can't do it fully, the executive director does not sit with you to go through the literature review with him, (laughter) he doesn't have that time. He can read the books while on a flight in his business class, do you get what I'm trying to say? That's why I'm agreeing with him that there's a kind of a shift in our mindset when we hit

> dissertation we think, Ok - am I gonna sell this? That's why you can leave it in the shelf for the next two years, you don't even think about it.

As can be seen by the data extracts above, Lihle realises that the business school holds the key to his future, and thus it is vital for him to conform to the standards required by the academic discourse community. Emile, on the other hand, during the coursework component of the programme, felt inspired to conduct his research in such a way that it be a marketable document, something of value to put on the boardroom table. He came to the realization however, that this would not be acceptable from an academic point of view, and became disillusioned. Swales (1990) states that in some cases a genre may have sets of communicative purposes. When purposive elements come into conflict with each other, the effectiveness of the genre as a socio-rhetorical action becomes questionable.

Emile perhaps feels that the lack of momentum to complete the dissertation is because the dissertation will not ultimately be valued in his professional arena -not necessarily because of the content of the dissertation - but because of the style of writing, the readability factor – the way that knowledge is communicated into writing for a particular audience. As Emile comments on not having English as a first language:

Emile: It's not the English language, per se, but *how* do you communicate that in what is being expected in the workplace?

Respondents to the online survey were asked in question 17, an open-ended question, what they saw as being the most challenging skill in terms of reading and writing that they had to master while writing their dissertation. Online survey respondents indicated that they had difficulty moulding academically presented content in a format that would present as readable for the corporate world; and they also had the following to say with reference to the most challenging aspect that they had to master in terms of writing their dissertation:

> "[The] ability to combine different literature review materials to present a strong business case."
>
> "Integrating the academic theories with my professional investigation."

The following remark by an online survey respondent encapsulates the dilemma of genre purpose:

> "Structuring it [the dissertation] into a document that can be read and understood in terms of the intent in undertaking the study. *There should be a way to take this material to the corporate world, especially as they are not particularly academically focused but they need to read it"* (emphasis mine).

The purpose of the dissertation is determined by the meaning or value the intended audience places on the document and this is in turn dictated by the format or the style in which the knowledge is communicated for the intended audience. In the following extract the practicality - or value - of the dissertation in the workplace is being debated:

Lihle: ...our dissertations are not practical, if I take this dissertation into the workplace, it's not going to be very practical.

Nicki: What do you mean they're not practical?

Lihle: No, well it's going to be practical from *my recommendation's* perspective

Nicki: Exactly.

Lihle: But as a document, it's not readable. They're going to flip over to the last page. They're going to be looking at my recommendations, (gestures) this is what he thinks - and then they're going to say - thanks, Lihle, very nice doc.

Lihle's observation above underscores the findings of Seshradi & Theye's (2000) study that showed how business professionals and business faculty view writing quality differently. The most significant finding from their study was that business professionals emphasise the product of writing while business professors focus more on the process of writing.

Thus Lihle's comment that those in the workplace reading his document are looking for the product of his dissertation in the form of his recommendations only, is not unfounded.

The discussion continues in terms of the readability of the dissertation as a document:

Debbie: Why isn't it (the dissertation) readable, think now in terms of your audience?

Lihle: I'm thinking about it , you see, I'm trying to separate business here, because I think this is a key thing where the line is drawn, I'm trying to separate business from philosophy . In the business workplace, you know when we do normal analysis ... there's a way in which we write documents.

Debbie: And how is that?

Lihle: And those documents ... have a clear objective, you know, you *know* this is what we're doing... With the dissertation I find that, we've got a lot of um... I feel, theory based concepts, I mean, conceptual things. And some of them not entirely applying immediately to my immediate business environment. And I think that's where, for me, the difference is.

Once again, the definition of genre offered by Swales (1990, p.58) can be used to underpin the Lihle's comments above. Genre can be defined as comprising a "... class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre." Now the question that begs asking is, to which discourse community does the dissertation as a genre belong, and thus what is the rationale for the genre?

It is evident that the academic discourse community and the business discourse community have differing views regarding the purpose of the dissertation; and thus the effectiveness of the genre becomes questionable. Jaco, in turn, expresses the role that readability plays in terms of the dissertation being a medium for communicating knowledge of value to the business community:

Jaco: Then again, if you look at the whole MBA setup, I believe your dissertation should be a living, working document. Where somebody, if they want information on knowledge management, they look at your dissertation and they can get something out of it. Where somebody will [now] read arghh, this is boring, let me put it back. So I believe that basically a dissertation should be a living working document. Just not an academic document.

The format of the dissertation in terms of genre now comes under the spotlight when the focus group members reflect on Jaco's assertion above:

Lihle: ... are you saying then that the dissertation must rather be a business document and not an institutional document?

Elizabeth: Well, I think it should be a bit of both, a combination, but I think because its academic, it should have a standard of language, because I've seen some of the business language we use, actually if you come from an Afrikaans background, we use direct translation and its really poor English, so I think the MBA should have a certain quality of grammar, but should be a combination of both of academia and business.

Jaco: Then we should say what must weigh more?

Elizabeth: I think it should be a proper mix, a good mix; it should be more like a business document but with good language.

Emile: ... I would say there should be a balanced way : maybe sixty – forty, academic demands should be ...forty percent and the business side should be sixty percent.

Chad: It will make more sense that way. Otherwise we only doing theory and writing a book and presenting it so we can pass.

Here Emile can be seen to be giving precedence to the business value of the dissertation, while Nicki, in the extract below feels differently.

Nicki: I feel that the business report is done when you are doing your assignments, you write your management reports, you know, (E: executive summaries ...) with the dissertation, it has to be academic. Because that's basically (Jaco: if you put it that way, okay.) what they look at to grade you to say that you can go to PhD.

I would argue that what is occurring in the interchange above is that respondents are interrogating the genre of the dissertation as a form of reporting on research. Askehave & Swales (2001) propose a text-driven or a context-driven procedure for reviewing genre status and for making a case for a new genre or for the atrophy or transformation of an old one. In this instance a context-driven approach is being used as a framework for the discussion. MBA students are identifying a communicative discourse community - in this case two discourse communities – business and academic, and are comparing the two in terms of values, goals and material conditions. The rhythms of work and horizons of expectations of the discourse communities give rise to the scrutiny of genre repertoires and etiquettes, which will in turn entail repurposing the genres and detailing the features of the new genres (Askehave & Swales, 2001, p.208). The dilemma in this instance arises from the issue that the context in which MBA students find themselves as writers is multi-layered to start off with as they are members of dual discourse communities – business and the academy.

Askehave & Swales (2001) observe that since the advent of the 'new' genre movement in the early 1980's, there has been a widely-shared view that genres are best conceptualized as goal-directed or purposive and cite Johns's view that "...purpose interacts with features of text at every discourse level" (Askehave & Swales 2001, p. 195). Further, Askehave argues that "... if we want to discover and identify the purpose of a text, we cannot avoid investigating the context in which the text is used" (Askehave as cited in Askehave & Swales 2001, p. 203).

Two online survey respondents corroborate Nicki's viewpoint above (that the dissertation should be an academic document) in their open-ended responses to question 19 of the online survey where they were asked what one piece of advice they would give an MBA candidate starting out on the dissertation process. Their responses support Nicki's argument that the dissertation needs to be of an academic nature:

> "Concentrate more on the academic requirements of the degree as you may have all the knowledge but are unable to express it in the way required by academics. *There are two different worlds out there!*" (emphasis mine).
>
> "Follow the academic way of presenting and writing your dissertation and you will pass. If you follow the professional way, you will not make it."

The findings imply that there is an ambiguity of purpose experienced by MBA students who are faced with the research component of the MBA with reference to the purpose of the dissertation, the audience they are writing for and the format and style they should use in the writing of the dissertation.

I asked the focus group respondents if they experienced any difference between the writing they used in their professional capacity and the writing that was required for their dissertations.

Chad: I am hoping that this recommendation comes through, that the style of write-up that we use in the MBA , seeing that it's going to be used in the work place, that we might as well follow the format that we use at work, it's pointless, you know we just do it the way they do it here at Business School X - or any other institution - just to pass your MBA and then next week you graduate, you go to work, you going to start doing your reports differently. So it has to be business oriented, strictly.

Thabo Everybody who is here wants to finish here rather than really looking to the dissertation and saying it's going to be a worthwhile document or not. I'm not interested. I just want to get my MBA, but with the modules (coursework), I think I've done something.

The findings from question 16 of the online survey offer an interesting departure from the views being expressed by the focus group. In question 16 the question was posed as to whether or not the respondents felt that the research component of the MBA and the dissertation had added value their professional development.

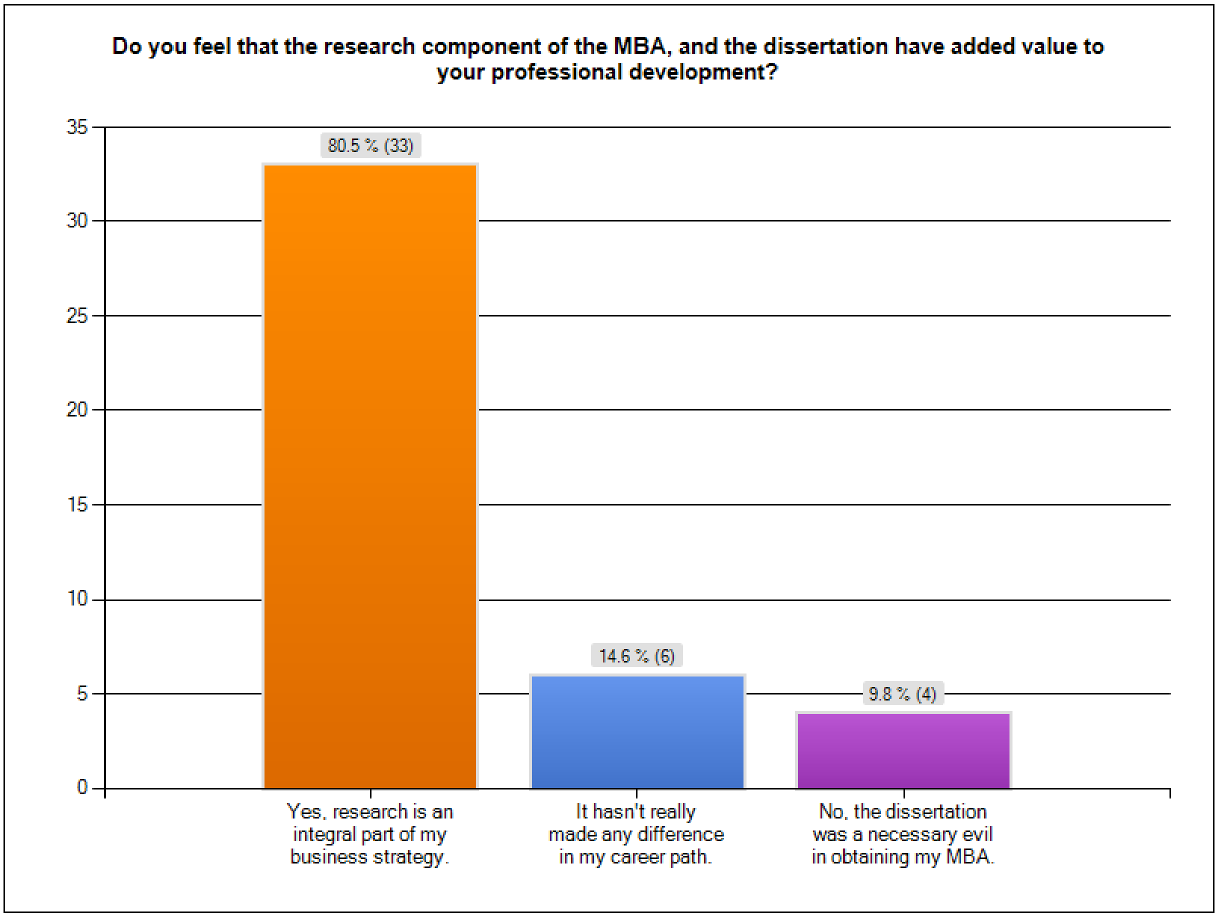

Figure 10 – Question 16 of Online Survey

The findings portrayed in Figure 10 show that 80, 5% of the respondents felt that the research component of the MBA and the dissertation had added value to their professional development, while 14,6% indicated that it hadn't really made any difference in their career path. Only 9,8% felt that the dissertation was a necessary evil in obtaining their MBA.

In analyzing the significant difference in attitude toward the research component between the online survey respondents and members of the focus group, I would put forward the following explanation. Most of the online survey respondents had already completed their dissertations and some, although not all, had graduated in 2008 and in 2009 and had thus already been able to experience the benefits of exposure to research methodology gained through the completion of their dissertations in the workplace. The benefit of hindsight, as well as distance from the process of writing the dissertation, may have had an impact on the responses indicated in Figure 10. Members of the focus group were still deeply entrenched in the final throes of completing their dissertations, which may account for a difference in perspective on the matter.

Some of the open-ended comments motivating online survey respondents' affirmative responses to question 16 were:

> "I research practically every day, even if I am not working on a specific project. Completing my dissertation has led to it being part of my daily life – I thrive on it."
>
> "My reading, writing and presentation skills have improved. Analysis and attention to detail in any environment has improved."
>
> "I am able to find business related information easily and can apply the knowledge to my work. At the same time I keep up with new information or ways of doing things."
>
> "It was challenging, but I learnt a lot from it, especially how to balance and present a new argument and how to use research to back this up."

Comments to the contrary from online survey respondents were:

> "Corporate South Africa does not place any importance on an MBA, let alone the dissertation."

Research is not part of my day to day job, I am a financial person."

In considering the observations above and comparing them to some of comments made in the focus group about the value of the dissertation, I would argue that it is not so much the research component as such that poses the dilemma in terms of professional value, but the format and the manner in which the research is presented that causes the most disequilibrium for MBA students terms of writing identity and skill. This brings the discussion to the manner in which the research component is dealt with in the MBA programme.

4.2.4 MBA Programme Design – the Research Puzzle

The question of programme design appeared as a category in more than one of the themes emerging from the data and thus warranted discussion as a theme on its own. I wanted to find out if students felt that the coursework component of the MBA at Business School X prepared them for the challenge of academic research writing.

The objective of question 6 was to ascertain if MBA candidates found that the type of reading and writing skills required for the dissertation was different to those required for completing assignments during the coursework component of the MBA programme. The data showed the following as can be seen in Figure 11 below:

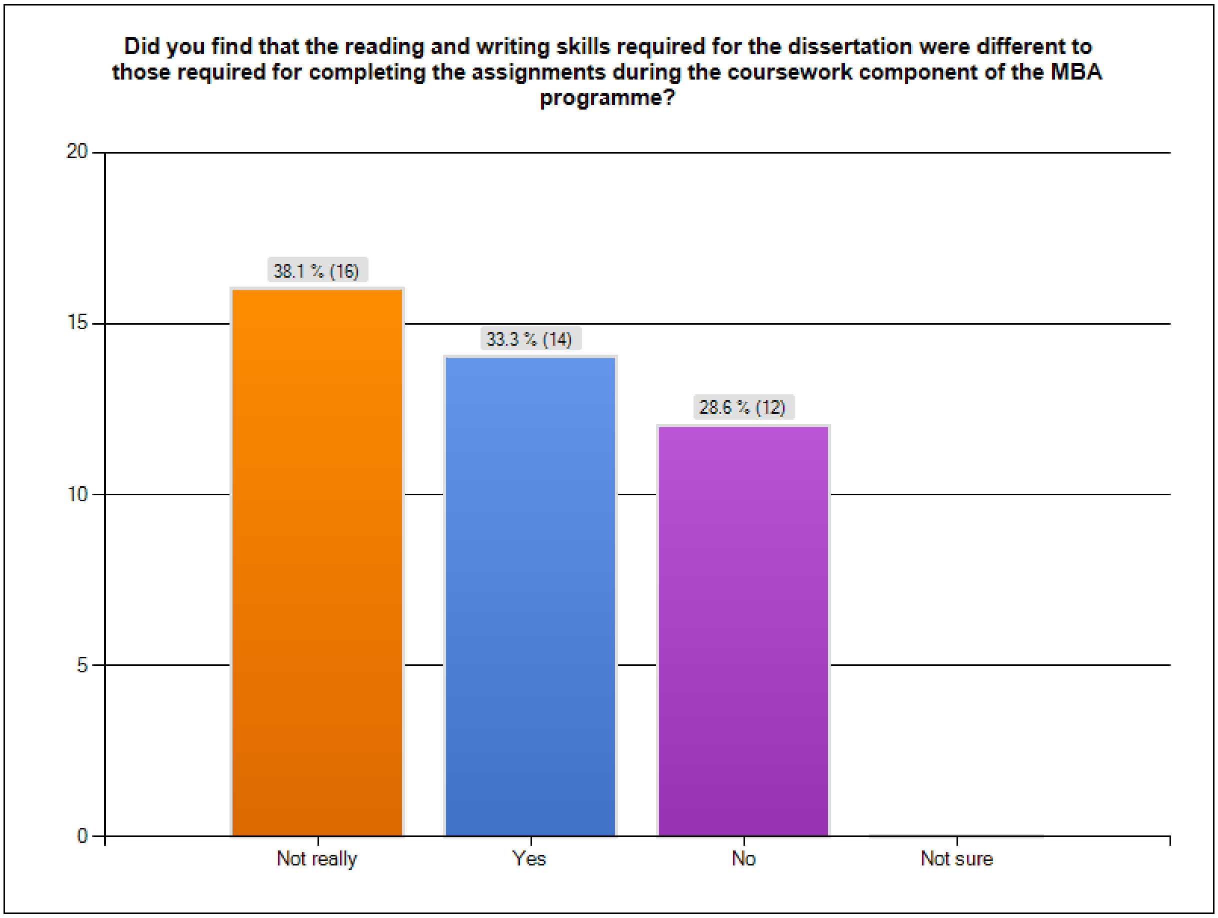

Figure 11 – Question 6 of Online Survey

Of the online survey respondents, 28,6% felt that the reading and writing skills required for completing assignments were not different to those required for completing the dissertation. 38.1% felt that the reading and writing skills required for completing assignments were not really different to those required for the dissertation, while 33.3% of respondents felt that there was a difference between reading and writing skills required for the completion of assignments and the dissertation. Those respondents who felt there was a difference in the skills required, motivated their responses with the subsequent observations:

> "The structure and level of language used (for the dissertation) was at a higher level."
>
> "The dissertation requires a lot of reading and understanding of a specific topic and (requires) intense research compared to an assignment"

“The main difference experienced was in writing skills … it is a lot harder than assignments.”

“When writing an MBA thesis, more academic language is needed.”

In Question 7 I wanted to find out if students felt that the coursework of the MBA programme had prepared them adequately for embarking on the dissertation process:

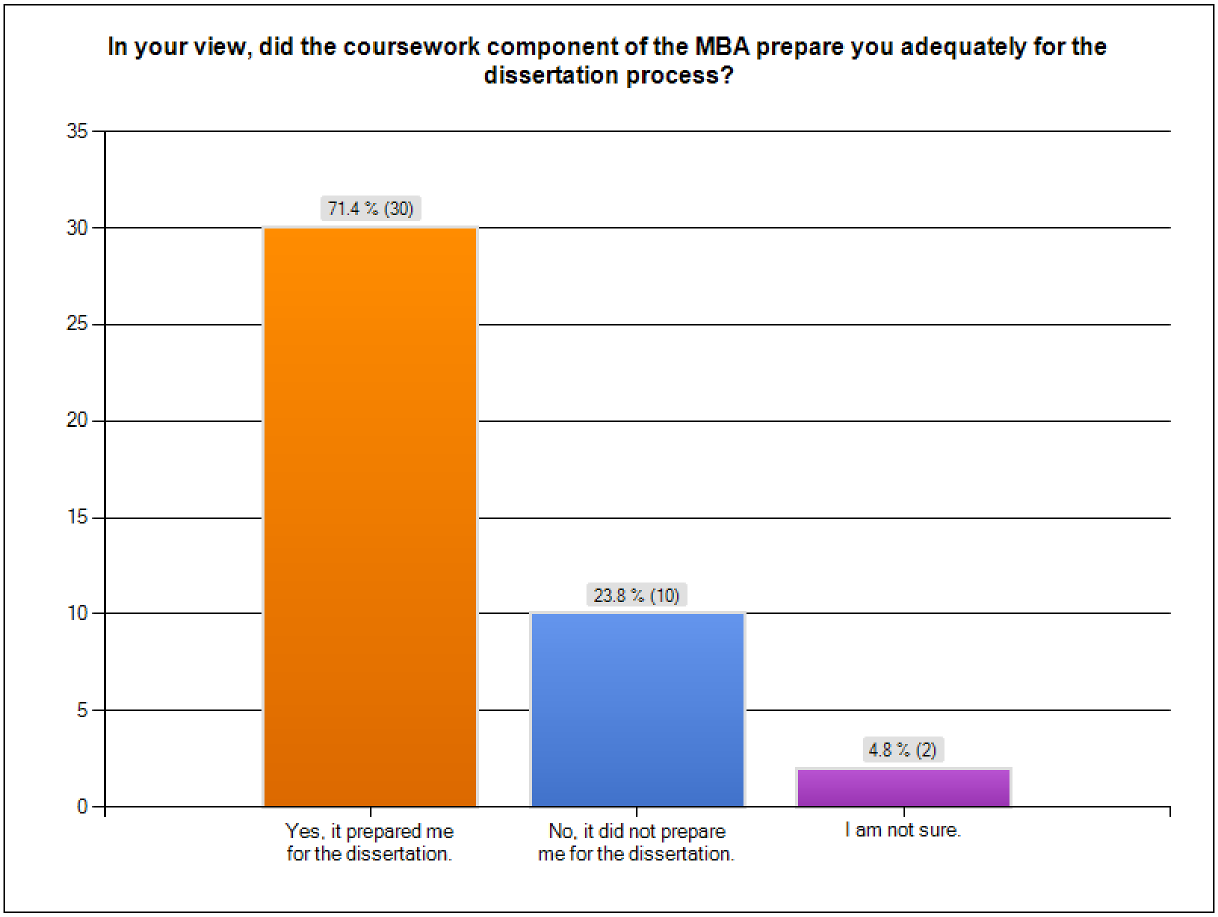

Figure 12 – Question 7 of Online Survey

As can be seen from the graph above, 71,4% of the online survey respondents felt that the coursework had adequately prepared them for the dissertation. 23,8% felt the coursework had not prepared them for the dissertation and 4,8% were not sure. The online survey respondents who felt that the coursework had not adequately prepared them for the dissertation process made the following comments:

> “The assignments need to be longer and more along the lines of a dissertation layout. Every assignment should be a ‘mini’ dissertation.”
>
> “We should have been required to write assignments and exams at a higher level or standard.”

The two comments above indicate a desire on the part of the respondents to have been more grounded in the practice of academic research writing during their coursework. This is supported by the following online survey open-ended responses to question 7 that indicate that practical exposure to the requirements of the dissertation process would have been enhanced by explicit information:

> “Clear information should be provided with regards to the dissertation writing process – technical guidance on structure and content and methods to ‘attack’ the project. Previous successful works should be reviewed in order to gain a practical perspective.”
>
> “More time spent on practical exposure to students.”

The preceding observations underscore the principles of an ‘academic literacies’ approach outlined by Lea (2004) where she posits that exposure to discipline-specific genres and texts should be embedded into mainstream course design. The fact that students desire practical, explicit exposure to the genre of academic writing resonates with Loudermilk’s (2007) observation that students are expected to acquire discipline-specific genre knowledge over a period of years through continuous exposure and not through explicit teaching.

In contrast to the responses to question 7 of the online survey where 71,4% of the respondents felt that the coursework had adequately prepared them for the dissertation, members of the focus group felt differently. Chad elaborates on how he felt that his lack of experience and expertise caused a delay in his making progress in his dissertation:

Chad: ... knowing what I know now, if I had started that way before, if your modules were interlinked with your dissertation there wouldn't have been that pause. There wouldn't have been that little grey area that we go through without a supervisor and emptiness and lack of supervision, and they just need to interlink everything together.

Debbie: So, am I hearing you correctly, when you say that the coursework component of the MBA programme didn't prepare you adequately for the dissertation process?

Chad: No, not really.

Lihle: Not even close.

Jaco I think the closest it actually came is when we did assignments and it's only the referencing part.

Lihle What I've realised as I've gone through my dissertation, it's actually a very logical process, it's not a complicated process and it's actually not difficult, the only problem is the little pieces that they give you during the programme, do not add up to your dissertation. You have to go there and learn how to do the dissertation ... you have to learn anew how to do the whole thing.

It is possible that respondents to the online survey who felt that the coursework had adequately prepared them for the dissertation felt that way at the time of the online survey because they had completed and submitted their dissertations and were experiencing a measure of achievement as a result. The focus group respondents, on the other hand, were still in the process of trying to complete the dissertation.

One can speculate how the focus group members would have responded had they been interviewed after they had completed their dissertations. Perhaps their struggles and difficulties may retrospectively have been blurred by the success of completion.

Since 2009, a full research methodology class has been initiated as part of the current curriculum at Business School X. By implication, at the time of writing, there had not yet been a cohort who had completed a dissertation after having attended such a class. It is important to note that the samples used for this study were from cohorts that attended only shortened dissertation workshops and who submitted dissertations during 2008 and 2009; or who were in the final throes of preparing dissertations for submission in early 2010.

In an attempt to ascertain the level of academic interaction that students encountered in class during the coursework component of the MBA degree, respondents were asked in question 9 of the online survey to rate the following class activities according to the frequency with which they took place in class:

- debating various author’s theoretical viewpoints,
- discussing operational executive issues,
- constructing an academic argument,
- reading and analysing academic texts,
- and chalk and talk from the lecturer.

According to online survey respondents, the activity that took place most often in class was discussing operational issues (81,0 %), followed by reading and analysing academic texts (61,0%). Learning how to construct an academic argument (54,8%) was followed by debating author’s theoretical view points (42,9%). The activity that took place least seldom was chalk and talk by the lecturer (29.3%).

These results from question 9 show that the classroom activity that took place most often during the coursework component of the MBA degree at Business School X was the discussion of operational issues, an element I would suggest as being of core significance to the business discourse community; and by the same token not to be considered as being out of place during the coursework component of a business degree.

This finding is corroborated by Thabo who explains that he was more motivated and inspired by the programme content delivered during the coursework component of the MBA degree at Business School X than by the research component.

Thabo: Debbie, can I come in here in terms of the dissertation? I must be honest, with my dissertation, I didn't really get much, but the modules [coursework] of the MBA is what … the information, the knowledge ... I've grabbed a lot as compared to the dissertation. The dissertation , you know I was at the stage where, I think all of us here, we've got books of the past people who have done dissertations because we want to finish, we want to see how they've done it, follow the same route, almost follow the same topic, so that we must get rid of it and graduate, but the modules ... as we are going through because you are there on every second day, and then we are applying our mind and we are thinking about what we are doing, interrelating within the classroom, then it gives you too much insight as opposed to the dissertation. Everybody who is here wants to finish here rather than really looking to the dissertation and saying it's going to be a worthwhile document or not. I'm not interested. I just want to get my MBA, but with the modules, I think I've done something.

Thabo's view of the dissertation expressed in the excerpt above resonates with Swales's (2004) illustration of how a student's dissertation is affected by various factors. While there are institutional constraints on the dissertation with reference to format and writing style, there are also disciplinary requirements that should be taken into account. The topic chosen will also dictate the approach that should be followed. Notably the candidate's personal ambitions and expectations can also shape the form and purpose of the dissertation. Swales's recognizes a type of candidate whose "… only ambition is to 'get done, get out, and get on with life,' who has no interest in following up the dissertation research…" and whose main aim to get the qualification (Swales 2004, p. 136). To quote Thabo: " I just want to get my MBA."

The form of the research component of the MBA comes under discussion in the following excerpts from the focus group interview. The matter of how the research should be done and presented is debated. Focus group members expressed a desire to be practically involved with the research process.

Nicki:	... at other institutions ... you have to produce … or launch a product, or have a project that you've launched before you graduate ... you actually go overseas and you get involved ...
Nicki:	You have to practice before you graduate ...
Emile :	Practice before you graduate, that's internship like ... ah ... that's a point to make.
Lihle:	How theory links to business... you link it practically.
Debbie:	Do you think that the dissertation is too theoretical?
Emile:	It is - I've already said that ... If you tell us to go and do field work of six months, cut out the report maybe it will be better. Field work – report six months, add the two ... maybe it makes business sense in terms of MBA dissertation.
Jaco:	Then that makes that document a live document.
Lihle:	Something that means something.
Elizabeth:	Something tangible, something that you can touch and feel and be involved and be there, you know.
Chad:	... we could do something like that ... a six month thing, three months out there in the field and three months coming back here and consolidating more the practice into theory. It will make more sense that way, otherwise we're only doing theory and writing a book and presenting it so we can pass.

The interchanges above show a desire by MBA students to relook at the way that research is done and presented in the MBA programme. A need is expressed for the research component to be more practical, in Elizabeth's words, "… something tangible, something that you can touch and feel and be involved and be there...". Perhaps this is an expression of an underlying desire to try and link the two communities of practice, business and academia, whereby academic research can find a relevant context in the business community of practice where it will be meaningful to the student undertaking the research as a process and of value to those who look to the results as a product of the research.

I will now look at the academic community of practice to once again focus on business students' experiences of academic writing within an academic setting and the role that supervisors play in helping students to master the conventions required for participating in the academic community of practice.

4.2.5 Communities of Practice

4.2.5.1 Supervision

One of the issues that emerged very strongly from the focus group was that of supervision. Issues around supervision had not been introduced into the interview by me, and it was in reply to the question asked about the major hurdles or drivers that had got the focus group members to where they were at that point their dissertations, that issues to do with supervision came to the fore.

When discussing the data relating to supervision, it is important to note that many of the models covered in the literature and linked to the findings are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Dysthe (2002) notes that supervision may include aspects of various models, but may be dominated by an aspect of a model, sometimes depending on the phase of the thesis work.

It became clear that students in the focus group were looking to a supervisor for more than just technical help, but also for guidance and mentorship. Belcher's (1994) studies of graduate student/mentor relationships point to the mentoring relationship as a determining factor in the academic and professional success of some students. Each member of the focus group had had a change of supervisor at least once, which had been a stumbling block in their progress. The change had been necessitated by either a change in topic or by a breakdown in communication between the student and the supervisor.

Nicki: I had to change my supervisor as well. There was a communication breakdown between myself and my supervisor, so ...

Elizabeth: And obviously with the two of you, there's nothing happening, lack of communication... the first supervisor I had never bothered to talk to me.

Nicki: Communication breakdown.

The data clearly shows that communication or lack thereof, is a contributing factor to the breakdown of the relationship between student and supervisor. Spear (2004) wrote a paper based on many years of supervision as well as exit interviews with PhD students at the Australian National University. He noted that a pre-requisite to managing expectations of both supervisor and student is that of effective communication. A comment made by a student author points to the importance of communication in the supervisor/student relationship: "The issue of good communication comes up over and over again. We think effective communication is the crux of good supervisor-student relationships" (Spear, 2004, p.17).

Chad: ...I met mine [supervisor] once and [he]said to me, look, we might never see each other again, we'll just communicate through email, and I was like ..okay ...that's a vote of confidence right there, and you know, you try and put down timelines for yourself and you get messed up ... you tell yourself by this week I should achieved chapter one, and it takes four weeks for him to come back to you.

It is not clear from Chad's comment above what caused the lack of communication between him and his supervisor. What is clear, however, is that what was missing was an explicit understanding of mutual expectations from the relationship. Clearly Chad was expecting more from his supervisor than just feedback via email.

There are indications from the responses below, that Lee's (2007) functional model of supervision is what Jaco and Emile could have been looking for. In this model, the most prominent activity is the rational movement through tasks, where the supervisor assists the students by directing and helping the student to project manage the completion of his dissertation.

Jaco: And I don't think it's a matter of you want to be baby sat with regards to being supervised, being allocated a supervisor. It's more about somebody that can give you just ... that push. Listen I want chapter one this week, and you move on and that actually pushes you to get to your target of finishing, and that is what I found that is mostly lacking when they allocate supervisors.

Emile: Partly I have to change supervisor on the line, so I needed someone to give me a drive... I got a new person, not that drive was too much or was better than the other one.

Nicki adds that it would help if supervisors were sensitive to students' needs. Nicki's needs in this instance would have been met by a supervisor who adopted Lee's (2007) relationship model of supervision. Such a supervisor would have drawn on emotional intelligence as a skill during the supervision process. Once again, Nicki's observation highlights the need for effective communication and the management of mutual expectations between student and supervisor:

Nicki: And also I think it would be nice to get supervisors who are sensitive to the

> students' needs, who are willing to meet you half way. At first I was allocated a supervisor who was living in Pretoria, and I'm in Alberton. He wanted me to go to Pretoria, and he said, "that's it, you just have to come to me" I mean, I'm in Alberton and I'm a student. Couldn't we just meet half way? And he was like, flat out – NO - you just have to come to me.

It is also interesting to note that of the entire focus group, Thabo was the only student who had submitted his dissertation and who was due to graduate a short while after the focus group interview took place. His observation below is significant in relation to Braine's (2002. p.65) summation that "... a sound relationship between the advisor and advisee is essential to the latter's success ... in fact what is needed is a collaborative relationship between the advisor and advisee." It is likely that Thabo's constructive supervision experience had a positive effect on the completion of his dissertation in good time:

Thabo: You know I think the supervisors - they really play a critical role ... When you've got somebody who can look after you and go with you step by step, and understand you, like in my case, I had a very good supervisor, I used to send him chapter by chapter, he was very, you know, responsive in coming back to me, so I tried to finish quickly.

Lee's (2007) models of supervision are to my mind, very technical or approach orientated, in that she has identified clear distinctions between the roles, activities and skills required by her proposed models or approaches to the functions of supervision. Lee further comments on the 'possible student reaction' to each approach. The question can be posed whether or not the student was part of a negotiated understanding of mutual expectations at the outset of the supervision process? While it is true that these models may 'fit' the varying needs of a diverse student body in one way or another, it may be that some students are looking for more from the supervisory relationship.

Lihle is a case in point. He is looking for more than just 'meeting the academic requirements' in passing the dissertation. He is looking for a supervisor who will share his passion in terms of the business value of what he is writing about.

Lihle: And I think another critical thing ... is that you get supervisors who are relevant in terms of the business value of what you're writing about. My supervisor is an academic and he is supervising people across fields, he's an economist... what he's looking for in my dissertation is the academic value of the dissertation, he's helping me pass. That's what he's doing. He's helping me meet, like it says on the front of the dissertation, "meet the requirements" and meet the academic requirements. But it would be nice to have person who's looking at it from the passionate sense that I'm looking at it from. I'm looking at trying to make a difference here to an organisation the size of Cell Co A. I'm trying to change something in that organisation, I'm trying to change something, I'm trying to change executives' views on certain things and allocation of resources and if I can get someone who's going to *come* with me and help me in that battle to try and make those things change in a physical and practical and usable sense, then I believe that would be allocating a real supervisor to me.

Chad points out that he feels that supervisors should be allocated right from the beginning of the research process according to the general field of interest of the study in order to assist students more with the actual formulation of their research question.

Chad: ...once you start thinking, hmm, I'm going the customer service route, there should be at least four five supervisors to choose from who will guide you in the *initial* stages ... because people have halfway through - they got to change their subjects. Based on what? They choose the wrong subject and halfway through they realise, I'm stuck - there's no information on this

> subject, I must go back. So if you start your initial proposal with a supervisor, there’s no way you can go wrong. Right there and then they can tell you no, you’re going to get stuck there; turn left turn right. You start with them right there; a relationship is built right there initially.

Chad’s insights above link, once again, to Braine’s summation of the research done on academic literacy and the nonnative speaker graduate student, that “…in the case of NNS graduate students, hands-on help by the supervisor from the conception of a research projects to the writing of the thesis is the most effective” (2002, p.65).

In Chapter 4 the major themes that emerged from the data were analysed and discussed. Issues surrounding the MBA student’s discoursal identity while at Business School X were explored and the influence that discoursal identity has on the MBA student as both a consumer and producer of academic texts was examined.

Chapter 5 will outline a summary of the findings of the study as well as recommendations arising from the findings. Areas that warrant further research in this field of study will also be indicated.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

This case study set out to explore MBA students' experiences of academic writing at the research site, Business School X. The aim was to investigate and determine the difficulties experienced by MBA students with particular reference to the academic literacy skills required for completing the dissertation. All findings and references made to MBA students in the findings below pertain to students at Business School X only, the site for this case study.

5.1 Summary of Findings

I will now encapsulate the findings from the data analysis in Chapter 4.

- While the academy and business are both secondary discourse communities to which MBA students at Business School X belong, they identify more strongly with the business discourse community than with the academic discourse community.

- Reading and writing as participatory requirements within the business and the academic discourse communities differ with reference to genre, volume, style and purpose.

- In terms of *reading* the main findings were that

  ✓ the genres most frequently read by MBA students for professional development were those least frequently read for the literature review of the dissertation and vice versa; and

  ✓ MBA students experienced the volume of reading, synthesis of information and sourcing relevant literature as being the most challenging aspects of completing the literature review of their dissertation.

- In terms of *writing* the main findings follow below.

  - ✓ Writing tasks most often performed my MBA students in a professional capacity were emails, PowerPoint presentations and reports which differed from the academic writing tasks they had to perform at the business school. The main difference between professional and academic writing tasks experienced by respondents was that professional writing tasks used an 'easy to understand' and succinct writing style; while academic writing was seen as being prescriptive in style and difficult to understand.

  - ✓ Most MBA students felt that their professional expertise had made a more significant contribution to writing their dissertations than their academic expertise.

  - ✓ Difficulties were experienced by students when attempting to write a document that addressed both the requirements of academic rigour and professional relevance. The literature showed that academic faculty placed more value on the process of academic writing while business readers attached more value to the product of the writing.

- While most MBA students who participated in the study did not dispute that academic research had been of value to their professional development, they noted that an ambiguity existed in terms of the format and structure of the dissertation - an academic document - as a readable and valued medium for taking research findings to the corporate world.

- Results were divided on whether the reading and writing requirements for the dissertation were different from those required for completing assignments during the coursework component of the MBA programme. Those students who had *completed* the dissertations felt that there was not such a difference between the reading and writing requirements of the dissertation and the assignments; and that the coursework component of the MBA programme had prepared them for the dissertation. MBA students who were *in the process* of completing their dissertations felt that the coursework had not prepared them for the dissertation.

- With reference to supervision, findings revealed that students viewed the role of the supervisor as being very important in terms of successful completion of the dissertation, especially with reference to motivation. A change of research topic or a breakdown in communication was cited by students as being the main reason for their having had a change of supervisor.

5.2 Recommendations

Firstly, I would argue that one of the most significant findings of this study is that while MBA students at Business School X are completing a postgraduate qualification at a higher education institution, they do not identify themselves strongly with the academic discourse community. That they identify themselves strongly as professionals within the business discourse community is legitimate and understandable as their tenure at the business school is generally a short term one while their membership of the business discourse community is likely to be of a long term nature. Seeing that discourse communities have a considerable influence on the genres of reading and writing as participatory mechanisms within particular discourse communities (Swales, 1998) , I would contend that the business school could play a more supporting role in assisting students with the acquisition of the writing conventions that are commonly employed by members of the academic discourse community. I would propose that the following measures be taken facilitate MBA students' greater participation in the academic discourse community:

- Adopt an academic literacies approach (see Appendices A and B) to the MBA programme design whereby academic literacy and genre pedagogy are embedded into mainstream programme design and delivery of the coursework component of the MBA programme - as opposed to a study skills model which focuses on surface features of language and on the transfer of writing and literacy skills from one context to another (Lea, 2004).

An academic literacies approach would ensure that explicit instruction with regard to disciplinary based discourses and genres is integrated into the programme design of the coursework component of the MBA programme in particular. I view such an approach as imperative seeing that findings of this study show that students draw on genres used in the business discourse community to frame their academic reading and writing.

- Integrate elements of research into all modules of the coursework components of the MBA programme - not just exclusively into the Research Methodology module. Assessment criteria for formative assessments for all modules should include reference to academic journals and a high level of academic writing. In this way, students can become practiced in the level of academic writing required for the dissertation.

- Ensuring the appointment of part-time faculty who are not purely non-academic industry-specific specialist staff, but who themselves are members of the academic discourse community.

- Careful selection of supervisors who are experienced practising scholars and who will mentor students through the research writing process and who will play a role in the enculturation of the MBA student into the academic discourse community.

Secondly, the applied nature of the MBA degree should be considered. Findings from the study showed that students writing their dissertations were faced with the dilemma of writing for a dual audience: the academic who would assess the dissertation as an academic document and the business professional who would be looking to the dissertation for business value.

While most MBA students who participated in the study did not dispute that academic research had been of value to their professional development, they noted that an ambiguity existed in terms of the format and structure of the dissertation, primarily an academic document, as a readable and valued medium for taking research findings to the corporate world. In this instance I would make the following recommendations:

- The interrogation of the suitability of the dissertation as a medium for taking business research findings to the corporate world and a possible repurposing of the genre of the MBA dissertation (Askehave & Swales 2001).

- Engagement with the stakeholders in the business discourse community in terms of looking at the value, purpose and format of the dissertation as a research project.

- The initiation of debate around the structure of the research component of MBA programme. A point for debate could be that the research process entails some form of project, fieldwork or internship; the findings of which could be presented as a hybrid academic business research report. The exact nature of such a report could be the subject of further research and consultation between business and the academy.

The primary limitation of this research is that these findings cannot be generalised as they pertain only to the site of the case study, Business School X, although there may well be wider applicability.

5.3 Recommendations for Further Research

There are many opportunities for further research arising from this study which are explored briefly below:

- Similar and/or comparative studies could be conducted across more than one Private Provider of Higher Education or across both public and/or private providers of the accredited MBA in South Africa. The findings of such a study could confirm or refute the findings of this case study.

- The nature of the research component of the MBA could be investigated and alternatives could be recommended.

- Also of significance would be a study to ascertain the value attached to MBA dissertations as research reports by the business community, the results of which could be used in the process of repurposing the genre of the dissertation.

- The question of the format of the MBA dissertation as an effective means of conveying research findings to the boardroom table could be investigated and possible alternatives could be researched and put forward.

At the outset of the study the question was posed: What are the difficulties experienced by MBA candidates, with particular reference to academic literacy, when undertaking research and writing dissertations at Business School X? Findings regarding the research question have been discussed in Chapter 4 and summarised in 5.1 above.

However, for me, the essence of the research problem and a point of departure for further research is embodied in the sentiment expressed by one of the online survey respondents with reference to the biggest challenge they faced when writing their dissertation. The respondent expressed the notion that it had been challenging to structure the dissertation into a document that could be read and understood in terms of the original purpose for undertaking the study:

> “There should be a way to take this material to the corporate world, especially as they are not particularly academically focused but they need to read it”.

This observation demonstrates how the complex communicative purpose of the dissertation as a genre presents difficulties for MBA students as academic writers during the writing of the MBA dissertation. The dilemma that faces students who are writing for a dual audience underscores the point made by Swales (1990) that when purposive elements of a genre come into conflict with each other, the effectiveness of the genre as socio-historical action becomes questionable.

Thus the “...evolving and dynamic nature of genres...” (Askehave &Swales, 2001, p.208) may be the key to understanding and solving some of the perplexities and difficulties experienced by MBA students both as writers in, and members of, more than one discourse community.

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APPENDIX A

1. PRINCIPLES OF AN APPROACH TO COURSE DESIGN BASED ON AN 'ACADEMIC LITERACIES' MODEL.

- Takes account of students' present and previous literacy practices.
- Acknowledges that texts do more than represent knowledge.
- Recognises the relationship between epistemology and the construction of knowledge through writing and reading practices, using both written and multi-modal texts.
- Recognises the gaps between students' and tutors' expectations and understanding of the texts involved in learning.
- Involves thinking about all texts of the course – written and multimodal- and not just assessed texts.
- Attempts to create spaces for exploration of different meanings and understandings by all course participants.
- Does not create a dichotomy between other literacies and academic literacies.
- Recognises and builds upon issues of identity and how these are implicated in the creation of texts.
- Acknowledges the power dimensions of institutional structures and procedures and the ways that these are implicated in text production.
- Rather than trying to acculturate students into a discipline, attempts to see students as engaged participants in the practices and texts which they encounter during their study of the course.
- Sees the course as mediated by different participants. Allows spaces for this and embeds this in both the course content and the course design.
- Recognised the integral nature of the relationship between literacies and technologies.

(Lea, 2004, p.744)

APPENDIX A CONTINUED:

2. POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS TO AN APPROACH TO COURSE DESIGN BASED ON AN 'ACADEMIC LITERACIES' MODEL.

- Recognition of institutional constraints on what is possible
- Is it enough to try to be explicit about texts? Can one ever be explicit enough?
- Limitations of institutional assessment procedures.
- How is it possible to work within institutional constraints as a practioners in contrast to a researcher, when research findings can critique in ways which might not be possible pedagogically?
- Can course designers utilize quality assurance procedures to their advantage, for example in the use of learning outcomes?
- Is it possible to go further than an 'academic socialization' model in course design?
- Do some disciplines, subjects, fields of study, lend themselves better to this approach?
- How do designers provide pedagogic spaces for exploration of all the different and contrasting textual practices that are involved in teaching and learning?

(Lea, 2004, p.745)

APPENDIX B

THE HONG KONG ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION PROJECT: RECOMMENDATIONS

The incorporation of:

1. A well-designed English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme for all first year business education students aimed at developing a core of academic discourse while at the same time highlighting disciplinary and cross-disciplinary variations.
2. A modular genre-based ESP course with each module introducing students to a set of academic business genres, and sensitizing them to some of the typical lexico-grammatical realizations and rhetorical features of such genres as well as making them aware of generic conflicts across disciplinary boundaries.
3. A modular genre-based set of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) electives focusing specifically on individual genres and linked to professionally oriented tasks, introducing students to some of the demands of key post academic professional workplaces.

The further investigation of:

1. Some of the main professional genres and sub-genres to be used as input to curriculum design.
2. How best to convert the insights from needs analysis into the design of specific curricular packages keeping in mind the institutional demands and constraints.
3. The development of ESP (EAP/EOP) teaching materials for use in specific modules suggested in the recommendations.
4. The feasibility of self-access and/or web-mediated ESP modular materials for use in ESP (EOP) courses.

Adapted from Bhatia & Candlin, 2001, p.106 (as cited in Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007, pp86-87).

APPENDIX C

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

1.

You are invited to participate in my research study on MBA students' experiences of academic writing, by completing the following survey. It is confidential and quick and should take not more than 20 minutes of your time to complete.

1. Indicate which of the following applies to you. English is my

- [ ] 1st language (mother tongue)
- [ ] 2nd language
- [ ] 3rd language

Other (please specify)

2. In which language/languages did you complete the majority of your schooling?

3. If you completed a post-school qualification prior to completing the MBA, please indicate the type of institution at which you obtained the qualification.

- [ ] College
- [ ] University
- [ ] Technikon
- [ ] I do not have a post-school qualification

Other (please specify)

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

2.

4. In what language did you complete your post-school qualification/s?

5. How many years have elapsed between your most recent post-school qualification and your admission to the MBA programme?

- [ ] Less than 5 years
- [ ] 5-10 years
- [ ] More than 10 years

APPENDIX C CONTINUED

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

3.

6. Did you find that the reading and writing skills required for the dissertation were different to those required for completing the assignments during the coursework component of the MBA programme?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Not really
- ○ Not sure

If yes, please specify in what way you found them different.

7. In your view, did the coursework component of the MBA prepare you adequately for the dissertation process?

- ☐ Yes, it prepared me for the dissertation.
- ☐ No, it did not prepare me for the dissertation.
- ☐ I am not sure.

If you answered no, how do you think the coursework presentation could have prepared you more for the dissertation process?

8. Approximately how many academic journal articles did you read during the coursework component of the MBA programme?

- ○ less than 5
- ○ more than 10
- ○ none
- ○ I am not sure what an academic journal article is.

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

9. In class during the coursework component of the MBA degree

	often	seldom	not at all
We debated various author's theoretical viewpoints.	○	○	○
We discussed operational executive issues.	○	○	○
It was chalk and talk from the lecturer.	○	○	○
We learned how to construct an academic argument.	○	○	○
We read and analysed academic texts.	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

APPENDIX C CONTINUED

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

4.

10. In your professional role as a business person, please indicate the nature of the reading and writing tasks you are required to perform. Please choose all that apply.

	read	write	both
contracts	☐	☐	☐
proposals	☐	☐	☐
reports	☐	☐	☐
PowerPoint presentations	☐	☐	☐
memos	☐	☐	☐
email	☐	☐	☐

Other (please specify)

11. How, if at all, are the reading and writing skills required for the professional tasks listed in question 10 different to the skills required for writing a dissertation?

12. Please rate the reading genres below according to how frequently you read and utilize them for your professional development. 5 being most frequent and 1 being the least frequently read.

	1	2	3	4	5
academic/scholarly journals	○	○	○	○	○
books	○	○	○	○	○
industry-related magazines	○	○	○	○	○
newspapers	○	○	○	○	○
websites	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

13. Please rate the reading genres below according to how frequently you read and utilized them for the literature review of your dissertation. 5 being most frequent and 1 being the least frequently read.

	1	2	3	4	5
academic/scholarly journals	○	○	○	○	○
books	○	○	○	○	○
industry-related magazines	○	○	○	○	○
newspapers	○	○	○	○	○
websites	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

APPENDIX C CONTINUED

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

5.

14. Rate the following aspects of completing the Literature Review from 1 - 5. 5 being the most difficult or challenging and 1 being the easiest or least challenging.

	1	2	3	4	5
sourcing relevant literature	○	○	○	○	○
the volume of reading	○	○	○	○	○
expressing what I understand coherently in writing	○	○	○	○	○
bringing many ideas together in a coherent piece of writing	○	○	○	○	○
expressing others' ideas in my words	○	○	○	○	○

15. When writing your dissertation, what aspects of your expertise do you feel made the most significant contribution when writing your dissertation?

- ○ professional business expertise
- ○ academic expertise

16. Do you feel that the research component of the MBA, and the dissertation have added value to your professional development?

- ☐ Yes, research is an integral part of my business strategy.
- ☐ No, the dissertation was a necessary evil in obtaining my MBA.
- ☐ It hasn't really made any difference in my career path.

Why/Why not? (please specify)

17. In terms of academic reading and writing, what was the most challenging skill you had to master while writing your dissertation?

MBA Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

6.

18. Did you view your identity as an MBA student at business school primarily as

- ☐ a professional finetuning your executive capacity
- ☐ a student learning about business
- ☐ confusing - student or professional?

19. What one piece of advice would you give an MBA candidate starting out on the dissertation process?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – ONLINE SURVEY

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

Wits School of Education

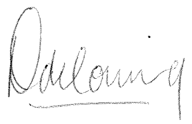
My name is Debbie de Coning, and I am conducting research for the purpose of obtaining a Masters degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. The purpose of my study is to determine the difficulties experienced by MBA students during the writing of their dissertation with regard to academic literacy and, in particular, academic writing. While the dissertation requires a competent level of academic writing, business studies as well as the work environment often require writing competencies differing from academic writing. It is thus that I aim to explore MBA students' experiences of academic writing. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

I will be asking MBA candidates who are varying stages of the dissertation, as well as MBA graduates, to participate. If you have been invited to participate in this research project, then it will be on the basis that you have completed or are nearing completion of your dissertation.

Participation in this research will entail completing an online questionnaire. The questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete and participation is voluntary. While questions are asked about your personal circumstances, no identifying information such as your name or ID number is asked for, and as such you will remain anonymous. There will also be no mention made of the name of the institution in the research report.

Your completed questionnaire will be submitted online and will remain anonymous. It will not be seen by any person in this institution at any time, and will only be processed by myself. The questionnaires will not be submitted for examination along with the research report. The data obtained from the questionnaires will be used for the research report on this study, and may also be used in future journal articles and/or conference proceedings.
If you choose to participate in the study, please follow the link in the email and complete the online questionnaire as carefully and as honestly as possible. Once you have answered the questions, please be so kind as to follow the prompts and submit the questionnaire electronically. This will ensure that no-one will have access to the completed questionnaires, and will ensure your confidentiality. If you do complete and submit the online questionnaire, this will be considered consent to participate in the study.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. This research will contribute both to a larger body of knowledge on the difficulties experienced by MBA students when writing their dissertations, as well as inform curriculum development and programme design at the institution. Findings from this study may also inform teaching interventions that may well pre-empt the difficulties experienced by some students during their academic tenure at business school.



Kind Regards
Debbie de Coning

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – FOCUS GROUP

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

Wits School of Education

2009-09-01

My name is Debbie de Coning, and I am conducting research for the purpose of obtaining a Masters degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. The purpose of my study is to determine the difficulties experienced by MBA students during the writing of their dissertation with regard to academic literacy and, in particular, academic writing. While the dissertation requires a competent level of academic writing, business studies as well as the work environment often require writing competencies differing from academic writing. It is thus that I aim to explore MBA students' experiences of academic writing. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

I will be asking MBA candidates who are varying stages of the dissertation to participate. If you have been invited to participate in this research project, then it will be on the basis that you are an MBA candidate who has completed Stage 2 of the MBA programme and who is in the process of completing your dissertation or you have completed your dissertation and will be graduating this year (2009).

Participation in this research will entail being part of a focus group at a time and place that is convenient for you. A focus group is a form of group interview that relies on interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher, who in this instance will be me. The focus group will last approximately one hour. With your permission, this interview will be recorded in order to ensure accuracy in transcription.

Participation is voluntary, and no student will be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way for choosing to participate in the focus group. All your responses will be kept confidential, and no information that could identify you would be included in the research report. The focus group interview material (tapes and transcripts) will not be seen or heard by any person in this institution at any time, and will only be processed by myself. You may refuse to answer any questions you would prefer not to, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point. There will also be no mention made of the name of the institution in the research report.

The data obtained from the focus group, whether a recording or transcript will not be heard seen by any person in this institution at any time, and will only be processed by myself. The recording of the focus group will not be submitted for examination along with the research report. The data obtained from the recording of the focus group will be used for the research report on this study, and may also be used in future journal articles and/or conference proceedings. If you choose to participate in the study, please reply to me via email at researchsurvey.ddeconing@gmail.com , alternatively I can be contacted telephonically at 083 461 5215.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. This research will contribute both to a larger body of knowledge on the difficulties experienced by MBA students when writing their dissertations, as well as inform curriculum development and programme design at the institution. Findings from this study may also inform teaching interventions that may well pre-empt the difficulties experienced by some students during their academic tenure at business school.

Kind Regards
Debbie de Coning

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS (FRIDAY 18TH SEPTEMBER 2009)

1. Opening question:
   - Tell us your name and in which business sector you operate.

2. Introductory question:
   - When you hear the word dissertation, what comes to mind?

3. Transition question
   - How are you progressing with your dissertation? Are you pleased with your progress? What have been the drivers/hurdles?

4. Key Questions
   - What was the most difficult skill (reading & writing) you had to master when writing your dissertation?

   - Did the coursework component prepare you adequately for the dissertation writing process?

   - If not, how could you have been better prepared?

   - How (if at all) is business writing different from academic writing?

   - Discuss aspects of the literature review in terms of difficulty:

   - How do you experience your identity at business school in terms of being a professional/student?

5. Ending

   - All things considered, what one piece of advice would you give to an MBA candidate starting out on the dissertation process

   - Is there anything we should have talked about that we didn't?