

Incidents in an Educational Life

John M. Swales.

Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2009. 208 pages. ISBN 978-0-472-03358-4.

Incidents in an Educational Life does not intend to be a self-promotional or intellectually pretentious narrative exercise, as its preface sincerely reads. Rather, his author chronicles an educational journey that generously leads readers into the heart of academia and into the realm of the authoritative ESP and EAP studies.

A first reading of *Incidents in an Educational Life* immediately evokes the unparalleled literary flair of *Where do you Stop?*, written by contemporary fiction writer Erik Kraft. Both narrative accounts brilliantly tell the personal history, adventures, experiences and observations of their two protagonists – Peter Leroy in the latter and John Swales in the former. When they reminisce, they show not only their interest in facts but also in the possibilities and implications behind those facts. But while Peter Leroy does so as a master of the art of wishful thinking, Swales stands as a master of profound research and pedagogically-oriented thinking. And this is precisely the most precious asset of *Incidents in an Educational Life*.

A first thought-provoking reading unavoidably invites a second, more reflexive reading throughout the solid EAP/ESP tenets underpinning the memoir. The anecdotal experiences that the volume compiles do not only entertain the reader and make him/her perceive the author's sensitivity and acute views into educational contexts. They also make salient varied theoretical and applied issues in EAP settings – thus making the volume a fruitful compilation of applications and implications for all those involved in academic and professional English.

Swales's writing expertise turns his memoir into a dynamic interplay of rhetorical modes of discourse that are subtly knit-together – the narrative, the expository, the descriptive and the argumentative modes. The fluent and hilarious narrative account is built upon entertaining classroom episodes and anecdotes that implicitly lay bare principled educational stances. The volume also nurtures from an expository mode through which the author thoroughly surveys the EAP/ESP landscape from its early beginnings to date. Swales

also rememorizes key scholarly figures as well as milestones of the ESP profession and envisages new interdisciplinary directions for EAP/ESP teaching.

Along with narration and exposition, the volume is remarkably descriptive as it minutely recreates systematic explorations of research and teaching practices and a myriad of academic interactions among EAP/ESP teachers, colleagues and students. Finally, intertwining these three modes, the typical Swalesian argumentative tone raises concern towards debatable assessment methods, rigid teaching methodologies and ineffective student counseling/tutoring practices. In such a crafty way, Swales's personal experiences go beyond the mere history-telling and take in what is "out there" in the EAP/ESP world.

The question "What can the reader learn from *Incidents in an Educational Life?*" can be easily replied by outlining the multifarious issues raised throughout its pages – as briefly sketched (and perhaps roughly categorized) below, pedagogical, theoretical, educational and institutional issues.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the volume embraces lively discussions on topics relevant to English teaching and learning for specific discourse communities of practice. The rich diversity of topics includes, among others, evidenced learners' difficulties in their second language acquisition processes, suitable ways of developing informed curricula, effective strategies for devising and preparing teaching materials and successful methods for teaching/learning EFL and ESP/EAP. The increasing use of computer labs or inductive language learning based on a data-driven approach and electronic corpora wittingly play a prominent role in Swales's memoir.

Further, readers may also consider this long-life journey as the author's pretext for providing them with rich feedback on EAP research/teaching methods and procedures that he himself has assessed in his actual professional practice. Particularly outstanding are Swales's valuable indications as regards the suitability of conducting a learners' needs analysis and designing tailor-made materials and courses according to such specific needs. The pedagogical benefits of using notional syllabuses, the advantages of integrating competences in language learning as well as prioritizing fluency vs. accuracy in English conversation classes are some other issues of interest raised in the memoir.

Echoing the premises of constructivism in language learning (Duffy &

Jonassen, 1992; Fallows & Steven, 2000), Swales relies on his extensive educational background and teaching experience to comment on the importance of students' acquisition of problem-solving and critical thinking skills along with a theoretical and applied knowledge of the language. Swales's observations on the crucial role of effective tutoring, as also viewed by his doctoral students (Luebs et al, 1998) and on challenging cooperative and collaborative classroom methodologies (e.g. dialogic scenarios and project-based learning) are all issues that we should take into account when preparing EAP/ESP courses for the imminent European degrees.

From a theoretical standpoint, genre analysis inescapably comes to the fore in every single anecdote of the memoir. The reader profits from the detailed account of the very foundations of genre theory, the latter profoundly rooted in cultural anthropology, philosophy and the sociology of science. The reader can also find careful introspection into the linguistic characteristics of genres, as well as on textual typologies, context-sensitive analyses, re-visited communicative purposes, big discourse communities, and small academic tribes and territories. Other relevant issues related to genre theory that do not escape Swales's notice are the increasingly generified processes in academia, the formation of genre networks and genre colonies, the importance of audience analysis and the textualization of academic writing processes across different disciplines and cultural backgrounds.

As the title of the volume anticipates, *Incidents in an Educational Life* also paves suitable grounds for discussing educational issues. The reader will find numerous descriptions that forge a comprehensive view of educators and the kind of ongoing training that educators need. Of note, the innumerable intertextual links that the memoir provides are influential works in the EAP domain that have influenced Swales and may likewise influence both novice and experienced EAP/ESP scholars today. Guided by Swales's exceptional intellectual curiosity and experience as an EAP/ESP researcher, the memoir provides useful insights into the synergy between researching and teaching and the benefits from academic mentorship. In addition, it delves into specific aspects involved in climbing up the academic ladder – aspects such as profiting from interdisciplinary teams, participating in conferences, properly preparing a lecture talk, developing a mature writing style or getting involved into research publishing and editing.

As for institutional issues, the volume allows some space to invite dialogic

moments to assess the rising commodifying forces in universities worldwide. It also engages readers into judicious and sensible advice on language university policies with the aim of catering for students' language needs in Spain, in Europe and worldwide, especially at a time when multilingualism in Europe and elsewhere seems to be counteracted by the prominent sociolinguistic status and growing spread of English as the current *lingua franca* for academic communication.

From what one reads, it is easy to corroborate the author's reason to embark upon his journey – “to show how an ordinary instructor working in odd places could work his/her way up the academic ladder” (personal communication). *Incidents in an Educational Life* illustrates important aspects regarding the kind of formal education and training an EAP/ESP instructor undergoes – aspects as varied as an acquaintance with academic literacies and disciplinary communities, as well as the need for acquiring a solid formal knowledge of the English language and for gradually developing a critical eye for learner-centered views and pedagogies. *Incidents* also illustrate that, at times, the educational journey is long, arduous and involves obstacles that must be overcome. But within this comprehensive picture of language teaching/learning experiences, the reader misses more detailed accounts of the kind of assessment systems and assessment criteria one should adopt as an alternative to the unsuccessful assessing methods that he often criticizes throughout the book. These are issues which, in my view, do not receive sufficient attention and the necessary reflection, but that are nonetheless crucial particularly at a time when ESP courses and their assessment systems are being redefined in the European Higher Education context.

As it is, though, *Incidents in an Educational Life* offers compelling arguments for giving prominence to the individual learning process of an ordinary instructor in the academic world. Indeed, the book represents a useful heuristic for the challenges that EAP/ESP researchers and teachers face in their daily academic duties and tasks. It will therefore be of considerable interest to both novice and experienced scholars who want to know or better understand the nature of EAP/ESP instruction.

[Review received February 2010]

Reviewed by **Carmen Pérez-Llantada**
 Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain)
 llantada@unizar.es

REFERENCES

Duffy, T.M & D.H. Jonassen (1992). *Constructivism and the Technology of Instruction. A Conversation*. Hillsday, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fallows, S. & C. Steven (2000). *Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education; Employability, Transferable Skills and Learning for Life*. London: Kagan Page.

Kraft, E. (1995). *Where do you Stop? The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observations of Peter Leroy*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Luebs, M., K.M. Fredrickson, S. Hyon & B. Samraj (1998). "John Swales as mentor: The view from the doctoral group". *English for Specific Purposes* 17: 67-86.