

## **'A balancing act': a case study of a student's experience as a writer at university**

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### **Key words:**

### **Background**

This paper examines the experience of one student (Thelma) as a writer through her three-year undergraduate programme, and the principal issues that arose for her. We attempt to relate this experience to those of other students in the US and the UK through examining the literature around academic literacy, and issues of writing and identity. Also of relevance are theories of discourse and attitudes to different discourses and genres and their importance in the higher education context. The process of reflecting on and writing about Thelma's three years at the university has brought up many questions, most of which have been raised by others before in different contexts. These range from the very broad - such as 'What (and who) is higher education for?' and 'What is the nature of knowledge and who decides?' - to the more specific - such as 'What does it mean to succeed?' and 'What do students need to do to achieve this?'

Because a case study approach has been taken, looking at the path travelled by one individual, issues have come up with regard to the place of the personal in the academic context, and the power structure within the lecturer/student relationship. Barnett (1997) has suggested that the aim of the university is to develop 'the critical person', with criticality encompassing three domains: academic knowledge, the self and the world, and with students reaching this goal through critical reflection as self-realisation. This view of higher education suggests a process by which the student, bringing with her whatever experience, knowledge and awareness she has integrated into her life so far, participates as an acknowledged individual in order to achieve her own goals and perhaps transformation. Yet the place of the personal in the academic environment is at best only beginning to be accepted through new practices, for example with vocational fields such as the caring professions becoming academic disciplines (see Hoadley-Maidment, 2000), or through innovations in teaching practice such as learning journals (see Creme, 2000).

Conversely, many students perceive degree studies as being about learning the rules and playing the game in order to get good grades (see Read *et al*, 2001; Lillis, 2001) rather than about developing and expressing their own views. At the same time, the crucial importance of the student writer's self cannot be ignored and when students receive feedback on their writing they inevitably perceive it as personal (Lea and

Street 2000). Pardoe (2000, p.126) has pointed out '... just how difficult it is for the novice or outsider to work out what is required in a new context'. It is easy to see why students might choose to take the line of least resistance in a context where lecturers are the acknowledged repositories of knowledge and power.

There are, of course, students who challenge both power and convention and this can be a gamble. The changing nature of the student population, with more mature students with substantial experience entering higher education and more professionals returning to study, makes it worth considering what the consequences may be of ignoring what students bring with them to university.

## **Writing, context and identity**

According to Fairclough (1999, p.81) discourses '...are always provisional and indeterminate, contested and moreover, at issue in social relationships, within which all teachers and learners are positioned.' Students at university not only have to develop an academic writing style, but have to write in a range of formats for a large and diverse number of teacher-readers, each with her/his own idea of what constitutes the ideal assignment. This raises the fundamental question of the purpose of writing at university. Is it about demonstrating what you have learnt on a particular module; reformulating the information with some of your own ideas thrown in; or giving your own point of view on the question with reference to some of the recommended texts? This is often a greater dilemma for the mature student, since she will have developed a complex set of views and opinions on a range of issues and may find herself in conflict with what is being taught or with a different approach to the ideas being dealt with.

Literacy practices, states Street (1994, p.139), are 'related to specific cultural contexts' and are 'always associated with relations of power and ideology'. He also argues that they are constitutive of identity and personhood; that the acquisition of a new literacy is often associated with the construction of a new identity. For a mature student there may be more to be lost than gained in such a process, with conflict arising from a desire to retain an existing identity at the same time as gaining acceptance in the academic community - particularly where that community appears to be white, middle class and male dominated and the student's identity is otherly classed, raced and gendered. The student may find it a struggle to maintain and integrate her identity and beliefs in the academic environment.

Ivanic (1997) conceives of student writers as having three different selves: the 'autobiographical self' representing the identity of the writer; the 'authorial self', meaning the writer as perceived by the reader; and the 'discoursal self' expressed in the linguistic features which form the genre of a particular text. She sees this division of selves as one means of preserving identity while conforming to academic requirements. In order to speak with authority in the academic context, she explains, students have to take on someone else's voice and code, since any authority that they may bring with them, such as that of parenthood, local politics or business, may not be recognised. Hence, the self, personal opinions and experiences are required to be set aside in favour of academic impartiality and analysis. As Lillis (2001, p.24) says '...the writer herself is constructed as an autonomous and socially neutral, or empty subject'. Lillis takes a *social practices* approach to seeking understanding of what is at stake for individuals as they engage in the literacy practices involved in higher education. She considers '... the student-writers' literacy/life-history accounts' are key to this quest (*ibid.*, p. 4). A central thesis of Lillis' approach is that students'

development within the academic institution is intimately tied up with their lives, past and present, outside – as this case study illustrates.

### **Thelma's experience**

It became apparent early on in Thelma's degree studies that her identity as a mature black woman and a parent, with a high degree of political awareness from an early age, and her experience in a range of jobs (voluntary and paid) and as a local councillor, were going to be highly significant in her approach to degree studies and her interrelationships with academic staff. She had had negative experiences which confirmed for her the embedded nature of an institutional and systematic colonial and capitalist framework, which constitutes frames of reference for Blacks of stereotypes, historical domination and oppression, colonialism, negative perceptions, negative expectations, negative vision of other Blacks, the denial of their experiences and denial of access to opportunities and facilities that will change their condition or life expectations. In studying at university, she said:

*'The idea was to learn and expand my theory base and articulate my experiences into a format that would not be described as aggressive, incredible, unbelievable. I needed to utilise the tools of discursive 'safe' language construction to articulate my pain - my lived experiences - my confusions of being denied my humanness because of my outer skin'.*

She expected to get high grades and felt angry with herself when this was not always the case. The importance of grades is a recurring theme with many students because of the way in which grades classify them - not just for their final degree classification but as symbols of the value attached to their work and indeed their selves - throughout their studies. When she got excellent feedback on one piece of work Thelma said:

*'I knew my coursework was good. When I was researching and writing for it - there I experienced pleasure and some ironic excitement that I was actually learning theory to explain my own lived life. My examples used in the course work were also from my lived experience which probably made the piece come alive'.*

However often tutors commented primarily on structure, which Thelma found frustrating and restricting:

*'This was my first indication that there was no room for creativity and individuality. I have to gauge what it is lecturers want and fit into a box, a window, a frame, a tight jacket'.*

From fairly early on Thelma felt there was a lack of dialogue with tutors. She was puzzled by the fact that sometimes she felt she had written similar assignments but they came back with very different marks. Lillis (2001, p.45) uses Bakhtin's concept of 'addressivity' to demonstrate how students may (or not) work out tutors' expectations through '... talking with the tutor, listening to particular lectures and reading written, often departmental, guidelines'. But she goes on to stress the distance that exists between tutors' and students' understandings of academic writing conventions because these are so often implicit. Thelma felt there was a tension between her own identity and what she wanted to write and '... them needing me to write in a certain way.' She thought that some lecturers perceived her as a troublemaker ' ... and I couldn't understand it because if they knew the state I was in'. She felt that '... if they see you as a threat they come down hard on you'. Another factor was the modular

system: 'You have all these different tutors and just when you're getting to know what they want you move on'. She also found it difficult to ask for help, especially after an incident where having been specifically instructed to do a certain assignment in a particular way, and having shown a draft to the tutor and been told it was fine she received a low grade. As a result she lost confidence in the process.

Other discouraging experiences resulted in a sense of the difference between mature students and those coming to university from school.

*'I was coming from a work environment - a notch or two above simplistic book methods - where I was trying to 'do it as it is'. All that was required was a text book assignment to show that I understood the concepts - from a mature student that had functioned at a wide level and range of command I was having to become a 'child' that had to do as it was told'.*

But the most negative realisation was '...how racism can and does work within the [university] system'. Following a period of study at in City College New York (CCNY) where Thelma experienced an environment in which far more of the lecturers were black, she came to feel that the white lecturers in England are racist without being aware of it:

*'I certainly felt more empowered in CCNY as we had Black Professors - in abundance. I wasn't wearing the fear of my skin and I did not have to worry about using theory to incorporate my experiences of racism - it was an accepted fact here - not like the liberal white lecturers in England who mark you down when you dare to - even within their own parameters. Also there were clearer instructions of what they wanted from you. There wasn't such a (European) whiteness of coded behaviour'.*

After her return from the USA, Thelma said 'It was a different way of writing, I had to learn to write a different way again.' This was a return to the feeling that her English was somehow substandard, in spite of the praise she received from her CCNY professors. Having scrutinised some of her essays, Helen felt, and Thelma agreed, that her writing appeared more laboured, and sentence structure seemed to suffer in some of the more theoretical work (such as essays on cultural theory), whereas when she wrote about a topic she knew well and/or cared deeply about, her language seemed to flow more freely. As she said: 'There is nothing like personal experience to bring life to a piece of writing'. She commented:

*'To some university professors it seems my experience doesn't matter. If I quote Aristotle or Hobbes people are happy, rational, detached, but then you go on to say this is my experience and people can't cope with that'.*

Thelma also said that when she had confidence in the lecturer the writing flowed more. This demonstrates how subtly the relationship between student and tutor can affect the work produced, in conjunction with the subject and nature of the task and the student's approximation of the tutor's expectations.

A recurring issue for Thelma was confusion about for whom she was supposed to be writing. The fact that tutors came and went, and it was not always the lecturer known to the student who marked the work, led to a lack of continuity and a sense of writing to a vacuum which led Thelma to '... write the assignments for the intelligent person on top of the Clapham omnibus'. Another issue was the fact that tutors often referred students to documents such as the Student Handbook, Module Handbooks or

assignment instructions, which appear crystal clear to them (probably since they wrote them) yet only serve to mystify students further.

Thelma experienced change, difficulty and a loss of confidence, but there was also hope and a feeling of greater liberation and of recovering that which had been taken away. She was not a passive participant, but was conscious of the power and privilege inherent in academia and felt that her main aim was to learn to use existing discourses creatively 'to articulate my own experiences'.

## **Conclusions**

Many of the issues that arose for Thelma during her studies are ones that have been signalled by researchers into student writing (such as those cited above), including:

- lack of dialogue between tutor and student;
- different expectations from different tutors;
- the requirement on the student to stifle her/his own voice;
- the importance attached to surface aspects of student writing.

Thelma's experience is just one example of the knocks sustained by those who seek to question and change. Her 'balancing act' consisted in not rocking the boat so much that she ended up not getting what she went to university for in the first place, a degree - while at the same time achieving her aim of validating and understanding her own experience. Many students besides Thelma have mentioned the tactical or strategic approach to student writing, which consists in producing writing that will fit the model required. One of Helen's Open University students described what she called 'the power relations in literacy practices' demonstrated by the rules that govern how an assignment should be presented and the information it should contain, saying 'To resist would be at your peril'.

This desire for control over what and how students write seems outdated to many of us now, in an age where students are very often not young people still in their formative years, but experienced and knowledgeable individuals used to expressing themselves in contexts outside academia. In many disciplines, forms of writing other than essays are now starting to become the norm, such as: case studies, reviews and reflective portfolios (see Lea and Street (2000) for a description of how traditional disciplines are looking at new ways of writing). In the era of 'lifelong learning' and 'widening participation' it seems appropriate to encourage the acceptance and development of more diverse forms of writing, discussion and dialogue which acknowledge the value of lived experience as well as that gained from the study of texts and from lectures. There is a need for a more democratic approach to writing and an opening up of the academy intellectually to accompany the broadened intake of students.

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