Making Academia Transparent:
Negotiating Academic Identities in the Writing Center

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Abstract

Graduate students often have to negotiate their academic identities because of the manner in which they are positioned in the academy, and because of the ‹discourse of transparency› that often surrounds their academic writing. I argue that the Writing Centre is the best place that these students can use as ‹rehearsal space› to develop an alternative ‹discourse of selfhood› while negotiating their academic writing identities. This article reflects on a project researching how students negotiate academic identities in a faculty writing centre. It attempts to answer what processes are involved in the negotiation of an own identity within an academic discourse community. Nine multicultural and multilingual Masters in Education students were interviewed about their participation in the activities of the Writing Centre, and the written texts that they composed while attending the Centre have formed part of the data. Interview data have been subjected to a process of Narrative Analysis. Written work has been analyzed in terms of an Appraisal System, identifying the specific ways in which writers establish authority in, through and over their own writing. The narratives reveal that students identify in almost peripatetic mode with certain elements in grand narratives. Students do not model their narratives on archetypal ones, but rather ‹cut and paste› their own academic identities on to the general structure of a narrative. In terms of the appraisal system it was noticeable that student writing is a very significant indicator of the degree to which they students adopt a specific and powerful attitudinal stance, inviting or deflecting dialogue with the reader, as well as adopting or refuting intertextual positionings.

Taking on the obscurity

The issue under discussion in this article is the way graduate students negotiate their academic identities in the Graduate Writing Center of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Concomitant with major political changes in the country, the University has changed its policies of access to higher education under a previously discriminatory political dispensation with regard to African students. These students have to redefine themselves continuously at various levels: they are social engineers, forging a new South Africa by commencing graduate study and research in order to take educational leadership in the country. Although relatively new to the roles, they are expected by the institution to become expert

researchers and report writers, as a consequence becoming almost ‹fixed› in their academic identities. For instance, they are labeled as ‹poorly educated›, ‹previously disadvantaged›, ‹under-prepared›, students from ‹historically black universities›, being fast tracked through agendas and programs of equity, redress and access stipulated in, among other documents, the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001). When these students present themselves to the academy, they are positioned as lacking real academic literacy, as ‹novice› researchers and ‹apprentices›, as ‹amateurs›, as ‹trainee researchers› to be ‹initiated› into the discourse community, thus maintaining the unequal power relations in society: the Supervisor-Student relationship can easily be equated with that of the Master-Apprentice in the workplace.

Not all students, however, are willing to conform to these makeshift academic identities, a stance which often leads to confrontation and contestation. I argue that one of the most important ways in which they ‹assume› alternative and perhaps ‹real› academic identities in the University, is in and through their writing. The Writing Center is the best space to posit the developing academic identities of these students, shaped by their *academic literacies*, (Lea, 1999, Lea & Street, 2000) their skills, their experiences and their socio-cultural background, against the expectations of the academy, and with the *academic discourse of transparency* (Lillis, 2001, Lillis & Turner, 2001, Turner, 1999) that often characterize expectations of student work and writing. The problem therefore revolves around the fixing – and unfixing – of academic identities.

Considering the discourse of transparency
The discourse of transparency is the dominant conceptualization of language in Western intellectual tradition. When language is working well, in this tradition, it is invisible. Academic thinking, it is also assumed, is rational and logical. When language is not working well, it draws attention to itself; it becomes an object of censure, marking a deficiency in the individual students using it, marking their writing ‹illogical›, and/or ‹irrational›. The discourse of transparency assumes that writing should be done with absolute clarity when representing knowledge. Academic writing should be representing the universal, intellectual tradition of objectivist epistemology. If one takes academic literacies seriously, if one values the students' experiences and the processes they engage in while crafting their written products, one has in fact to

question the academic discourse of transparency, one has to reveal the workings of the written language and the value systems behind the works. In other words, the epistemological role of language has switched from that of perfectly reflecting and revealing reality and reason, to that of communicating knowledge clearly. Academic literacies shatter that mirror image, revealing the shape *of* language and the shapes *in* language.

The assumptions of a transparent discourse of writing are that students have to write an introduction to their topics; that they cite authorities in the field; that they use faultless grammar and punctuation; and that they avoid plagiarism (Johns, drawing on Elbow, Geertz & Purvis, 1997). Most importantly, students are supposed to argue intelligently and structure their arguments coherently and logically (Lillis, 2001). As a result, written feedback on student writing often contain such comments as ‹Say exactly what you mean›, ‹Express your ideas clearly›, ‹Be explicit›, ‹State clearly›, ‹Spell it out›, and so on. Although the rhetorical organization of academic writing is *highly significant*, it is also socio-culturally situated and hence subject to change. Students are supposed to be viewed as inherently a heteroglossic grouping in a homoglossic environment - the University, but such a difference only leads to a chasm between students and the academy, and furthermore the notion that students and institution should develop new pedagogies and new epistemologies in order to bridge the divide. These pedagogies, I argue, should be less concerned with simply developing such key skills as academic writing and communication, but more about creating and utilizing new spaces such as the Writing Center in order to allow for negotiation of academic identities. With regard to new epistemologies, I maintain that the role of the academy is not for students to reproduce knowledge, but to create new knowledge and participate in doing that. It is not enough for institutions to give students access to the academy and to socialize them into the dominant practices. Students have to work through the different voices in a written text and explore which voices to own; students have to problematize the transparency of language; and they have to open up ‹talk back› spaces. In other words, student writers are to make their own meaning; to contest the dominant conventions of the academy. Students, in fact, have to flout the *discourse of belonging* to the academic community because it does not ensure automatic admittance to the community. Graduate students are, in fact, constantly subjected to a *discourse of surveillance* when they embark on

their research. They are subjected to various standards of graduate research supervision which spell out such things as admission and selection criteria; doctorial committees; advanced degree committees; doctorial seminars; codes of conduct listing the responsibilities of the student and the responsibilities of the supervisor; support structures of the students; monitoring of studies; termination of studies; and formal assessment. (Standards for Graduate Research/Supervision, 2004)

Tracking the negotiation process

This article reflects on a research project investigating how students negotiate academic identities in a faculty writing centre for graduate students. The research attempts to answer such questions as what processes are involved in the negotiation of an own identity within an academic discourse community? How do students establish authority over the content of their work in their academic writing?

A group of nine multicultural and multilingual Masters in Education students has been purposively selected in order to describe how their authorial identities are negotiated. They have been observed in their interaction with Writing Center tutors, they have been interviewed at strategic moments in their participation in the activities of the Writing Center, and their written texts that they have composed while attending the Center have all been sources of data. Interview data have been constituted as forms of *Narrative Analysis* and the students' written work has been analyzed in terms of an *Appraisal System*, identifying the specific ways in which writers establish authority in, through and over their own writing.

Narrating academic identities

The narratives I elicited from the participants reveal much about their academic identities. I used this form of inquiry primarily to capture stories in action, performances of experiences, negotiation of identity. I trace four structural elements of their performances in the narratives. I look firstly at the kind of story in which the narrator places him/herself; secondly, how he/she locates the other characters in the story in relation to him/herself; thirdly, how the narrator relates to him/herself, i.e. what are the identity claims that the narrator makes about him/herself, and lastly, who the narrator sets up as the audience while narrating his/her story? The following is a selection of the most prominent narratives from the nine participants.

Bill, a black, Sesotho-speaking male student, studying towards a Masters degree in Educational Management, narrates a story of alienation and ostracism. He relates how his teaching colleagues and his community marginalized him because of the fact that he embarked on graduate studies, purportedly thinking himself better than them. The other characters in his narrative are represented as people not understanding him and not valuing the difference he can make with his newly acquired knowledge gained and produced at university. His identity claims during the interviews are about those of a ‹prophet› not recognized in his own country, and he sets up the audience of his narrative to sympathize with his plight of changing their attitudes towards him.

Denise, a Tamil-speaking Indian woman, studying towards a Masters degree Inclusive Education and Learning Support narrates a oppression-emancipation type of story. The rural happiness she enjoyed while teaching at a farm school was shattered by the discrimination at university for her first degree. She, however, was ‹freed› when attending the Writing Center and getting the support of and intellectual relationship with the tutors in the centre. The characters in her narrative are all presented as contributing towards togetherness, interaction, and racial harmony. The identity claims in her narrative centre portraying her as a fighter for emancipation, yet in setting up the audience of her narrative, she adopts an obsequious stance, calling me ‹sir›, ‹mister›, and seeking affirmation by tag phrases such as ‹you know› after her statements.

Ester is a black Venda-speaking woman, studying towards a Masters degree in Educational Linguistics. Her narrative is about ‹straying from the flock›. Similar to Bill's story, her family and community blames her for abdicating her role as servant of the community, for the life of researcher at a university. The other characters in her narrative, she signals, tear her between her loyalty to her community and her yearning for academic freedom. Throughout her narrative, she emphasizes her Venda-identity very strongly, and her resolution to ‹go back› with her knowledge and ‹uplift› her community. The audience, consequently, should view her endeavors as brave and courageous.

Fran, a white Afrikaans-speaking woman, studying towards a Masters degree in Educational Psychology, narrates a tale of conformity and its rewards. She represents herself as a dutiful daughter, a hard working student, and a privileged person under the previously apartheid political dispensation in South Africa. The suite of characters in her narrative is subsequently

also divided into the ‹haves› and the ‹have-nots›, the privileged and the underprivileged. She with all of this ‹performance› in front of the audience is supposed to elicit their sympathy for her awareness of inequality and her attempts to redress, however small.

Hester, a black Tswana-speaking woman, studying towards a Masters degree in Computer Education, narrates a rescue mission. She tells about her attempts to help her black teacher colleagues, her fellow Masters students, and other undergraduate students she tutors, and about all the dangers along the way, such as white students setting traps for her by asking her to change their marks on the schedules. The other characters in her narrative are represented as in continuous need of rescue, such as under-qualified fellow teachers, unmotivated fellow students, and misguided undergraduate students. The identity markers she chooses for herself are those of the hero of the story, of the spokesperson for the oppressed. The relationship she sets up with the audience during her narration is that of compelling appreciation of her efforts and acknowledgement of her plight as a black students' right campaigner.

What is clear from all these narratives is the fact that students identify in almost peripatetic mode with certain elements in grand narratives of, say, the Apartheid story and the role of Blacks and Whites in the history of South Africa. They do not model their narratives on archetypal ones, but rather ‹cut and paste› their own academic identities on to the general structure of the narrative. This ‹cut and paste› function is also evident in another process of negotiation in the writing centre; that of performing their academic writing identities in their written texts.

Revealing academic identity in writing
The next section looks at the way the students present their academic identities in their written work. In the interaction with the tutors they assume certain aspects of their academic identity as was the case with the narrative interviews with the researcher. These students assume a different side of their academic identities each time they engage with another member of the academic discourse community, ranging from the tutors in the writing centre, the supervisors of their studies, or the researcher interviewing them and eliciting the narratives of their academic writing literacy. I argue that students also assume equally convincingly, their academic identities in their written work. Although it is important to recognize the importance of text

as research data, (Silverman, 2001), the way in which these texts have been analyzed in educational research, as listed by Silverman, namely content analysis, analysis of narrative structures, ethnography, and membership categorization device analysis, omits analysis of the way students position their academic identities in and through their texts. This is called the ‹Appraisal System›.

White (2002) holds that the Appraisal System is an approach to exploring, describing and explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personae and to manage interpersonal positioning and relationships. It explores how writers pass judgments on people generally, on other writers and their utterances, on material objects, happenings, states of affairs and thereby form alliances with those who share these views and distance themselves from those who do not. It explores how attitudes, judgments and emotive responses are explicitly presented in texts and how they may be more indirectly implied, presupposed and assumed. It explores how the expression of such attitudes and judgments is, in many instances, carefully managed so as to take into account the ever-present possibility of challenge or contradiction from those who hold differing views. Student writers, then, position themselves in terms of attitude, dialogue and intertextuality.

Andy writes:

> «A most significant event of the last decade has been the appearance and subsequent explosive growth of the World Wide Web and its effect on learning with multimedia (Allessi & Trollop, 2001:5). Web-based learning has emerged as the new buzzword in education and the subsequent scramble by tertiary educators to adopt new teaching methods can be clearly seen by looking at the number of courses that have recently evolved under the banner of web-based, online or e-learning.»

With regard to attitudinal positioning, Andy fully endorses the rapid technological revolution as a direct consequence of globalization and the profound effect it has on learning. He refers to recent authors but it seems as though he is not paraphrasing them –rather using them to back up his statement. In other words, he equates the status of his own claim with that of two authorities in the field. In the next sentence, however, Andy criticizes labeling web-based learning, calling it a ‹buzzword›, a fad, a passing fashion in education. His use of the term ‹scramble› carries an equally negative connotation as the use of ‹buzzword›. With regard to

dialogical positioning, Andy does not invite comment/ interaction with his statement: he presents his views as fact, as indisputable. With regard to intertextuality, he positions his statements as equally important and valid as those of other authors in the field.

Esther writes:

> «I am a Curriculum Advisor at the district office in the Eastern part of the Northern Province. In my capacity as a Curriculum Advisor, I am responsible for advising teachers on how to teach English in grade 12. I am also a sub-examiner of the end-of-year examination in the same grade. The schools that are under my supervision all use English as a second language. The medium of instruction in the schools is pre-dominantly English although they have Sepedi as the mother tongue. The English teachers in all the schools also use English as a second language. In my capacity as sub-examiner, I have come across essays in the examination written by learners, that are not well constructed and that are not focused on the topic. This has led to the learners failing the writing paper and ultimately the whole English examination.»

With regard to attitudinal positioning, Esther positions herself firmly in her community and her society, indicating that she understands its problems and saying that she is fully prepared and equipped to take responsibility for solving these problems. She also seems to question the power of English; she signals that it is forced down on teachers as the only medium of instruction, while the mother tongue, Sepedi could equally well serves as medium of instruction. She also points out that educators are not fully conversant with the English medium and endorses the transparent discourse with regard to writing, mentioning conventional issues such as essays not ‹well-structured› and not ‹focused on the topic›. However, she is fully aware of the fact that the ability to write leads to academic success, i.e. passing grades. She positions herself strongly as having a dual identity: a mentor to composition teachers, but also an examiner of the products that their students produce in the examinations, and she is careful to deploy both identities while researching academic writing. With regard to dialogical positioning, she indicates that she is going to take the lead solving the writing problems of this teaching community, and thereby uplifting the whole society. With regard to intertextual positioning, Esther invokes other texts such curriculum documents dictating teaching practice, and examination papers assessing that practice - but no detailed or critical analysis of these texts appear as yet.

Gloria writes:

> «During 2002 I developed and facilitated a workshop for the general assistants. The workshop was a success and left me with a challenge of how to develop them in a school situation. During my interaction with them, I was able to identify the urgent need for personal and interpersonal development, that include; self-awareness, communication, relationships, problem solving and conflict management. I feel that my school, a special needs school could be more inviting. We need to address the issue of developing a healthy school environment, specifically giving attention to General Assistants. The reason is that in most cases when we talk about whole school development only the needs of educators are met and the GA's are excluded. From my observation, there is a great need for their development in order for them to perform better in their different job descriptions as well as in their family management. Most of them (70%) did not have an opportunity to be educated until secondary school level, hence they have poor communication skills.»

Gloria positions herself as competent and confident, with good organizational skills: she has ‹developed› and ‹facilitated› a ‹successful› workshop. She signals her versatility and creativity by implying that she is able to translate her skills and knowledge about one context into another, where there seem to be problems. She signals that she is sensitive to the needs of others, wanting a ‹healthy› working environment for them, because she seems critical of her own workplace, a special needs school where the needs of all are not apparently taken into consideration. Of is most significance is her use of the personal pronoun; after presenting her own skills and knowledge in the fist person, she then switches to the plural ‹we› to signal a collective, inclusive research and problem solving endeavor. Her dialogical positioning is also contingent on this; the use of the plural pronoun invites the reader and the members of her research community, her unit of analysis to participate, to respond to the problem that she has identified, to endorse her concern about the issue and to acknowledge her ability as a competent researcher seeking answers to complex problems. Gloria's intertextual positioning is equally interesting: many different ‹texts› are invoked in her writing, such as the workshop itself that she has conducted previously; the special needs school that

invokes educational policies of inclusion; reference to general assistants that invokes texts of workplace ethics; and reference to lack of learning opportunities of these workers, to texts of apartheid discrimination and disadvantaged educational backgrounds.

Irene writes:

> «Technology was introduced as one of the compulsory learning areas in the National Policy Document and its introduction was intended to help learners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to solve problems pertaining to technology, as well as problems of a general nature, effectively (Department of Education, 1997:3). Its aim was to develop learners' thinking ability so that they would be able to contribute towards improvement and also to contribute towards the effective use of technological products and systems. As well as evaluating technological products and systems from functional, economic, ethical, racial and aesthetical, for designing and development of appropriate products. (DoE, 1997:89). With the knowledge and skills learners acquire from the technological process they should be able to apply these skills to solve problems and to satisfy the needs and wants of the society since the process is regarded as the essence of teaching Technology Education. It is the only learning area that emphasizes the acquisition of effective thinking skills and that considers the effect of the design and the making of the products on society and the environment (Scanlin, 1992;25). Good quality education to produce productive learners depends on the effective application of proficient thinking skills in problem-solving. This should develop learners to become responsible citizens who should participate proficiently in problem-solving in their world of work as well as uplifting the economy of the country.»

Irene's attitudinal positing has an extensive social equity agenda: she highlights the ability to solve problems, to contribute towards harnessing technology to improve life, to people being productive, responsible, and economically independent citizens. Her argument is further strengthened by stating that because the government has mandated the inclusion of technology as a school subject/learning area, one should not question such a social agenda. She expresses a high regard for technology as a learning area because it focuses on developing ‹thinking skills›. She aligns herself with a rational individualist philosophy of life, the ability of the individual to solve problems in a rational way. The use of the word ‹upliftment› suggests her association with issues of equity and redress in society. With regard to her dialogical positioning, Irene sounds like a government agent advocating the implementation of technology as a learning area at school attempting to persuade the reader of the merits of her argument. With regard to intertextual positioning, Irene draws on National Policy documents with regard to educational change.

In concluding this section, it is noticeable that student writing is a very significant indicator of the degree to which these masters students adopt a specific and powerful attitudinal stance, inviting or deflecting dialogue with the reader, as well as adopting or refuting intertextual positionings.

Transparency in the negotiation process in the space of the Writing Center

In the Writing Center one gets to know the students for what they are through the way the present themselves to the reader, the way they represent themselves and their academic identities through their writing and the way in which they establish authority over their work in their writing. Transformation of the way these students are perceived by the academy and inadvertently positioned in a negative way by the academy, can only occur when responding to the whole student: to what they tell us about their academic identities in their narratives; to how they represent their authority over their work and their research and their practice in their writing; and to how they interact with tutors in the writing centre. Students want to participate in another type of discourse, questioning the discourse of transparency, flouting the discourse of surveillance, and initiating a transparent discourse of conversation.

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