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Processfolio: uniting Academic Literacies and Critical Emancipatory Action Research for practitioner-led inquiry into EAP writing assessment

Pearson, J.

Academic Literacies, as a critical response to writing in higher education, is attracting growing interest from the UK English for Academic Purposes (EAP) community (Turner, 2012). The research tradition of Academic Literacies (AcLits) is grounded in the academic literacy practices of native-speaking students within the university, rather than those of international students on preparatory courses such as pre-sessional EAP. However, both EAP and AcLits are concerned with pedagogies of academic writing, and there is a growing critical engagement with power relations within the academy and its impact on EAP students (Bensech, 2001; Chun, 2009). Hence, AcLits has the potential to inform a critical approach to EAP that emphasises student empowerment around academic discourses.

Yet while this paper in no way decries the impressive body of research in AcLits and growing attempts to apply this research into meaningful pedagogic practices in EAP (Lea, 2004; Gimenez and Thomas, 2016), it is my claim that any attempt at genuine critique of writing practices must engage directly with the constraining influence of assessment of academic writing. I will contend that so far a lack of attention by AcLits research to assessment currently confines its potential as a critical framework for EAP to the level of academic discourse and text, rather than academic practices and 'real' social structures (Bhaskar, 1989). I have chosen here to focus on issues around writing assessment on pre-sessional EAP courses, as this is the most highly political and constrained context, and most importantly, the one in which the majority of UK EAP practitioners work. It is not easy to obtain a coherent picture from the literature of the practices of UK EAP, given its problematic status in many institutions as an administrative service (Hadley, 2015) rather than an academic discipline in its own right (Chun, 2009). As Wingate (2012) points out, academic

writing research in the UK does not have the same historical tradition as that of the USA or Australia. There is a dearth of research into the real conditions which pre-sessional EAP students and teachers face, particularly those around assessment (Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons, 2015). In addition, criticality in EAP has often been framed at the level of abstraction (Morgan, 2009), exacerbating "pedagogies of pessimism" (ibid, p89) and over- emphasising identity politics at the expense of real power inequities inherent in structures (Kubota, 2014), of which assessment is one. This paper thus takes a Critical Realist perspective of structure, agency and power. Although it is not within the parameters of this paper to detail the nuances of structure in its varying forms, Bhaskar (1989) defines *structure* as a set of organised patterns of interactions between agents and their social world, being both created by and creating individuals.

I will firstly outline two core principles of AcLits that make it an appropriate framework for a critical approach to teaching writing in EAP, and how an application of those pedagogic principles might be limited by current assessment of writing on EAP pre-sessional courses in the UK context. Next, I will report on a Critical Emancipatory Action Research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) study on a pre-sessional EAP course at one UK university in which I designed and implemented an assessment of writing, termed *processfolio*, with a view to mitigating negative impacts on writing process and student agency. Finally, implications for future directions in assessment research are outlined, which could offer an alternative to the critical orthodoxy of problematization, and encourage both students and teachers to engage with the constraints of their real working conditions for collective agency and change.

The potential and problems of AcLits for a critical EAP

Social practice and process

The term Academic Literacies is taken here to be distinct from academic literacy, which refers merely to the generic ability of students to read and write proficiently in academic environments (Lillis and Scott, 2007). AcLits is associated in the UK with the seminal paper from Lea and Street (1998) which draws from the New Literacy Studies group, who see writing primarily as a social practice and as context-dependant meaning-making (Street, 1984; Gee, 1998). Rather than side-lined to the remedial, language is central in knowledge construction and reproduction (Lillis and Scott, 2007). Clearly then, it aligns with a construct of EAP which sees language as more than something to be fixed or a skill to be assessed. However, unlike other social-constructivist theories of writing which have informed EAP pedagogy, such as genre analysis (Swales, 1990), the central focus is not only on the analysis of disciplinary text and language, which has been accused of reducing writing to an emulation of discourse features (Luke, 1996). Rather, the focus is a critical ethnography of the practices of how discourse is constructed as a social process within disciplines, by whom and in whose interests.

AcLits has *process* as an epistemological stance in that knowledge, like language, is not static (Lillis, 2003). Writing is seen as a social event, purpose driven with social goals; thus, the process of writing is inextricable from the text or product (Ivanič, 1994). This aligns with the socio-political goals of a critical EAP pedagogy (Bensech, 2001). Yet EAP writing assessment is generally of the product only, creating tensions when the pedagogy is at odds with the method of assessment (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000). This is commonly referred to in assessment

literature as *negative washback* on teaching and learning, but can be viewed more widely as the social impact (see Shohamy, 2001) of assessment as an educational structure.

In order to contextualise EAP assessment, it is important to look at the wider political and economic layers of social structure. UK EAP in the early twenty-first century is subject to particular external regulations and scrutiny. Universities are increasingly losing government funding and turning to international higher-fee-paying students to maintain revenues (Hadley, 2015). Shifting political agendas on immigration and maintaining academic standards by preventing international students with insufficient levels of English from undertaking tertiary education, coupled with the acknowledgement of international education as a multi-billion-pound industry for the UK (Murray, 2016) have led to the implementation of government approved Secure English Language Tests (SELTs) to regulate Tier 4 visa status for access to university places (UK Visas and Immigration, 2016). If students do not obtain the required SELT level specified by their university department, they can pay to undertake a pre-sessional course which assesses their linguistic proficiency for tertiary study prior to commencing their (usually postgraduate) degree. Pre-sessional EAP has thus obtained a gate-keeping in addition to a pedagogical function. For the majority of institutions, if students pass the pre-sessional, the SELT requirements are understood to have been met (Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons, 2015). This places an onus on the EAP course to benchmark its in-house assessment, whether a timed writing exam, an extended research essay, or a combination of both, to the criteria and grading of SELTs (Bannerjee and Wall, 2006). This is despite research having questioned in particular the application of an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) style product model of assessing writing as a means of assessing the

construct of academic literacy that generally forms the substance of EAP pre-

sessional courses (Moore and Morton, 2005; Hamp-Lyons and Bruce, 2015).

While it would be erroneous to ignore the examples of good practices and

assessment innovations by some EAP practitioners (see for example Seviour, 2015),

and in fact some EAP departments may in theory have a great deal of freedom in their

assessment design, many are bound explicitly or implicitly to assess the product as

measured by SELT-like criteria. This is partly because this is what is most commonly

understood by those external to the field and partly because many teachers who are

responsible for designing assessment within their institution are allocated insufficient

resources for assessment training other than their familiarity with SELTs (Schmitt and

Hamp-Lyons, 2015). Thus, the most damaging impact of assessment practices is not

only in reinforcing the notion that only that which is measurable is valuable (Madaus,

1993), but in creating what it intends to measure (Hanson, 2000), i.e. a technical and

skills-based approach to essay writing on the part of EAP students and teachers,

valuing only the product. It is difficult for students to conceptualise the choices they

make as writers within their social world, in line with an AcLits pedagogy, if they are

concerned largely with meeting narrow criterion-referenced requirements to achieve a

passing grade. Students cannot conceive of themselves as developing writers, but only

as successful or unsuccessful writers, when measured by outcomes dictated by

institutional criteria benchmarked to SELTs.

While AcLits does acknowledge the elephant in the room of institutional

assessment of writing (Lea, 2004), the research focus is on the *textual* discourses

which reflect and perpetuate power within disciplines, rather than the wider and more

pervasive discourses and practices around *assessment.* It is assessment more than

pedagogy which leads students to inculcate the discourses and values of the system

and equate them with their own needs and identities as writers, while being simultaneously disempowered by those discourses (Shohamy, 2001). Thus, any pedagogic applications or research directions for EAP using AcLits may in fact be negated by focusing only on textual practices within disciplines, rather than how assessment, as an educational structure transcending the notion of discipline, engenders and sustains the view of what constitutes successful writing in the academy.

Identity as agency

A second core tenet of AcLits is the focus on writer identity and the potentially conflicting identities that the student as writer must negotiate (Ivanič, 1994). Although it does not locate writing as purely the domain of the individual, the perspective of the individual as a social agent, their processes and experiences of writing and identity-creation are valued. The implication is that EAP students should be encouraged to engage with and talk around their own means of constructing knowledge, their textual practices and socio-cultural processes of writing (Lillis, 2003). As a theoretical framework for problematizing writing in the academy, AcLits takes much from Friere's notion of dialogic education (1970). This seems particularly appropriate for a critical EAP which aims to raise students' critical consciousness of how power operates through discourse (Coffin and Donohue, 2012). If this begins on EAP courses, not only could students become effective evaluators of their own work to increase self-efficacy (Falchikov, 2005), but are also capable of contributing to discussions of what constitutes writing. They may thus be empowered to contest judgements and conventions and become ethnographers of writing practices in their disciplines (Frodesen, 1995), a way of marrying the critical ethnographic research tradition of AcLits with EAP pedagogical goals.

However, this fails to take sufficiently into account that assessment is a key societal structure which can mediate the formation of the self in either an enabling or constraining way (Ecclestone and Pryor, 2003) and operates at the level of the 'real', not only at the level of discourse. Within EAP pre-sessional summative assessment practices, the locus of control is largely with assessors, not students. A common critique of assessment is that responsibility for judgement is external to the individual student; thus, assessment becomes an act done *to* or "performed on" (Boud, 2000, p.156) the student, fundamentally constraining agency conceptualised as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p.112). Students' ability to *feel* in control and *do* control of their social world, in this case by exercising influence over their educational experiences (van Lier, 1996), is thus impeded.

In the climate of the neo-liberal university, power is not merely actions which are imposed *on* subjects but *by* subjects on themselves through the process of individualisation or *subjectification* (Foucault, 1982) in the assessment of students' performance. This is sustained by the current discourse in UK HE (and of EAP) of making students responsible for their own learning, an example of how a well-meaning misconception that equates 'learner autonomy' with agency has been co-opted to suit a neo-liberal agenda (Torrance, 2015). The autonomous learner is responsible for one's own success or failure in their "willingness to comply with the process" (ibid, p.9) of assessment, rather than recognise it as a structure which constrains the ability of the agent to effect changes in their social world. Thus, although awareness-raising of the co-opting of emancipatory discourses for the purposes of the neo-liberal agenda (Starfield, 2004) is vital, critical engagement with assessment at the level of discourse currently only problematises rather than offers potential to work to change actual assessment practices.

AcLits is highly critical of the acculturation model of writing, which assumes that the burden is on the student to assimilate to disciplinary and wider academic conventions. However, the dialogic ethos of AcLits has to contend with the fact that the temptation by teachers to lead students to the answer rather than allow them to make mistakes and reflect on these as part of the learning process is exacerbated on a gate-keeping pre-sessional when the stakes are high for all and progression of students onto courses can be a measure of teacher performance (Hadley, 2015). In the current climate as described above, there are some severe ethical implications when EAP teachers push a critical agenda at the expense of teaching students what they need to know to meet criterion outcomes to pass a course (Wingate, 2012). Thus assessment is also 'performed on' (Boud, 2000, p156) teachers in that the realities of their pedagogical practices are shaped by assessment as an overarching structure.

In the context of the stratification of social structures which engender and sustain assessment practices, my study aimed to explore whether the localised alternative assessment of *processfolio* on a pre-sessional course at one UK university, as a microcosm of the wider context above, could be designed and implemented to mitigate the impacts described above on a) students' ability to conceptualise themselves as developing writers and b) their sense of agency, in line with AcLits principles. Although students were my primary foci, teachers' views on the *processfolio's* impact on their students and themselves was included in order to examine the way assessment as a social structure also impacted on their perceptions of their own role in EAP writing assessment as well as to triangulate the data from students' interviews and *processfolios*

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Critique as social action

Critiques of assessment have largely been from an anti-positivist stance in that they decry the ability of tests to measure knowledge in an objective and scientific way (Shohamy, 2001). Yet the alternative assessment literature has tended to emphasise theory over empirical practice due to the problems associated with practical implementation (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000). This project was approached from a middle ground of Critical Realism (Bhaskhar, 1989), an ontological framework which accepts the critique of positivist approaches to objective knowledge claims, since knowledge is socially produced. However, it does not accept that there is no rationality beyond what the mind creates or not truth beyond language. Critical Realism accepts educational structures, and social structures which impact on education, such as assessment, as real, which allows them not only to be described and evaluated as causal mechanisms of action, hence crucially, which can be altered (Shipway, 2011), allowing criticality to be re-conceptualised as action.

This is not a fashionable paradigm, as it could be seen to deny diversity, identity and multiplicity of social roles, imposing one version of truth on others. For critical ethnographic AcLits research, transformativity is the problematizing of practices (Lillis and Scott, 2007). Yet the critical tradition predicated on power as central to all human interactions equips students and teachers with an understanding of their constraints but offers no alternative potential to work towards change, however small-scale, and risks a descent into passive resistance or alienation from working practices (Shipway, 2011). Critical Realism refutes the notion that truths must be value-free (Bhaskar, 1989) and allows for a multiplicity of realities, at the same time accepting that some overarching structures are real and constraining to all,

despite the differences in perspectives of these structures. This is an alternative to a critical tradition which values what divides above what unites can be manipulated by those in power, in this case the neoliberal university, to alienate the individual from the collective (Darder, 2012) and stymy social change.

Within a Critical Realist paradigm, as assessment can be identified as a social structure, action research seems to be an appropriate methodological framework within which to investigate it (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Critical Emancipatory Action Research (CEAR), unlike other forms of educational action research, is interested not only in improving outcomes but in transforming practices, which, in the case of assessment, impede self-understanding, rely on false discourses and constrain self-determination (Kemmis, 2009). Crucially, CEAR seeks to uncover a 'false consciousness' (Lather, 1986), or the participants' reasons for their own actions which they may be unaware of in their own accounts or interpretations, cutting to the heart of the inculcation of norms around writing and assessment practices. Crookes (1993) highlights the importance of CEAR in its focus on highlighting inherent conflicts in the needs of students and teachers and the needs of institutions to maintain the status quo. This makes it an apt framework within which to view twenty-first century EAP with its encroaching neoliberal agenda as it can offer a way of not merely raising a critical awareness of its discourses but a means of reversing disempowering practices and policies (Chun, 2009) by fostering agency of research participants through affecting real change, albeit at a local scale. Thus, research within a local context, as in this project, represents a "microcosm of a problematic social situation" (Boog, 2003, p.434), which allows possibilities for such research to offer wider claims to truth (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). In this respect CEAR seeks change on a

more extensive scale than that of the individual practitioner (although this is often the starting point), but at the level of society, culture and politics.

In order for true praxis to occur, researchers must be insiders, researching within and for their own contexts. The tensions inherent in doing this require the researcher to be continually critical and reflexive in their own work (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). In this way, CEAR can be seen to align with the critical ethnography of AcLits as exposing power relations of disciplinary discourse (Coffin and Donohue, 2012), but the 'critical' is a means of seeking change for one's self and others in a democratic, dialogic and participatory way (Lather, 1986). It is the desire for tangible change that is key to a re-examining of criticality in the UK EAP context. If we acknowledge, as Kubota (2014) points out, that critical orthodoxy has been co-opted by the neoliberal agenda in its focus on diversity and individuality rather than cooperative and collective action, it is possible that a re-examining of what could be considered a dated framework of CEAR could offer us a different direction with which to look for change at the level of social action.

The Research Design

Following the principles of CEAR, this project took place in iterative cycles or 'moments' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) over three consecutive 9-week summer EAP pre-sessional courses in an English Language Centre of a UK university from 2013 to 2015. The writing assessment component of the course required the students to complete one formative essay and one summative essay. An initial reconnaissance stage took place in 2013 with pre and post-course interviews with six pre-sessional students. This data identified problems in the local context as a microcosm of the wider context discussed above, such as the mechanistic attitude to writing and the

feeling of powerlessness and confusion around writing assessment. This data

informed the design of the *processfolio* assessment of writing as a means of

mitigating the two main impacts of current assessment practices. The second research

cycle implementing the *processfolio* assessment took place in 2014 with my own class

of fourteen Chinese postgraduate students. To adhere to the good practice of test

trialling before use in high-stakes summative assessment situations (Bachman and

Palmer, 2010), the *processfolio* was only implemented on the formative stage of the

course. However, as one of the objectives was to examine the impacts the experience

of the folio would have on mitigating issues on the summative part of the course,

interviews were conducted immediately after the folio was submitted and 5 weeks

later when the summative essay was handed in. Data from the students' folios,

interviews, recorded tutorials, self and peer assessment activities (see below) were

collected and used to make refinements to the *processfolio*. In the final research cycle

in 2015, two teacher volunteers were sought to trial the *processfolio* (forty-eight

students, including my own class) of mixed nationality postgraduate students. The

data sets were repeated and interviews with teachers, pre and post-course, were

conducted. Ethical consent of all participants was obtained prior to the

commencement of each course.

The Processfolio

Processfolio is the name for a type of assessment most commonly associated

with the work of Gardner (1993) in the arts, which is an adaptation of the traditional

portfolio, a collection of artefacts or multiple essays which demonstrate the students'

best work. Benefits of portfolios are espoused in the literature, such as providing

multiple sources of evidence as well as a means of developing the notion of writing

process and learning progress (see for example, Hamp- Lyons and Condon, 2000). However, the showcase portfolio is certainly impractical on such a short intensive course as the pre-sessional, which focuses on many aspects of language skills and academic literacy in addition to essay writing. In addition, courses can become little more than a series of writing tests, with confusing weighting systems and different criteria (ibid). This solves none of the issues surrounding high- stakes assessment and in actuality, is likely to create more anxiety when each piece of writing is summatively assessed, as the ideas of development through process and facilitating agency around assessment is negated. Due to the institutional and wider constraints described above around the necessity to benchmark final writing scores to SELTs for the purposes of a gatekeeping pre-sessional, it was unfeasible for the *processfolio* to replace the product essay at this stage. Rather than impose a new assessment tool, the concept of the *processfolio* was predicated on the attempt to mitigate negative impacts and foster collective agency through a questioning of current practices by students and teachers, while acknowledging constraints, in line with the principles of CEAR.

There is little literature on the applications of *processfolios* in writing. *Processfolio* allows the learner to depict the journey they have undertaken in order to complete ONE piece of work, in this case, a 1000 word source-based research essay set by the institution on a topic of their choice related to their chosen discipline. The *processfolio* concept as part of this assignment was introduced to students in the first week. Instructions were given to the students that their folio should be handed in alongside the essay and that it should include a variety of work undertaken as part of the process of writing their essay. Students were not told what to include, but examples discussed were draft essay sections, tutorial records or class-work. It required students to select these pieces themselves and state why they had done so.

Students were encouraged to produce a contents page, an abstract or mini-essay justifying the choices of pieces they included in the folio in terms of usefulness for their research writing process and what they learned about writing, the process and themselves. This could be undertaken alongside the production of the essay as an aid to time management, or, as many chose, to collate the pieces after the completion of the essay. It was marked formatively with holistic comments according to criteria such as 'organisation of the folio' and 'justifying choices of pieces for inclusion'. Formative feedback was given for the folio and the essay, but only the essay was given a grade.

The design of the *processfolio* for EAP writing was based on principles of AcLits with a view to mitigating assessment impacts as described above. Firstly, in organising their pieces of work to depict their research journey, students were given the opportunity to conceptualise for themselves their writing development, which promotes a critical and metacognitive awareness of the choices they made in the act of explaining them to an assessor (Mezirow, 1991). This aligns with the talk-around-text of AcLits (Lillis, 2003), and although the key focus of the folio was not on disciplinary identity as expressed through text and discourse in a classic AcLits framework, it offered students the potential to explore this by reflecting on how they negotiated problems of communicating to a reader within an unfamiliar discourse (Ivanič, 1994). Although it could be said that their folio was 'judged' by their class teacher, because they were allowed to present their folio without restrictions and because it was not graded, students could exercise some control in how they wished to be assessed (Murphy and Camp, 1996).

Secondly, in terms of writing as a social process and practice, the *processfolio* emphasises the process as integral to the product in that they were not graded separately or individually weighted but rather the folio was a component of the product. In attempting to mitigate the negative impacts, it could contribute to a changing pedagogical approach to assessment (Sadler, 2010), as a means of countering the technical approach to writing in the classroom. Hence, activities that facilitated agency were built into the course that students might choose to include in their folios. Examples include lessons designed to aid understanding of and question institutional criteria for essays, an alternative approach to plagiarism awareness that explored issues of deliberate and accidental plagiarism on a spectrum, and the adoption of a forum for peer-feedback which took place on the institution's virtual learning environment. Students could upload sections of their essay for reciprocal peer and teacher asynchronous feedback in order to emphasise the collaborative and communicative nature of writing (Badger and White, 2007). In addition, students were provided with an optional self-assessment form to complete as part of the course to comment on their formative essay and their folio. Peer and self-assessment activities, previously employed in the institution at individual teachers' discretion, were integral to the *processfolio* project due to their potential for facilitating self-efficacy and empowerment (McDonald and Boud, 2003; Falchikov, 2005). These were not assessed as individual pieces of writing (see above) but students were expected to justify their inclusion or exclusion in the folio in terms of the usefulness of these activities.

It was vital that the assessment was not implemented as another technological assessment tool (Madaus, 1993), or that the folio uncritically replace the concept of quantifiable measurement with qualitative *subjectification* (Foucault, 1982).

Alternative assessments such as reflective writing can be co-opted as an alternative means of attaining the same ends of providing scores and judgements about people rather than questioning the ends in themselves (Madaus, 1993). Students were required to critically reflect on their writing choices, challenges and process as part of the *processfolio,* but as this was not graded or judged and only commented upon by the teacher to be discussed in tutorials, the dialogic aspect of an AcLits pedagogy could be facilitated. The alternative offered by *processfolio* was not an indirect imposition of power that makes students comply with their own marginalisation through an emphasis on individual responsibility (Torrance, 2015), but rather an attempt to marry assessment and pedagogy to shine a critical light on the system of EAP assessment and its wider social impacts.

Due to the parameters of this paper, a brief description of the findings from the two primary data sets from the 2015 stage of the project are presented here: a summary of findings from the *processfolios* themselves, and vignettes from interviews with twelve students and two participating teachers. These were thematically analysed for evidence of agency and engagement with writing as a social process and practice.

Findings from the Students

The social practice and process of writing

Of the forty-eight student folios, forty showed a clear awareness of the writing process by organising their folio in order of completion of their essay. Some chose to impose their own order such as stages of the essay writing process (outlining, drafting, etc.) or stages of the essay itself (introduction, definitions, etc.) and explained these stages in abstracts, tables, essays and contents pages. There was great

variety in the folios. Students were not given rubrics for to how to do this, so by imposing their own order, they seemed to be conceptualising their own practices of text creation. The majority selected pieces of importance and discarded others, justifying these as helpful or unhelpful. Interview data supported the initial impressions from the folios that students were both able to articulate their process of text creation (Lillis, 2003) and feel permitted to express their emotional reaction to it, often using words like "painful" and "suffering" as they negotiated their new identities as writers (Canagarajah, 1999).

The interviews confirmed this awareness of process. Of the twelve students interviewed, ten said they had put the folio together after writing the essay, as a way of understanding what was helpful in post-hoc reflection, although two stated that they had kept records as they progressed. The ability of students to use the folio in the way they chose can be said to reflect their growing sense of awareness of their own practices and processes around writing (Lillis, 2003).

Students also demonstrated an awareness of text as a means of communication with a reader and a socially constructed practice in their reflections on changing their texts in response to comments from peers. Rose, for example, struggled with the balance of communicating an interdisciplinary essay when she was more familiar with the norms of accounting research:

One example is Enron's background in my introduction, my classmates all thought it's complicated and weird to show in the first paragraph, but I have to firm my own style.

Eight students said they used the folio as way of setting goals, which can be still seen to be a strategic or instrumental approach to writing. Others seemed to have used it as a way of exploring deeper issues. For example, Dan expressed frustration about how the spectre of assessment was constraining his ability to learn about writing:

> I think postgraduate is not just summarising, I have to find something new. But the main task was to finish that essay.

Dan's process of discovery is constrained by a focus on the mechanics of writing and he is thus unable to conceptualise the act of meaning-making for himself (Luke, 1996). Although Dan has made a pragmatic choice to disregard this for now, the act of reflecting in the folio has awoken his consciousness somewhat around this issue. This is echoed by Kyle, who struggled with a very narrow definition of critical thinking espoused by the technical approach to writing as a collection of discourse features (ibid) that the essay marking criteria promotes.

> You put something from the red team and something from the blue team and you pick them up and make them fight.

Dan and Kyle seem to be contesting a particular way of constructing knowledge in order to meet assessment objectives (Hanson, 2000) with their real and experienced ways of meaning-making. Kyle discusses how a new discourse is imposed on him, which is impacting on his identity:

Why can't I pretend I love everything, just choose one topic – that way you

don't put your emotion into it and it's like a machine and it might be easier?

But I think that's a waste of time. I think the pain is part of the experience.

The second half of this vignette shows Kyle's rejection of this way of learning and

assessing, an agentic choice, despite the discomfort and risk involved (van Lier,

1996). He has chosen his own path knowing that it might be problematic for his

ability to easily pass the pre-sessional.

Identity and agency

The students' folio introductions showed clear identification of themselves

with their work, using personal and declarative statements such as "I decided" "I

chose". The way students presented their folios in a variety of ways reflects not only

their own awareness of their processes but seemed to indicate that they were taking

the opportunity for control over the way they wished to present themselves to the

assessor. Students' terms for the folio include *a collection, a catalogue, a*

*documentary (*media and digital asset management students*), a record* (accounting), *a*

witness to my progress (law), and *an invisible tutor (*an education student*),* reflecting

an identification with their emerging new disciplinary identities (Ivanič, 1994).

In interviews, participants expressed increased confidence around writing, and

some reduced anxiety around assessment. However, Lee reflected on his inculcation

of assessment discourse:

In my brain I still focus on grade. We cannot change that after just a few

weeks.

For Kyle, the reality of EAP high-stakes assessment on his ability to control his own situation (van Lier, 1996) was not mitigated by his folio experiences:

> I cannot feel part of this city because I might be excluded any time I fail an exam.

Mary acknowledged the lack of control which had characterised her previous assessment experiences:

> At first I just think assessment is teacher's responsibility and students have no right to ask why they do this, but ... it's our own work to assess our work.

However, she seemed to be able to re-evaluate her previous experiences of assessment as a structure which mediates her ability to exercise control (Ecclestone and Pryor, 2003).

The most significant finding in terms of the impact of the *processfolio* was that many of the students said that they did not view it as assessment, as Patti states here:

> The folio isn't important; it's the process itself is very important.

By making the folio integral to the assessment of the product essay (see above), it removed fear of judgement for many of the students, as evidenced by utterances such as "we feel free"; and "I feel in peace".

Findings from the Teachers

Given the impact of assessment on EAP teachers, the need to involve them in issues of assessment is vital (Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons, 2015). This is also a primary principle of CEAR and any meaningful attempt at critical praxis which is *for* and *by*

rather than *about* practitioners (Kemmis, 2012). The principles of the *processfolio* here either aligned with or confronted teachers' beliefs about assessment, writing and their roles as EAP teachers, driving these two practitioners to confront their conflicting understandings of their own practice (ibid), which could begin to expose the false consciousness (Lather, 1986) of the roles they had previously accepted as preparing students for assessment, on the pre-sessional and in the academy.

Sara initially expressed scepticism of the principles of the folio and AcLits, reflecting a traditional skills approach to the teaching of writing (Lea and Street, 1998):

> We're teaching them about how to write a good essay, about topic sentences and about language.

This seems to indicate that Sara conceptualises her role as 'fixing' students' writing (ibid) for the purposes of demonstrating readiness for university, which should be assessed by product outcomes:

> The product is how you measure how well they've done.

In contrast, Denise explained her involvement in the folio as aligning with her beliefs that this attitude about the role of the EAP teacher is problematic.

> If you think about the purpose of what is a pre sessional for? Not just so that they can improve their English language, it's that there are certain expectations of them at university and these will not be made explicit during their degree.

Here, Denise aligns with an AcLits value of demystifying the expectations of the academy (Zamel, 1997) and hints at a potential contestation of the acculturation model where the burden of transition is on the students (ibid).

Denise expresses concern about her students whom she perceives to have inculcated the values of assessment systems with that of their own and their eagerness to submit to that judgement (Torrance, 2015), giving away their agency.

> … students can just feel like they're just writing in the air and they don't know... 'what do people want from me? Judge me, rank me I just want to see my grade'. But what does A+, B+ mean? It's all actually quite meaningless.

Despite Sara's initial reservations, she reported many positive impacts on her students through her own impressionistic comparisons with her three years previous pre-sessional experience at this institution, including reduction of anxiety and teacher dependence. She expressed surprise that they did not to seem to need her guidance. In addition, she had found her usual pedagogy of using formative feedback for 'telling' in order to focus on passing the course assessment had shifted more towards 'facilitating' (Sadler, 2010). Denise identified similar effects, particularly around students' increased independence, as she had identified her class as particularly teacher-dependant and intolerant of ambiguity at the beginning of the course. It is interesting to note that both teachers identified a significant impact on the students as their ability to trust and rely on each other after the folio implementation. This is possibly due to the use of peer-evaluation as part of the assessment, which fostered collaboration and emphasised writing as a communicative practice (Badger and White, 2007). Although peer-evaluation is by no means unique to the *processfolio,*

this is an example of how good pedagogic practice can be nurtured rather than

negated by assessment for collaboration above competition.

Limitations and implications

A central issue is the extent to which *processfolio* can and should be used in

high-stakes summative contexts as a replacement for purely product writing

assessment. Denise strongly advocated this, while Sara expressed reservations, for

reasons of subjectivity in marking and standardisation for making high-stakes

decisions (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000). But it seems counter-productive to deny

the potential for a positive change in assessment practices by focusing on the

limitations of alternative assessment in the present context rather than advocating for

a wider social and economic perspective of assessment paradigms (Lynch and Shaw,

2005). This returns us to the status quo of problematizing situations because working

for change within them seems overwhelming. It is in taking research in this direction

that AcLits as an oppositional critique of the disempowering discourse of assessment

and CEAR as a means of changing assessment at the local level of research might be

fundamental. An agenda for research then could begin with developing and extending

critical ethnographic studies into writing assessment practices and their impacts in

local institutions in a variety of EAP contexts, such as in-sessional support, pre-

sessionals and foundation programmes.

Changing local assessments with a view to changing assessment culture

requires teachers' desire for change of their working conditions, a tricky task given

the pervasive ideology perpetuated by assessment discourse (Shohamy, 2001) and the

reality of assessment as a social structure. As Sara exemplifies, many EAP teachers

do see their role as merely helping students to acquire the language proficiency

required to pass the course outcomes and imposing an assessment tool on teachers

who do not see its value is antithetical to CEAR (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). The process of raising awareness of constraints, both internal and external, can be an uncomfortable process for both teachers and students, particularly in distinguishing between areas where they can be "causally efficacious" (Shipway. 2011, p.188), and the limitations of external constraints. Pre-sessional EAP in the UK is a highly under-researched area as many teachers working within it are in insecure positions (Hadley, 2015) and unlikely to rock the institutional boat. Indeed, even those EAP teachers in more secure permanent contracts are highly unlikely to be in research-oriented environments (ibid). Rather than imposing research-informed-practice conducted by the AcLits community on EAP teachers, these realities of teachers' own working practices should be the subject of research inquiry by insider practitioners (Shipway, 2011) and it is in this highly constrained context of EAP in the UK neoliberal university that CEAR may have something new to offer where the current critical orthodoxy has played into the hands of those who would emphasise difference over commonality. Indeed, AcLits itself emerged from a perceived disconnection between research and practice (Lillis and Scott, 2007); hence, aligning the research traditions of AcLits with a Critical Emancipatory Action Research methodology could offer a true praxis for the UK EAP community.

Conclusion

In summary then, AcLits, while providing a potential critical lens through which to view EAP, has so far paid insufficient attention to the impacts of current assessment regimes. Pre-sessional EAP is a microcosm of a wider context of UK university policies and practices (Hadley, 2015), where tensions around what it means to be critical play out, and AcLits as a theory of writing in the academy has much to contribute in this area. However, as this paper has attempted to argue, assessment, in

this case of academic writing, is a structure which transcends textual and disciplinary discourse. Therefore this requires revisiting a concept of the critical which offers possibilities for engagement with the ways that power as structure, including but not only as language (Shipway, 2011) can constrain agency and the ability to conceptualise oneself as a developing writer. Although the *processfolio,* as an attempt to align AcLits critical pedagogy with assessment practices, has had some positive impacts in one local context, its success in other institutions has yet to be tested. Reflexivity and vigilance are needed to ensure emancipatory discourses such as those of AcLits are not negated by structural realities or co-opted as part of a neoliberal agenda (Starfield, 2004; Kubota, 2014). Re-envisioning criticality in EAP, therefore, must mean more than problematizing at the theoretical level *about* EAP, but offer possibilities for transformation by engaging on a practical level with those who *do* EAP for new directions in assessment practices. This study is an example of one way to engage practitioners in collaborative efforts to work for transformation of our own conditions by understanding the nature of social structures which enable or constrain us.

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