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Transitions and shifting understandings of writing: Building rich pictures of how moving from school to university is experienced through exploration of students' discourses of writing

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In a time of economic constraints and increasing competition for places, negotiating “the transition” from school to university has become crucial for students’ educational success. Writing holds a dominant place in the academy as a mechanism of assessment. Therefore, exploring the writing practices of students as they move from school to university offers a valuable lens into how students negotiate the complex and multiple demands of moving between educational and disciplinary contexts. This paper will explore what insights an analysis of instantiations of students’ discourses of writing (Ivanič, 2004) can offer to develop a rich picture of how students experience their writing “in transition”. The data presented is taken from an ethnographic-style project that followed a group of British students from A-levels (HSC equivalent) to their second year of university study. Ivanič’s framework of discourses of writing offers a useful analytic tool, allowing analysis of the sets of beliefs and assumptions that students draw on when engaging in and talking about writing and can be applied to different kinds of data collected around students’ writing. Discourses of writing also provide an organising frame for exploring how students’ understandings of writing change as they move between educational and disciplinary contexts. This analysis shows that the ways students’ understand their writing are not only influenced by various discourses, which can change as students move between school and university, but understandings are individual, situated and context-dependent. The role of emotions, students’ “face work” (Goffman, 1967) and the dominant force of assessment emerge as significant areas for further development.

Key Words: students’ writing; discourses of writing; transitions; emotions; assessment.

1. Introduction

Transition into higher education is of vital importance for students, lecturers and institutions. While managing and supporting successful transitions into university has attracted much academic interest and funding, the impact of particular areas of students’ experience of transition, such as transitions in their reading and writing, have not been subject to the same levels of attention. This paper draws from a UK-based longitudinal, ethnographic study into students’ reading and writing in the context of “the transition” between A-level (HSC equivalent) and university study. It builds on previous work exploring students’ discourses of writing in the context of “transitions” into university (Baker, 2011) by offering rich descriptions of three students’ discourses of writing found in their “talk around texts” (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis,

2009), looking at how they shifted, if at all, across educational and disciplinary contexts, and exploring the implications of these shifts. Students' writing, when conceptualised as social practice, comprises rich and complex products and processes that communicates the varied and multiple nature of students' learning experiences within the limits imposed by curricular and institutional demands.

2. Context

2.1. Policy context

Within a context of heightened competition, decreasing graduate job opportunities and the ever-increasing cost of degrees in the UK, the need to "succeed" at higher education is arguably intensified and infused with increased social, cultural and economic capital. Student participation in the academy is predominantly mediated through a proliferation of texts and as such reading and writing "abilities" are the (invisible) gatekeepers of success. The (in)ability to communicate effectively or to engage with and produce texts can have a profound impact on how students experience university, not to mention on their potential success or failure in their degrees. Given that the medium for summative assessment is usually written (Lea, 1999; Leedham, 2009), the ability to "write well" in any of the 64 genres, written forms and conventions that students could be exposed to when they enter the academy (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004) is fundamental to students' success at university. If students are unable to articulate their knowledge in writing, according to the conventions and criteria imposed by the institution, they will not be classified as "successful". The implications of such "high stakes" writing (Lillis & Scott, 2007) are far-reaching.

Research into students' transitions to higher education (HE) has generated much interest, driven in part by institutional investment in supporting and managing students' movements into HE and political interest in improving "the first year experience" under the discourses of access, engagement and participation. As a result, there is a large body of literature on these phenomena under the umbrella term of "transition", expanding across several disciplines and fields of inquiry, and relating to theoretical and research pursuits and practice initiatives. Studies into the effects of entering the academy, albeit not always directly from A-level/ high school study, have characterised transition as loss (Scanlon et al., 2007); disorientation (Ballinger, 2003); alienation (Mann, 2001); attrition (Palmer et al., 2009; Tinto, 1998; Yorke & Longden, 2007); and as managed risk (Ecclestone et al., 2010).

What is markedly absent from the rhetoric and policy in proposed reforms to British HE is attention to the role that reading and writing play in retention, participation and achievement. Instead, the focus on students' writing has been driven by media interest on the lack of "skills", such as writing, spelling and arguing, that students arrive with in higher education (Paton, 2008; Henry, 2008; Ross, 2008), thus perpetuating a pervasive discourse of student deficit and placing the blame squarely at the feet of the students and their previous educational experience, rather than acknowledging the academy's position or influence.

2.2. Theorisations of "transition"

"Transition" from school to university study in the UK is commonly described in linear, static and unitary terms in political discourse, often under the buzz phrase "progression to HE". Quinn (2009) characterises the view of transition that informs British HE policy and practice as a "fixed point on a path without deviation" (p. 127). However, reality, she argues, is never linear or uniform; instead it is often composed of "multiple transitions into, across, out of and re-entering HE" (p. 127). While the idea of "transition" being reframed as "transitions" to reference the multiple and dynamic nature of individual experience has much support in the literature, the singular term is still used unproblematically, as a catch-all term to cover a range of other themes and research interests, thereby conflating nuanced differences in approaches and framings. The pluralised form of "transitions" is ideologically significant as it marks an ontological distinction between fixed and normalised views compared with understandings that such phenomena are complex, negotiated and multiple. Therefore, the use of the definite article

in the oft-used phrase “the transition from school to university” (see for example the titles of the articles by Booth, 2001; Ballinger, 2003; Winterson & Russ, 2009) implies a reified, singular and uniform progression that ill-reflects the realities of how transition is experienced. Other researchers have argued there is no monolithic first year experience (Hussey & Smith, 2010; Harvey et al, 2006; Mann, 2008; Christie, 2009), instead “transition” is experienced in multiple and dynamic ways. The use of the plural form in this paper is intended to reference this manifold view of transition.

2.3. Emotional Transitions

This study foregrounds a “transition as development” perspective (Gale & Parker, 2011), viewing transitions as processes of change and focusing on students’ sense of self(ves) and learning identities. Working from this view, entering the academy is explored through the affective lenses of belonging (Kember et al., 2001; Solomon, 2007; Palmer et al., 2009) and loss (Christie et al., 2008; Scanlon et al., 2007; Woods & Skrebels, 2011). And although Christie et al. (2008) point out that the literature has “remarkably little to say about the emotional dimensions of learning” (p. 5), “transition” provides a useful portal into exploring this oft-ignored aspect of students’ experiences of entering HE. Indeed, it is also arguably the case that the literature has little to say about the affective elements of students’ writing.

The changes that students experience in their transitions to university are manifest: changes to ways of learning, to disciplinary spaces, to physical locations, to social networks, to ways of demonstrating knowledge and what counts as knowledge. Such changes lead to the formation of new identities, which inevitably impacts on the students’ emotional lives (Christie et al., 2008; Christie, 2009; McMillan, 2013). In the context of this myriad of changes, Palmer et al. (2009) suggest that it is useful to accept the idea that students “do not immediately fit in at university but rather can be in a transient, betwixt space between home [or school] and university” (p. 38) as a default, therefore assuming that all students will experience (emotional) difficulties in their transitions, albeit to differing extents. This sentiment can also be found in Mann’s (2008) work, as she makes the case that institutional discourses that foreground the nature of “being a student” as periphery and temporary makes transition unavoidably difficult for all new entrants to HE:

Whilst we might expect the experience of difference to be relevant only for some students, it may be the case that the informal discourse of the institution produces the experience of difference or exclusion amongst all students, through the dualism that is sometimes set up in academics’ – and students’ – talk between ‘them’ and ‘us’, between the temporary members and the permanent members. (p.81)

Mann’s suggestion, that a series of binary constructs exist that creates “difference” in the academy, links to the Christie et al.’s (2008) work on the sense of loss and dislocation that some students experience when they arrive at university. In her exploration of non-traditional students’ transitions to university, Christie (2009) foregrounds the “multiple and contested pathways” available to young people in their post-school worlds (p. 124), highlighting how emotions infuse the choice making processes that underpin and connect students’ experiences.

3. Theoretical frame

Two theoretical frames are used to structure this paper: Roz Ivanič’s 2004 framework of “discourses of writing” and Erving Goffman’s 1967 notion of “face”.

3.1. Discourses of writing (Ivanič, 2004)

The study described here drew on Roz Ivanič’s 2004 framework of “discourses of writing and learning to write” to provide an analytic framework and tool for exploring students’ reading and writing “in transition”. Although the importance of learning (and teaching) to write are recognised, this paper restricts its gaze to exploring discourses of writing. In Ivanič’s framework, six discourses of writing are identified: *skills*, *creativity*, *process*, *genre*, *social practices* and *sociopolitical*, all of which index particular beliefs about writing. These named

discourses are offered as a heuristic for understanding and analysing the hybrid “underlying beliefs” and “particular ways of conceptualising writing” that exist in policy, practice and opinions about literacy and literacy education (Ivanič, 2004, p. 220). Ivanič’s (2004, p. 222) framework of discourses of writing is set within a comprehensive, multilayered view of language (see Figure 1), which acknowledges the textual, cognitive, social and sociocultural/political dimensions of writing and provided a “starting point” for the discourses of writing framework. Working from this perspective, adopting Ivanič’s framework for analytic purposes allows the researcher to conduct a thorough and contextualised exploration of the language under examination.

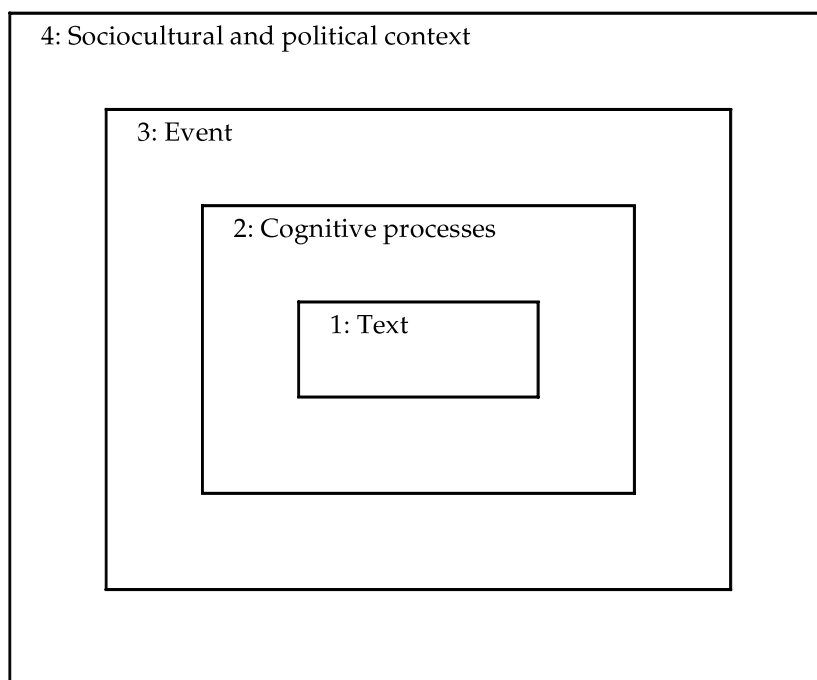


Figure 1. The multi-layered view of language underpinning Ivanič’s framework of discourses of writing (2004: 223)

Ivanič (2004) offers a broad description of discourse of writing and learning to write as:

... recognisable associations among values, beliefs and practices which lead to particular forms of situated action, to particular decisions, choices and omissions, as well as to particular wordings. The ways in which people talk about writing and learning to write, and the actions they take as learners, teachers and assessors are instantiations of discourses of writing and learning to write. (p. 220)

Ivanič foregrounds the heterogeneity of discourses by comments on the “often discursively hybrid” nature of instantiations of discourses. As such, Ivanič advises researchers using her framework to view data as “instantiat[i]ons of] one of these discourses, or... hybrid instantiations of two or more of them” (p. 240). In what follows, a brief overview of each discourse will be presented.

According to Ivanič (2004), *the skills discourse* encapsulates beliefs that view writing as “a unitary, context-free activity, in which the same patterns and rules apply to all writing, independent of text type” (p. 227). The assumptions about writing that underpin the skills discourse are text-centric, focusing on the application of knowledge of “decontextualised linguistic rules and patterns” (p. 228). In contrast, *the creativity discourse* characterises particular ways of thinking about writing that foreground meaning making, therefore viewing writing as “the product of the writer’s creativity” (p. 229) and a valuable activity in its own

right. The key belief underpinning the creativity discourse is the notion that people “learn to write by writing” (p. 229). As a result of the writing having no social function, the writing will usually be personal and based on the individual’s experience. It is arguable that issues of effect and affect underpin this set of beliefs, with engagement with and assessment of writing guided by the principles of whether writing is seen / felt to be “interesting” or “enjoyable” (p. 229), although, Ivanič (2004) acknowledges the absence of explicit attention to affective factors in her framework (p. 240). The development of affective issues within the creativity discourse will be picked up later in this paper.

From a *process discourse* of writing and learning to write view, the cognitive and practical processes of composition constitute writing. This discourse is recognisable from references to the planning process; Ivanič (2004, p. 232) suggests that words such as “plan”, “draft”, “revision” and “editing” index this particular belief about writing. According to Ivanič (2004), the set of beliefs underpinning the *genre discourse* are concerned with both the written product and the writing event, viewing writing as constituted by texts that “vary linguistically according to their purpose and context” (p. 232). As such, primacy is placed on both linguistic form and the social contexts that shape, position and constrain writing.

According to Ivanič (2004), the set of beliefs that underpin the *social practices discourse* views “writing [as] purpose-driven communication in a social context” (p. 234), which holds the view that writing is implicitly learnt through participating in real-life literacy events with real-life purposes, and has an eye on the social meanings and values ascribed to writing. Writing is therefore viewed as a set of practices embedded within the sociocultural context, with meaning bound to the social relations that construct and are constructed by writing events. The sixth discourse that Ivanič identifies is the sociopolitical discourse of writing and learning to write. Ivanič (2004, p. 238) argues that the sociopolitical discourse encompasses critical views of writing that are specifically interested in the dynamics of power which affect the writer’s identity and which direct, dictate and restrict what kind of and how writing is valued.

An extension to Ivanič’s (2004) framework was suggested following an earlier analysis (Baker, 2011) of the same data set as analysed in this paper. Assessment was a frequent driver in the participants’ talk; as a consequence, the “assessment discourse of writing and learning to write” was intended to capture the primacy of assessment in shaping the participants’ understandings of their writing. This additional discourse is underpinned by a set of beliefs which views writing as mark/grade-driven communication. The inclusion of this additional discourse into Ivanič’s framework makes visible the power and influence that assessment has over students’ understandings of their writing, which in turn inform their practices and products.

Using Ivanič’s framework as an analytic tool offers two key lenses on the participants’ views of writing. Firstly, it facilitates exploration of what discourses the participants draw on when talking about their writing; secondly, this analysis highlights the shifts in the participants’ beliefs, assumptions and understandings about writing as they negotiate their transitions into different educational and disciplinary contexts. The use of Ivanič’s framework provides a reciprocal analytic lens to the conceptual and methodological framework of academic literacies as it connects the contexts of writing (practice, process and product) with the sets of beliefs that underpin students’ writing.

3.2. “Face work” (Goffman, 1967)

The sociological notion of “face” (Goffman, 1967) offers the second theoretical framing for this paper and is used to support the exploration of the emotional dimensions of writing in the context of the transitions made from A-level to university study. Goffman describes “face” as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (1967, p. 5). Goffman asserts that “face work” and feelings are inextricably linked:

A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him; he cathects his face; his “feelings” become attached to it. If the encounter sustains an image of him that he has

long taken for granted, he will probably have few feelings about the matter. If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected, he is likely to “feel good”; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will “feel bad” or “feel hurt”. (p. 6)

As such “face” provides a theoretical bridge for exploring the emotional worlds indexed within students’ talk (see also Ivanič, 1998).

By drawing on these two, complementary theoretical frames in this paper, it is possible to explore students’ talk and texts for the sets of beliefs that underpin their writing (discourses of writing) and develop a nuanced understanding of how the students’ emotions impact on / guide their writing in transition (“face work”).

4. Methodology and research design

Academic literacies provides the conceptual and methodological framework for the study described. As a methodology, academic literacies offers a framework for exploring students’ writing that focuses on both the practices of production and the product itself. In this way, academic literacies goes “beyond the textualist analytic lens” (Lillis, 2008, p. 354) offered by other more textually focused approaches. The holistic lens of the academic literacies approach encompasses the wider context in which the practices that constitute writing are situated, offering different possible approaches to understand what is going on with students’ writing, why it is viewed as a problem, and what the writers themselves feel about their writing and their identities that are an integral part of their writing.

This research has a qualitative, ethnographic methodology, which is characterised by its longitudinal scope, breadth of data collection and level of engagement in the field. Data gathering spanned over three academic years (from the last year of A-level to Year 2 of degree level study), which permitted the building of research relationships that generated “thick data” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6). While much research has been focused on retrospectively examining students’ experiences of transition from a university perspective, empirical studies following a single cohort of students across time are rare.

The principal data sources for this paper are the interview data, students’ texts and Facebook status updates collected from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted six times throughout the data collection period and broadly covered the participants’ processes of writing, the texts they produced, the support they accessed and descriptions of how the texts were received by their readers/assessors. The use of the students’ own writing in the interview situation, or “talk around texts” (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2009), “complements the iterative methodology that is needed for a deep, context-driven inquiry into students’ attitudes and practices” (Baker, 2011). The participants’ Facebook status updates constituted a form of online participant observation and “talk” (see Baker (2013) for a fuller discussion of Facebook as tool, data and context), with status updates collected when they pertained to the participants’ reading and writing lives. The data were firstly analysed for themes and following this initial analysis, the students’ talk was then analysed for instantiations of discourses, using Ivanič’s (2004) framework of discourses of writing as the analytic tool. Following this layer of analysis, the lens was widened for detailed exploration of elements of the students’ stories that appeared to be particularly significant.

In order to explore the nature of the transition from A-levels to university as broadly as possible, 11 participants were recruited from the three principal avenues into university. Of the 11 students, 9 were “traditional” students, which is a term used for students going to university directly from A-levels, and 2 were “non-traditional” students, who re-entered further education in order to gain entry to university. The three sites from which the participants were recruited are categorised as a rural comprehensive sixth form, an urban further education college and a private, boys’ boarding school.

5. Introducing the participants

In this section I present brief vignettes of the three of the participants. Each vignette will centre on analysis of traces of discourses found in the participants' talk. The three participants were purposefully selected on the basis of their entry path into higher education (representing each of the three recruitment sites) and because their stories provide particularly rich and contrasting experiences of writing in transition.

Julia

Julia was aged 17 - 19 years old while the data for this study was collected. Julia took her A-levels at the rural comprehensive sixth form and studied English Language, English Literature and History. Julia described her perception of A levels as "if you're prepared to work and then they are really good". Julia studied English Language at university.

Stephen

Stephen was aged between 27 and 29 years old when the data was collected. He returned to education after a break of nearly 7 years and studied for his A-levels at a city further education college. For his A levels, Stephen studied English Literature, English Language and Sociology, which he chose on the basis of what he "was fairly good at school and things [he had] got an interest in". Stephen said he enjoyed college and summarised his experience as having "got more out of it than [he] was expecting to". Stephen studied English Literature at university.

Andrew

Andrew was aged between 17 and 19 years old throughout the period of data collection. Andrew is from Hong Kong but studied for his A-levels at a private, boys' boarding school. Andrew spent his early and secondary education in an international school in Hong Kong (where he did IGCSEs) and came to the UK to study for his A-levels. Andrew studied 4 subjects at both AS and A2 level: French, Latin, Economics and History. Andrew studied Law at an Oxbridge university.

5. Findings

5.1. Ivanič's framework of discourses of writing and learning to write as an analytic tool

In this section, I will illustrate how useful Ivanič's framework of discourses of writing can be as an analytic tool for exploring students' understandings of their writing and how these shift, if at all, over time. The extracts of talk presented in this section are all responses to the question "What makes your writing 'successful'?" This question was asked at three points across the data collection period (in A-levels, Year 1 and Year 2 of university) and therefore provides an organizing frame for exploring similarities and commonalities in the participants' beliefs about writing over time. Analysis of the participants' definitions of their "successful" writing suggests that the participants drew predominantly on two of Ivanič's (2004) six discourses: the creativity and genre discourses, and they frequently referenced assessment in their talk. In the three vignettes that follow, I will present extracts of analysis and illustrate the instantiations of discourses circulating in the participants' talk. The extracts presented below are presented as illustrative of the wider data collected; they are not intended to suggest that changes in discourses can be traced from this data alone.

Julia's discourses of writing

Julia: ['Successful' writing is something] that gets an A? Something that you feel, that you feel a sense of relief and achievement after you've completed it because then you know... well for me then I know that I've put a lot of effort into it.

(Extract 1: A-levels)

Julia: ['Successful' writing is something] I enjoy writing from start to finish and I get the grade I think I deserve.

(Extract 2: Year 1, university)

Julia: ['Successful' writing is something] is an essay which 1. I feel I have spent enough time researching and writing 2. that when I hand in I feel a sense of relief! 3. that I get more than 65 and 4. that I have found interesting.

(Extract 3: Year 2, university)

As can be seen from Extracts 1-3, Julia arguably draws predominantly on two discourses to evaluate and talk about her writing and these remained fairly consistent across the three years. Primarily Julia draws on the creativity discourse in presenting concerns about personal satisfaction and how writing makes her feel (referenced in her mention of *a sense of relief and achievement, enjoyment and interest*). Secondly, the issue of *assessment, grades and marks* is made clear throughout Julia's talk and remains significant to her throughout the data collection period.

Julia's wider talk also foregrounded an assessment-mediated view of writing. At both A-level and university, Julia created hierarchies of her preferred subjects that appeared to be based on the grades she received on her writing. Julia expressed the idea that she had an innate talent for writing for English Language, as represented by "seem[ing] to do quite well at it without really understanding what it was about", but thought that she did not have the same "talent" for History or English Literature, which can be particularly seen in the highlighted parts of the following extract:

Interviewer: *What is it, do you think, that has made these marks and these experiences so different between the three subjects?*

Julia: *I genuinely don't know. From, well not the beginning of Year 12, from about mid-set in Year 12, **I started to get good marks in English Language** and I found it really interesting learning about all the terminology and stuff, but other than that **it's just come really naturally**. Other people struggle with it, even though they say all the terminology, it's all about how you explain it afterwards and in a certain way that can't really be taught. **But it just turns out that I'm quite good at writing Language, but not so good at writing Literature and History** [laughs]*

(Extract 4: A-level, emphasis added by author)

Within Julia's comment about "not being so good at writing Literature and History" is an explicit connection to the grades she received and her sense of "ability". This focus on marks and grades was evident in her teacher's feedback on an English Literature exam practice essay (Figure 2).

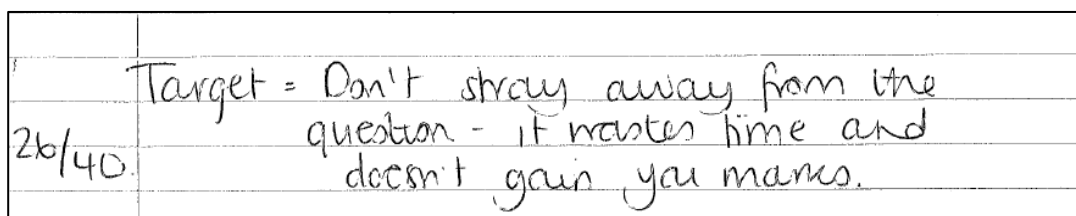


Figure 2. An example of feedback given on Julia's practice exam essay for A-level English Literature.

The feedback captured in Figure 2 clearly connects with the assessment focus evident in Julia's talk, seen in the comment "it wastes time and doesn't gain you marks". As I have argued elsewhere (Baker, 2011), this kind of feedback arguably builds a set of beliefs (discourse) about

writing that positions assessment as a central and constitutive feature. Indeed, this framing was so strong for Julia that it permeated her approach and understandings of writing through her first and second years of university.

Stephen's discourses of writing

While Julia's beliefs around writing remained relatively consistent, Stephen's view of writing appeared to change as he moved through the three years.

Stephen: ['Successful' writing is something] relevant to whatever you're supposed to be writing about. Erm, I think I like to sort of include something within it that questions what you're actually writing about and if it's relevant, if you're assessing some sort of situation, then maybe try and get a different point of view in ... also it's nice to try to lighten the tone a little bit now and again. I used to try and slip in song lyrics or names of things into my work to see if other people notice or not to amuse myself.

(Extract 5: A-levels)

Stephen: [Writing is 'successful'] if I get a good grade, that's sort of the whole point really ... but I think to gain those extra marks you need to be a little bit more insightful maybe, you need to remain academic in your approach. Try to think a little bit different, possibly.

(Extract 6: Year 1, university)

Stephen: So, a quick definition of what constitutes 'successful' writing to me would read something like this: a considered response to the set question or topic under discussion, which not only meets the requirements, but also goes that little bit further – extensive secondary reading and/or fresh approaches would usually achieve this.

(Extract 7: Year 2, university)

In Extracts 5-7, there are instantiations of several discourses circulating in Stephen's talk: the social practices and genre discourses, seen in references to *relevance* and *purpose*; the assessment discourse, seen in talk about "hitting objectives"; and the creativity discourse, seen in talk about interests, "amusing himself" and "engaging with the text". A key shift in Stephen's understandings of and talk around his writing can be seen in interest in how he presented himself in his writing as he moved from A-levels to university, moving from a desire to "lighten the tone" in his A-level talk to a need to "remain academic" when writing for his university studies. Stephen's attention to these issues connect with work on authorial voice and his writing identity (Ivanič, 1998) and while his views on this changed over time, his interest remained consistent over the data collection period, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Andrew's discourses of writing

In contrast to the consistent focus on assessment seen in the talk of Julia and Stephen above, analysis of Andrew's talk showed that he consistently drew on different discourses and presented a markedly different understanding of writing:

Andrew: ['Successful' writing is something] that expresses what you truly feel, that's not in any way affected by what your teacher/ other people tell you and you are absolutely frank in it – you haven't missed anything that you're embarrassed to write down. And something that makes an impact, that if the reader reads it and says "that was absolutely boring", that would be unsuccessful.

(Extract 8: A-levels)

Andrew: [‘Successful’ writing is] when you can present your point of view and the reader will respect your point of view and recognise that it’s a coherent, logical and valid one.

(Extract 9: Year 1, university)

As can be clearly seen from Extracts 8-9, Andrew had a significantly different evaluative take on writing at both A-level and university. His view of writing, which did not significantly change across the data collection period, appears to be largely influenced by the social practices discourse in that issues of fulfilling purpose and being effective for purpose were foregrounded. As such, Andrew’s talk suggests a developed sense of writing as driven by and driving social interaction and the context within which it is situated. As such, Andrew’s description depicts “purpose-driven social interaction” (Ivanič, 2004, p. 236), signalled through his concern for the reader and being able to offer what Andrew described as a “respectable and intellectually mature” view that will be ‘recognised’ by the reader.

5.2. Exploring the affective dimension of negotiating changes to reading and writing across contexts

A frequent element of the participants’ talk around their writing referred to how their writing made them feel, as seen in Julia’s example above (Extracts 1-3). However, the students’ repeated and significant attention to the emotional (affective) dimensions of their writing does not fit easily into the discourses identified by Ivanič. In this section, I propose that Ivanič’s (2004) framework could be expanded to accommodate issues of affect. I put forward a conceptual view that discourses, as “ways of understanding”, are profoundly entwined with less fully articulated feelings in complex ways and so emotions run through the entirety of writing (process, practice and product). Therefore, rather than assigning the “code” of emotion to any one discourse, as it would be careless and reductive to suggest that the emotional dimensions of writing can only fit into one discourse, the “affective” context could be added to the multilayered view of language that underpins Ivanič’s framework. Figure 3 offers a suggestion of what this would look like. As a result, I suggest that the way the practice of writing generates feelings can usefully be captured in Ivanič’s framework for the purpose of analysis and coding.

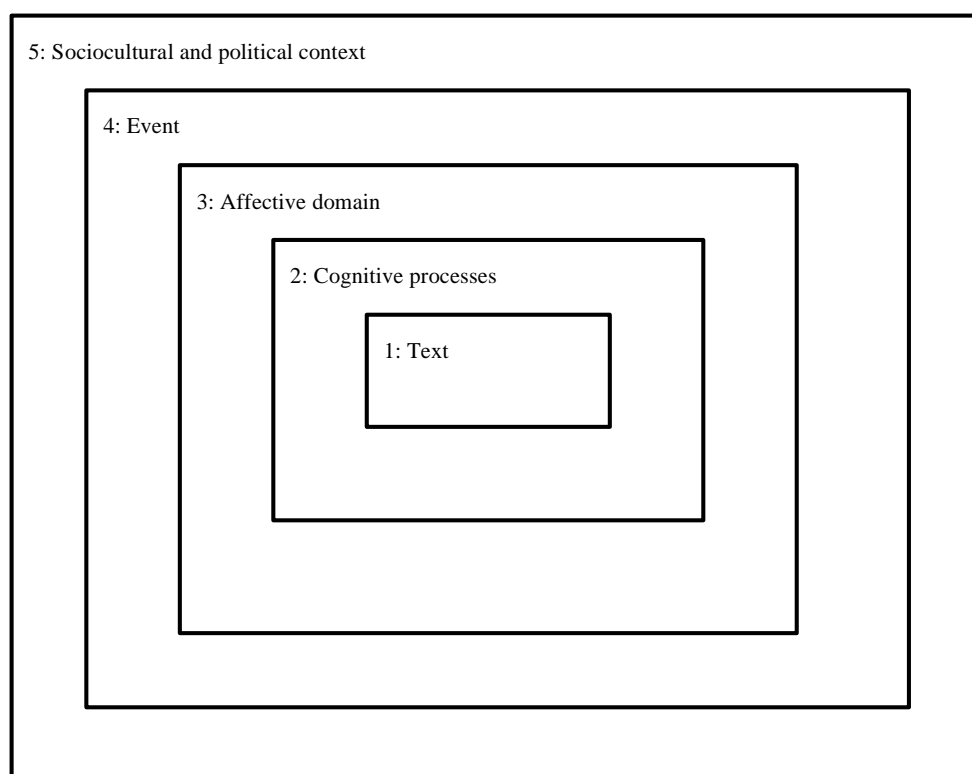


Figure 3. An updated suggestion of the multi-layered view of language to include the affective dimension of writing.

In the remainder of this section, I will focus on Stephen's emotional experiences of moving from A-level to university writing. There appear to be particular aspects of adapting to the reading and writing requirements of university that challenged him and led to a crisis of confidence; these can be broadly summarised as acclimatising to new audiences and acclimatising to new practices. In what follows, I illustrate how Stephen's confidence in his writing was shaped by not only how well he understood his task briefs, but also by feeling comfortable in writing to new readers. The following extract captures Stephen's lack of confidence in his expression when writing in his first year of university:

Stephen: (*talking about a text for his Poetry module*) ... but the thing was, that's why I say it was difficult, because on the one hand you don't want to be too involved in it, so at the end of the day you're not supposed to – it's supposed to be like an analysis of the text

Interviewer: Yeah you don't want it to be a polemic?

Stephen: Yeah but then obviously, you don't want to go, there's no reason there ... you know you can't win either way. If it's too personal then it just ends up sounding stupid, but on the other hand, if it's too impersonal then it's just gonna be like reading data which obviously isn't going to have any energy or life in it, so ...

(Extract 10: Year 1, university)

In seeking to balance out being “too personal” and “too impersonal”, Stephen was arguably in the process of negotiating his emergent identity as a university / English Literature student. Moreover, Stephen's concern with the “difficulty” of making assumptions about his audience hampered his authorial confidence, particularly with his writing for university:

Stephen: It's difficult cos you never know exactly how they expect me to write, this is what I've found difficult cos am I supposed to be writing overly academically or, or should I write in a sort of fun way or... and again I think it depends a lot of the time on whoever's marking your paper as well because I could hand in a paper to like my seminar leader, but he's not gonna mark it then ... I suppose you could lose marks as well.

(Extract 11: Year 1, university)

Stephen's talk suggested that the combination of new types of writing and new assessors led to a drop in his authorial confidence when he first arrived at university, saying that with writing at university you “never know exactly how they expect me to write ... it depends a lot of the time on who's marking your paper”. This sense of instability (in terms of what to write for each assignment and how to write for each assessor) continued throughout his first year and into his second year at university. Indeed, Stephen was so unsure of his work for his second portfolio piece (PP2) for his Reading, Theory & Interpretation (RTI) module in Year 1 that he was moved to address his assessor directly (see Figure 4):

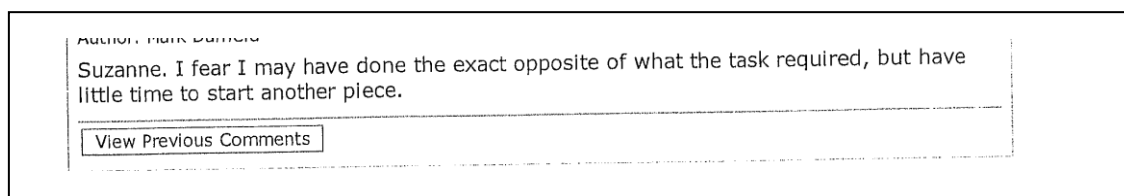


Figure 4. Stephen's comment to his assessor on his submission form for PP2 for his RTI module.

The challenges of these negotiations can also be seen in his attempt to communicate his difficulties in understanding the brief of one assignment. This is arguably an example of

Stephen striving to maintain “face” (Goffman, 1967) to diffuse the potential embarrassment generated from his perceived misunderstanding of the task. Working from this position, Stephen was trying to “save face” and protect the self-image of himself as a competent writer; engaging with the “corrective process” when he addressed his assessor, attempting to “challenge” his perceived “error” (of perhaps not understanding the task correctly; of producing written work that is not of a good enough standard) by “calling attention to the misconduct” (Goffman, 1967, p. 19).

Stephen’s lack of confidence and security in terms of addressing his audience and using his words effectively was communicated more emotionally (and possibly more authentically) through his Facebook status updates. These data provided useful contextual information for the “talk around texts” methodology:

Interviewer: You put on Facebook that you were really struggling, ‘46 words in one night’ I think you wrote.

Stephen: Yeah, well I was going back over my – I was doing my plan over and over again, er no I was just putting it off, like it’s difficult cos as soon as I turn my computer on, unless I turn the internet off there’s always – something pops up and you find yourself procrastinating so ...

Interviewer: I definitely know that feeling!

Stephen: I really had no desire at all to do it. Once I got into it was fine but I think it was partly because we’d had a break as well.

(Extract 12: Year 1, university)

The interaction captured in Extract 12 illustrates how referring to his Facebook status updates prompted Stephen to share some of his “back stage” practices (from Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective) around his reading and writing, such as procrastination. Furthermore, Figures 5 - 7 offer a snapshot of Stephen’s (emotional) reactions to reading and writing for his degree.

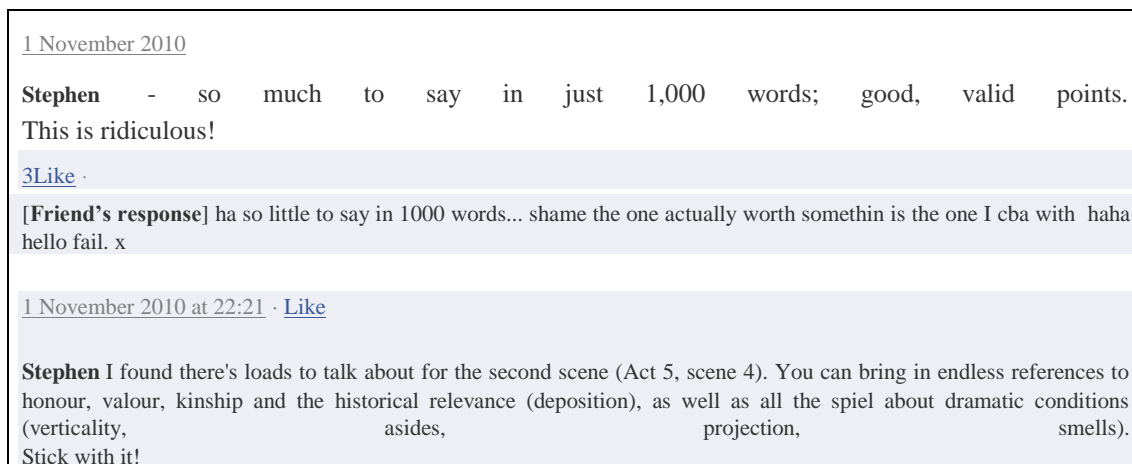


Figure 5. Stephen’s Facebook status update from 01/11/2010 (Semester 1, Year 2).

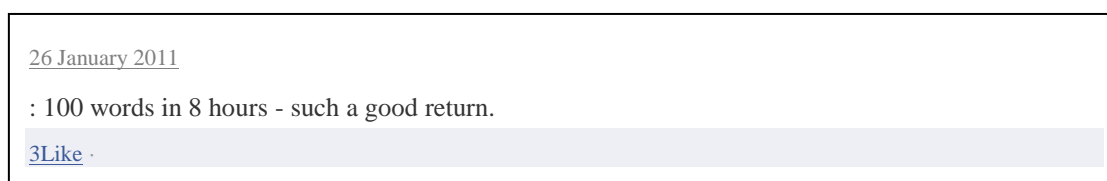


Figure 6. Stephen’s Facebook status update from 26/01/2011 (Semester 2, Year 1).

23 March 2011

- fair do's, this latest RTI assignment is beyond shit.

Figure 7. Stephen's Facebook status update from 23/03/2011 (Semester 2, Year 1).

Stephen's updates offer a window into his personal-public views on his reading and writing (and other areas of his life that are not relevant to this project) that would not be easily accessible through "traditional" research tools like the interview or even through "offline observation" (see Baker, 2013). It is further arguable that Stephen is using Facebook to publically attend to his "writing face", in the sense that he is pre-empting a loss of face through self-deprecating humour. In Figure 5, Stephen is initially complaining about the constraints of the word count and expressing frustration through his comment, "This is ridiculous!" However, we can see that Stephen repositioned himself as "knowledgeable peer" in relation to his friend's comment as he offers advice and counsels his friend to "Stick with it!" In Figure 6, Stephen is sarcastically commenting on his lack of activity, suggesting frustration with himself; in Figure 7, Stephen is publically denouncing his efforts and his writing as "beyond shit". In these three extracts taken from Stephen's Facebook home page over a five-month period from his first year at university, it is evident that Stephen negotiated, performed and constructed different states, from confidence to frustration to sarcastic self-reprimanding to public self-vilification. These status updates, therefore, offer a view of Stephen's negotiations in managing the changes to his reading and writing. However, Stephen's Facebook statuses also remind us of the difficulty in attempting to tie emotions down in this sort of research data; as such, Stephen's posts also offer an important reminder of the rhetorical or performative possibilities that using Facebook statuses as data offers.

6. Conclusion

The vignettes of Julia, Stephen and Andrew presented above demonstrate that Ivanič's (2004) framework allows researchers interested in student writing to identify the various discourses circulating in the participants' talk around their writing which facilitates examination of the situated detail of students' understandings of writing and further illuminates the complexity and the dynamic change over time. The vignettes also illustrate the multiple, partial and overlapping nature of these discourses and serve to build a rich and complex picture of how individuals understand their writing. These vignettes also suggest that changes take place in how the students view, describe and evaluate their writing as they move between educational and disciplinary contexts. We can see that some participants draw on the same discourses as they move between levels: for Julia, assessment and creativity remained consistent in her talk across the data collection period; for Andrew and Stephen, the idea of maintaining the integrity of their voice (character) and opinion was constant. However, the vignettes also suggest that for some participants, their ideas and understandings of their writing alter and expand as they moved into the university context. For instance, Stephen's view of "successful" writing in Year 2 was influenced by the increasing secondary reading demands of his English Literature degree. Therefore, it appears that Ivanič's framework is not only useful for identifying the different, hybrid assumptions and world views that underpin students' views of writing, it is also useful for exploring students' writing in the context of the movements made from A-levels to university.

What is clear from reading the data through an affective lens is that the participants' movements into HE were deeply individual, partial, circular and messy to describe. There was no sense in the data that any of the participants' movements, based on their descriptions, were linear or followed a simple chronology. The lived, situated experience of adapting to new audiences and reading and writing practices at university was painful for some of the participants, leading to losses of face, confidence and grades. However, for others the movement into HE was less problematic and not described in explicitly emotional terms. Recognising the holistic impact of

emotions in students' understandings and practices of their writing and connecting this for analytic purposes to the multilayered view of language underpinning Ivanič's work strengthens Ivanič's (2004) framework of discourses of writing and learning to write as an analytic tool. Furthermore, exploring the affective dimensions of students' writing, particularly through using Goffman's (1967) notion of "face work" to examine how students deal with the lived emotional realities of writing, appears to be a fruitful way to develop a richer and more complex picture of how students' experience their reading and writing "in transition".

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