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Reflection in university and the employability agenda: a discourse analysis case study

Abstract

In UK universities, reflection is promoted not only for its intrinsic value but also for instrumental purposes, for students to gain and demonstrate skills and attributes which are valued by employers. In this paper, I examine reflective writing produced by students seeking an award offered by the careers department of one university. By looking at the evaluative language choices made by the student writers, I shed light on some of their practices regarding self-representation and their articulations of experience. I provide a critical account of what reflective writing looks like in this particular setting, and interpret this in the broader context of the goal to foster reflection among higher education students. I argue that the reflective writing engendered by this particular context and task is different in key respects from the reflection which is commonly advocated as an element of personal, professional or academic development.

Introduction: Reflection in higher education

In an influential paper, Steur, Jansen and Hoffman (2012) discuss the concept of 'graduateness', that which a university education brings to a person in addition to knowledge or subject-specific skills. They discuss four interacting domains of graduateness, which are: scholarship, moral citizenship, lifelong learning and reflective thinking. Of these, they see the last is most central as underpins the first three. Steur et al. argue that it is the role of the university to cultivate reflective ability, arguing that 'graduateness' involves the ability to consider information from a range of perspectives and interrogate it critically in order to reach appropriate conclusions based on one's own judgement.

Although explicit reflection first entered the university via programmes which prepare students for professional practice, today reflection and reflective writing are required across a range of academic courses (Nesi and Gardner, 2012). There are

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arguably three drivers for this. A first is intrinsic to an understanding of the mission of the university as conceived for much of the twentieth century: Barnett (1997) argues that this mission is to develop critical thinking, critical action, and critical self-reflection. A second relates to a more recent ideology, part of what Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) call the therapeutic impulse in contemporary education, under which emotional intelligence and self-awareness are prized. Perhaps ironically, this therapeutic impulse is subsumed, in the current neoliberal university, within the ideology of competitiveness; reflexivity becomes yet another dimension on which students can stand out from their peers and universities can claim to be producing able graduates. A third driver, more practical, is the employability agenda: universities wish to encourage students both to develop the skills commonly associated with employability, and to learn to reflect on and articulate their experiences effectively to potential employers.

Whether within a degree programme or outside it, a university promoting reflection will require "evidence" that reflection is taking place, typically via reflective writing. Yet reflective writing is not a transparent window onto processes of reflection and is not necessarily reliable as evidence of reflection (Luk, 2008; Mann and Walsh, 2013; McGarr and Moody, 2010; Wharton, 2012). Especially where reflective writing is assessed, there emerges an important contradiction: assessed writing involves putting forward a polished self-representation, whereas reflection is held to involve doubt, self-criticism, emotion, experimentation, and an attempt to articulate thinking in process. A student whose reflective work is assessed is always likely to write so as to achieve the desired effect on the assessor. Therefore, by examining reflective writing deemed successful in a particular context, insights can be gained into the values of that context.

In this paper, I study an employability initiative from the Careers Department of a particular university. This aimed to encourage students to participate in extra-curricular activity from which they could learn a range of skills and to support them in learning how to reflect on their experiences in writing. Students were invited to apply for an award which recognised work outside academia; the criteria for

eligibility were that they should participate in structured extra-curricular activity, and then write a reflective account. Guidance for students on how to apply for the award included the statement: "You will need to submit a piece of written work of no more than 1500 words. This should be a reflective piece of work which summarises and also articulates what you have achieved and gained from your extra-curricular activities while at [university]. 40 hours or more of significant involvement in extra-curricular activities are required in order to apply".

My analysis below is based on the accounts written by a group of students who gained the award in a particular year. It focuses on their use of evaluative language and uncovers patterns in the attitudes which they choose to express. It thus identifies the evaluative positions which writers and readers of these texts jointly construe as indicators of personal achievement and reflective thinking, and so worthy of reward.

Discourse analytical perspective: textual evaluation

Textual evaluation is a rich perspective from which to examine reflective writing. Hunston & Thompson (2000:5) define textual evaluation as "the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about". Evaluation is part of Tenor (Halliday, 1985) – the construction of the reader-writer relationship. Evaluations can be conveyed along a range of dimensions: the writer's stance as to what sort of phenomenon is under discussion (e.g. a fact or an assumption), their moral stance on what is being discussed (evaluating something on a value scale of good and bad) their stance as to whether propositions are contentious or not, and their level of commitment to the certainty of what they say.

Due to the complexity of textual evaluation, most research papers on the topic isolate specific aspects of evaluative language for discussion. In the context of writing undertaken in higher education, some studies are: Conrad and Biber (2000)

concentrating on evaluative adverbials, Thompson and Zhou (2000) analysing evaluative disjuncts signalling clause relations, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2005) focusing on modal verbs, Chen (2010) focusing on modal verbs and adjectives, and Hyland and Milton (1997) working from a specific set of evaluative lexical items. Studies which focus on specific items of evaluative language tend to rely on a previous consensus of which specific lexical or grammatical items are most likely to carry evaluative meaning.

In contrast to this, the Appraisal framework (Martin and White 2005) takes a social semiotic approach to evaluation in text. It is situated within the systemic functional grammar approach of Halliday (1985) and concerns itself with the interpersonal function of language; specifically, the ways in which language users "construe for themselves particular authorial identities or personae, with how they align or disalign themselves with actual or potential respondents, and with how they construct for their texts an intended or ideal audience". (Martin and White 2005: 1). The framework delineates semantic/ pragmatic categories of evaluation at an abstract level, without linking these to pre-determined lexical items or grammatical resources. This gives the framework considerable flexibility as to the object of analysis. It has recently been used to examine interpersonal language in a range of discourse domains, for example reviews (Taboada and Carretero, 2012), journalistic discourse (White, 2012), political discourse (Miller, 2007) medical discourse (Gallardo and Ferrari, 2010) and academic discourse (Chang and Schleppegrell, 2011; Coffin, 2009).

The framework functions through a series of categorisations of evaluation types, which are in turn sub-categorised into increasing levels of delicacy. Its three basic subsystems are Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. Attitude recognises realisations where the language user puts his/her own attitude into the text e.g. *I enjoy taking the initiative*. Engagement recognises how the language user projects their voice vis a vis the potential voice of others e.g. *which might explain the restlessness...* and Graduation adjusts the strength of expressed Attitude or Engagement meanings, e.g. *the experience... was highly enriching*.

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In this study, with its focus on reflective writing, it is the Attitude dimension of Appraisal which is of most relevance. In the remainder of this section, I briefly illustrate the Attitude subsystem by a tree diagram, Figure 1 below. I then explain the categories and sub-categories in more detail, illustrating them with examples of data from this study.

(Figure1 here)

The first level distinction indicates whether evaluation is expressed in terms of Affect (valuing expressed through emotion, e.g. *I was worried about not being accepted…*), Judgement (valuing of people or their behavior, e.g. *two of our best volunteers*) or Appreciation (valuing things aesthetically or in terms of social value, e.g*. how important outreach work is*). Each of these three main types may be further categorized into subtypes. Within Affect, (Dis) Inclination captures realizations that express personal desire towards or against something, e.g. *I jumped at the chance to extend my time there*; (Un) happiness captures realisations which express positive or negative internal mood, e.g. *she just wasn't enjoying herself*; (In) security captures realisations which express degrees of confidence, e.g. *On my first tour I was a bit nervous*; (Dis)satisfaction captures realisations expressing one's positive or negative feelings about an outcome, e.g. *Everyone was happy with the results*.

Judgements, or evaluations of people, are considered to involve either Esteem or Sanction. Judgements of Esteem capture evaluations of people in terms of Normality, Capacity and Tenacity. Normality refers the extent to which people are (not) like everyone else, e.g. *the childrens' challenges in carrying out simple actions that I take for granted…* Capacity is to do with ability to accomplish tasks to a good standard, e.g. *I've led a team of ten people over the last year.* Tenacity is to do with effort over time, e.g. *I could not have started out in this position, it has been a progressive journey from volunteer to leader… .* Judgements of Sanction capture evaluations in terms of more overtly moral qualities, such as Veracity, e.g. *I went in with an open heart*; and Propriety, e.g. *who irresponsibly quit the day before….*

Appreciation captures evaluations of things, under the categories of Reaction, Composition and Valuation. Reaction refers to how something 'grabs' us, e.g. *This really _inspired_ me*. Composition refers to how balanced and well-formed something is, e.g. *there were some instances where our ideas _clashed_*. Valuation refers to how useful or worthwhile something might be, e.g. *This experience _taught me_ how to break down barriers.*

Interpretation of attitudinal meaning is, of course, highly dependent on reading position, and reader approaches a text positioned on at least two continua: one of subject familiarity, and one of empathy/identification. The first continuum refers to the reader's knowledge of the content and context of the text. The second continuum refers to the extent to which the reader may be compliant (disposed to accept the writer's evaluations) or resistant (disposed to contest the writer's evaluations).

For this analysis, on the first continuum I am a relative insider – as a lecturer in a UK university I am familiar with the kinds of activities narrated by students and with the context in which they applied for the award. On the second continuum, I consciously chose to take up a compliant position – as I was not myself assessing these applications, but rather was recognizing the fact that they had been assessed as successful.

Methodology for the study

To compile a corpus of texts for discourse analysis, students successfully completing the award in a particular year (57 students) were contacted and asked whether they would be willing to provide their reflective text for research purposes. 25 agreed to do so, and their texts were compiled into a corpus of 42,406 words; small enough for qualitative analysis relying on context leading to manual annotation (McEnery, Tono and Xiao, 2006). The corpus of texts is, of course, selective. Texts come from students firstly, who chose to attempt the award; secondly, who were

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successful; and thirdly, who were willing to share. It therefore seems reasonable to categorise the corpus as containing writing by students who were positive about the award process and happy with their writing.

To allow a systematic investigation of evaluative language, texts in the corpus were manually annotated using UAM Corpus Tool, a software programme which allows the user to first define an annotation scheme and then to apply categories of the scheme to stretches of text which they choose. The annotation process was as follows:

First, stretches of attitudinal language were highlighted. Each highlighted stretch of text was then categorized on four dimensions. Firstly, the broad option from the Attitude subsystem which best explained the type of evaluation. Secondly, in the case of an Affect realization, whether the source of the Affect (the person reported as experiencing the emotion) was the writer, e.g. *Under this pressure, I….* another person, e.g. *they feel more included*, or a group including self and other, e.g. *something we hope will enhance*….. In the case of a Judgment or an Appreciation realization, categorization was in terms of whether the target of the evaluation was the writer, e.g. *I was able to successfully take a trip on my own*, or another, e.g. *as she grew surlier*… or a group including self and other, e.g. *the camp leader found us an efficient pairing*. The third dimension was whether the Attitude expressed was positive or negative, and the fourth was a more precise categorization of Attitude subtype.

Given that the location and categorization of attitude in text is an interpretive and subjective act, it is important to ensure consistency by undertaking more than one cycle of coding, and it is desirable where possible to compare interpretations with a second coder. For this study, I first coded all texts myself. I then shared the categorization system with a second coder, also a higher education insider, who coded the texts independently from me. We then met to compare our codings and discuss disagreements. This discussion, revealing inevitable differences of interpretation, allowed me to understand any inconsistencies in my coding and

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improved my grasp of the principles which could be used to decide which categories to apply to data in the corpus. Following the discussion, I re-coded the data in the light of the principles that had been articulated through my discussion with my colleague. Through this recursive process, I was able to arrive at a consistent interpretation of attitudinal language in the texts.

Once texts had been annotated, the corpus was subjected to further quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis involved running a number of corpus queries to answer such questions as which options from the Attitude subsystem were most frequently used, and which options tended to be combined with which others. Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, involved re-examining coded stretches of text in their original context to try to form a picture of the pragmatic intention behind the evaluations put forward. In the sections which follow, I first discuss the overall patterns found and provide examples, and then place these in a broader context.

Results

A total of 788 stretches of text were coded as attitudinal, and the distribution over the three main branches of the Attitude subsystem was as follows:

(Table 1 Types of Attitude here)

It is immediately apparent that Judgement is by far the most frequently used category, accounting for almost half of the total expressions of Attitude. Appreciation is the least used category. These results show us that in these texts evaluation is very strongly focused on people, rather than things. I now take each of the three main categories as a starting point to examine results in more detail.

Affect

Quantitative results in terms of Affect were as follows:

(Table 2 Affect here)

The most noticeable point is that these writers comment on their own emotions far more than they comment on anyone else's. Emotions are primarily attributed to them as individuals, though there are also some reports of emotions shared by a group of people of which the writer was a part. For both the 'self' and the 'self and other' categories, positive emotions strongly outweigh negative ones. For the 'other' category, in contrast, reports of positive and negative emotions are more balanced.

Within the positive emotions reported as being experienced by the writer, Satisfaction and Inclination are fairly evenly balanced, as the writers express either their positive feelings about something they did, or their enthusiasm towards doing something. Among the negative feelings reported, Insecurity is the most frequent. In these realisations writers tend to express feelings of doubt about whether they could manage something. Often this is followed by an assessment of how they in fact did manage it, e.g. *Although I started … the sessions … with some apprehension as to whether I can adequately advise on … I found …* The feelings attributed to groups of which the writer was a part very much mirror the patterns of emotions attributed to the writer as an individual, which perhaps suggests a certain degree of projection on the part of the writers.

Where emotions are ascribed to others, the most frequent type, whether positive or negative, is (Un)happiness. Writers tend to report that others either enjoyed something (often something that the writers had provided, e.g*. my pairs were laughing by the end of the session*) or that they were feeling unhappy (and then, often, the writer went on to improve matters for them, e.g. *The … show organisers were outraged … I immediately rescheduled the shooting date …*)

Judgement

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Quantitative results regarding judgement were as follows:

(Table 3 Judgement here)

Looking first at the target of Judgement, it is noticeable that writers make the smallest number of Judgements on the behaviour of others – but that when they do choose to do so, the evaluation is normally negative. Most of the Judgements are of their own behaviour and these are overwhelmingly positive. They are second most likely to make Judgements of a group of which they were part and in this case again, the evaluations are overwhelmingly positive.

Moving on to type of Judgement, by far the majority of the positive evaluations of both self and team including self are in terms of Capacity, e.g *Alongside with my teammates, we have raised over £200 for… .* Tenacity is the second most frequently used option, with writers representing themselves as having perseverance, e.g. *As a mentor for three years, I have been able to build long lasting relationships with my old mentees… .* In the few positive Judgements of others, Capacity is again the most frequently chosen option. But in the more numerous negative Judgements, the most frequent option is Impropriety, with writers negatively evaluating others in terms of the moral rightness of their behaviour. In 10 of the 16 cases, the author is represented as compensating for this moral wrong, e.g. *One of my students … was very lazy and her teacher thought she would fail …. However I believed in her. By encouraging … she eventually passed.*

Appreciation

As was discussed above, the option of Appreciation refers to evaluations of things, rather than directly of people. But in these texts, writers frequently referred to things created by people, e.g. *our performance, the fashion show.* So it is still appropriate to associate Appreciation with an evaluation of either the writer, another, or a group including the writer.

Quantitative results for Appreciation were as follows:

(Table 4 Appreciation here)

Under the option of Appreciation the dominance of positive evaluation continues, and by far the largest number of evaluations are of an activity undertaken by, or a product created by, a group including the writer. This is accounted for by the frequency with which the writers evaluate an activity in which they have participated as being useful to them – e.g. *my involvement in … has been the major catalyst to my personal development whilst at university.* By claiming to have gained from an activity, the writers positively evaluate the opportunity that was made available to them and also credit themselves for personal growth. In fact 104 of the 124 examples of positive appreciation of self and other are in terms of Valuation, where an event or series of events in which both the writer and others participated is evaluated as having benefited the writer.

Discussion

These texts should not, of course, be interpreted as revealing any actual reality of writers' behaviours or even thoughts. Rather, they are subjectively constructed narratives produced in response to a particular audience and context. Each text is a narrative of the self; and since all language users are able to construct and manage a wide range of such narratives, any patterns which emerge in (successful) writing in a given context can be seen as elucidating the requirements of that context. In other words, it is reasonable to suggest that the positions adopted here are valued not only by writers but also by assessors in the careers department.

In the data analysed, Judgement was the most frequent category overall. This indicates that writers devote considerable space to commenting or reflecting on ethical matters. But the focus of their ethical interest is themselves; they most often express Judgements about themselves or their group, and these Judgements tend to

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be positive. This is one way in which writers respond to the simultaneous demands of 'demonstrating' reflection, and 'presenting' the self for assessment.

Most of the Judgements expressed are in terms of Capacity to fulfil task requirements, suggesting that writers believe that assessors are looking for evidence of a person who can 'get things done'. Yet for Ward and McCotter (2004), a predominant focus on capacity for tasks indicates lower levels of reflection, i.e. 'routine' and 'technical' reflection. Writers in this corpus often express positive evaluations of themselves after discussing a hurdle which they have overcome, e.g. *I do feel lonely at times … rather than being depressed about it, I took it as a challenge and kept my schedule busy*. The picture created is of someone who overcomes adversity, achieves success, and learns about him/herself in the process. These mini transformation narratives arguably respond to the prompt to show what writers have 'achieved and gained'. Yet the majority of the transformations represented are to do with behaviour, and transformations of ways of thinking are less commonly reported. For Lengelle, Meijers, Poell and Post (2014) such a focus is indicative of relatively superficial reflection.

Turning now to the negative Judgements expressed about others, a closer focus on the language of these realisations indicates that the some are rather direct, e.g. *some people were not appreciative of our efforts and demanded more and more.* This is in interesting contrast with Wharton (2012) and with Ferguson (2009) who both found that negative evaluations tended to be expressed indirectly. The writers in the present research, communicating with an anonymous reader and evaluating an 'other' who the reader had never met, seemed to use negative Judgement of another to construct a shared position with the reader, as people who would not behave in the negative ways reported.

In the current data, Affect was the second most frequently used major option, with writers narrating their own emotions far more than anyone else's. Ferguson (2009) finds a similar pattern, with students in reflective conferences tending to explore their own emotions rather than reporting those of other

participants in narrated activities. Lengelle et al. (2014) suggest that this imbalance is problematic – citing Pennebaker (2011, p. 13) they argue that writers with healthier perspectives tend to "say something about their own thoughts and feelings in one instance and then explore what is happening with other people before writing about themselves again". Reflection is held to develop empathy, but the current accounts do not devote significant space to the emotions of others.

The writers in the present research tend to focus on positive emotions. The relative lack of negative Affect perhaps suggests that the writers were uncomfortable with expressing it. In an investigation of reflective writing by medical students, Fernandez, Chelliah and Halim (2014) found – via an interview methodology – that approximately 30% of writers interviewed were uncomfortable in talking about their own negative feelings. The most common reason given was a fear of being judged. Writers in the current corpus perhaps have a similar view.

In the present data, the least used of the three main categories was Appreciation. The comparatively low presence of this category is in contrast with the findings of Ferguson (2009) who describes both parties in reflective conferences as using a large number of Appreciation realisations as they discussed the merits and demerits of various techniques for the practice. However, in the current corpus, Appreciation seems to have a different purpose – it is the approach through which transformation narratives of writers are most frequently expressed, as writers talk about what they learned and gained from an experience. The content of what they write in such narratives can, as discussed above, be related to different levels of reflection.

Overall, the analysis of patterns of Attitude in this corpus leads me to propose that this particular genre of reflective writing involves what Martin and White (2005) would describe as its own "evaluative key". Evaluative key is the notion that certain patterns of use of evaluative resources (i.e. the frequent use of certain options and the lack of use of others) tend to recur in certain text types, and

that these styles of evaluative positioning can be related to particular rhetorical effects and can create particular authorial identities or personae.

The reflective persona in the genre investigated here is someone who: highlights their own positive emotions, giving less space to the emotions of others; who judges him/herself, usually in terms of capacity, and usually positively; who judges others less frequently than self but when they do so, is more likely to focus on a negative aspect, and this is most likely to be moral propriety. However when other people are represented as being in the same group with the writer, they are again more likely to be judged positively, and again most usually in terms of capacity. The evaluative key also includes the appreciation of events and phenomena, and the usual target is an event in which both the writer and others were involved. The most frequent evaluation given to such an event is that of positive social valuation – this event did good to people, often to the writer themselves.

Arguably, writers were guided to adopt this persona through the rubrics given to them, and there are three main points to be made here. Firstly, students are specifically instructed to write about what they have achieved and gained. This is a steer to be positive, to report on the improvement of their own capabilities and to represent their experiences as having been in some sense personally transformative. The rubric does not suggest, for example, a consideration of their involvement from the perspective of others or a consideration of their activities from a wider perspective of social justice.

Secondly, students are asked to focus on particular types of extra-curricular activity. Clegg, Stevenson, and Wilcott (2009) argue that the activities typically valued in universities and by graduate employers are volunteering, or campus-based cultural or sport activities. Participation in such activities may be associated – in the minds of students and assessors alike - with the notion of graduate employability. This in turn could lead student writers away from deep and questioning reflection and guide them instead towards a polished presentation of the self.

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Thirdly, the rubric contains the phrase "significant involvement". Most writers in the corpus seem to have interpreted this as having provided leadership. In some cases writers claimed to have shown leadership when in a comparatively junior role; for example, representing themselves as transforming the practice of experienced teachers while volunteering at a school. Had I as analyst been reading these texts resistantly rather than compliantly, I believe I would have reacted against such a representation; as a compliant reader, I merely ask myself whether this is what the writers understood by 'significant'.

Conclusion

For the careers department who developed this award, there were two goals: to enable students to gain recognition for extra-curricular activities, and to develop their reflective abilities. The first goal seems to have been achieved for many students who took up the opportunity. Regarding the second goal, the picture is more mixed. Reflection certainly takes place, but it does not seem to be in line with the constructs of reflection which are held to be developmentally beneficial to the individual or to the society of which they are a part (Tarrant, 2013).

Whether students could be helped to reflect differently is a question of considerable interest to the careers department which developed the award. Clearly, the wider social context – of competition among students, graduates and universities, of the inherent contradiction between reflection and assessment – will continue to impinge whatever new initiatives may be developed. And yet, there is optimism in the literature that students and professionals can indeed be helped to reflect more deeply, and so gain developmental benefits. Lee and Loughran (2000), Ryan (2011), and Watts and Lawson (2009) all discuss approaches designed to direct reflection to fruitful areas and to encourage deeper, more desirable levels of reflection

For the context under study here, one suggestion emerging from the work of Clegg et al. (2009) would be to broaden the notion of what sort of extracurricular

activity is valued. A broader conceptualisation of extracurricular activity could encourage students to examine a range of issues in their work –life balance, and to reflect on who they are being and becoming as well as on what they do and their capacity to do it.

A second suggestion concerns the possibility that reflective writing could become incidental, part of an ongoing recording of life and thoughts. Coward (2011), writing about student nurses, suggests that they might benefit from keeping a general journal, which might sometimes have reflective moments in it, rather than from undertaking specific reflective tasks. As Schön and Rein (1994: xv) argue, "personal change arises, in other words, only as a by-product of the search for insight."

Although the current research has found that reflection in the examined genre is not at the depth and sophistication which the initiators of the award would have hoped, this should not be seen as an entirely negative finding. The very process of analysis and discussion reported on here forms part of a reflective cycle for the institution as it examines the uptake, and indeed transformation, of its initiatives by students. A number of factors have been discussed in this paper which might contribute to limiting the level of criticality in the analysed reflections. Some of these are outside institutional control, but others are the subject of current plans for change.

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