Article

The Development of Writing Identity through Writing Center Tutorial

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Abstract

This study analyzes how writing center tutorial influences on the development of writers’ writing identity. In order to achieve this goal, four writers who came frequently to Waseda University Writing Center had their sessions recorded. Writers were also later interviewed and their texts were collected as data. Transcripts from the sessions, the interview and writers’ texts were coded and categorized. Findings showed two main issues writers had to deal with in order to develop their writing identity: a) the pressure and demands on writing identity in academia, and b) consequences of refusing or resigning to demands and pressures. Drawing from three different fields on writing studies, namely academic literacy (Lea & Street, 1998), writing identity (Ivanic, 1998) and writing center theory (North, 1984), this paper explains how those issues were dealt with during Writing Center tutorial sessions. The paper finishes by pointing out the implications of the research to Writing Center theory and practice in terms of: a) how writers’ academic literacy practices and events influence their sessions, b) how tutors can use this information to provide possibilities for self-hood to writers by providing new alternatives for their writings, and c) the need to raise awareness of the possibility of tutor-writer relationship becoming another hierarchical practice in academia.

Key words: writing center tutorial, academic literacy, writing identity.

Introduction

Students’ writing abilities in higher education have been of great interest in the last 20 years. Many studies discuss students’ perception of academic writing, professors’ perception of students’ writing (East, Bicthener & Basturkmen, 2006; Motta-Roth, 2012), discourse and power, academic writing skills and academic literacy (Lea & Street, 1998; Ivanic, 1998). Studies on writing identity have also increased considerably since the 1990’s mainly focusing on the writer’s authorship (Hyland, 2002a; Hyland, 2002b; Abasi, Akbari & Graves, 2006; Dueñas, 2007). Moreover, writing
tutorials have been encouraged as a method of improving students writing since the 1930’s (Carino, 1996; Kinkead, 1996).

With the intention of producing new knowledge on the issue of writing identity and writing center research, this paper focuses on writing identity and how Writing Center tutorial can offer assistance to the development of university students’ writing identity. Different from previous studies, I draw on social theories of identity such as Ivanic’s (1998) theory of writing identity in relation to the concept of academic literacy developed by Lea & Street (1998). Moreover, since tutorial assistance always takes part during the writing process, the present study also aims at analyzing changes and permanence to writers writing identity over tutorial sessions.

The significance of this study is the contribution not only to writing tutorial theory and practice but also to writing instruction as a whole by providing new understanding on the process of writing identity development. In respect to the field of writing identity this research will provide insights into the negotiations, resistance and compliance which writers go through during the process of writing academic text.

Four participants who came frequently to the writing center and their writings are described in this paper as individual cases. I participated in this study as a tutor, in a participant-observer position. Sessions were recorded and the writers were later interviewed by the researcher. Sessions and interviews were conducted over a period of nine months. The aim of the research was to investigate how Writing Center tutorial can help university students develop their writing identity by offering those students new possibilities to deal with issues present in academic literacy.

**Literature Review**

Academic writing has been a matter of research for many years since the 1950’s (Moore, 1950; Lea & Street, 1998; Figueredo & Bonini, 2006). Studies in the field have evolved from focusing only on the writing itself to broader approaches, taking into consideration the social context around the writing activity (Lea & Street, 1998; Ivanic, 1998; Kapp & Bangeni, 2009). Furthermore, students’ perceptions of academic writing (Figueiredo & Bonini, 2006), students’ positioning in disciplinary discourses (Kapp & Bangeni, 2009) and also students’ identities as writers in the academic community (Ivanic, 1998; Burgess & Ivanic, 2010) have been issues of research in academic writing.

The change of focus from academic writing skills to academic literacy was a major innovation. Drawing on the ideas of the New Literacy Studies and the ideological model of literacy (Street, 2003), Lea & Street (1998) coined the term *academic literacy practices*. In contrast to study skills discourse and academic socialization discourse, academic literacy practices propose looking at writing in academia beyond the aspects of skill training (skills discourse) and acculturation (academic socialization).
Academic literacy practices - reading and writing within disciplines - constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study. A practices approach to literacy takes account of the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices, and this in turn has important implications for an understanding of student learning (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 157).

Lea & Street (1998) are proposing that writing in academia should take into consideration a) the hierarchical relations present in higher education, b) academic writing practices, and c) its spaces of production, in other words, the social context as a whole and the cultural aspects which are unique to academic literacy. In this sense, academic literacy has contributed to the field of academic writing studies by proposing a broader view of the influences on student writing in higher education. This new perspective on academic writing has also opened the field of writing studies to new topics such as writing identity in academic writing (Ivanic, 1994; 1998; Hyland, 2002a; Hyland, 2002b).

Writing instruction, as well as research in academic writing, has also changed significantly. The creation of writing laboratories in the 1930’s and the creation of writing centers in the 1970’s have been some of the most significant changes in writing instruction until present (Carino, 1996; Kinkead, 1996). The introduction of writing tutorials based on peer-learning by writing centers might have been one of the biggest changes in writing instruction. Those tutorials removed the hierarchical relation between professor-student common to education settings and introduced a new context of learning based less on teaching and more on dialogue (Bruffee, 1984).

Writing Center tutorial focuses mainly on three aspects: a) respecting writer’s intention (content and writing style), b) peer-learning, and c) discussion between tutor and writer as form of learning (Bruffee, 1984). Respecting the writers’ intention means giving writers’ ownership over their text; ownership means that the final decision on changes in the text should always be made by the writer. Tutors may present ideas as suggestions, but should always leave the final decision to the writer to make (Sadoshima, 2013). Peer-learning in tutorial sessions means that tutors are also students at about the same level as the writers. For this reason, writers may feel more comfortable with expressing themselves since the hierarchical structure of academia is taken out of the context (Bruffee, 1984). Lastly, tutorials at writing center are never about teaching but about learning through discussion. Tutors do not teach during sessions but instead promote discussions with writers about their writings. Based on these three fundamental aspects, writing centers promote a drastic change in academic writing in higher education offering student writers a new context for learning and talking about writing.

Academic writing identity, on the other hand, is a relatively new topic of research in writing studies and especially in writing center studies. Until the 1990’s very little research had been done on writing identity. The closest studies to those of writing identity have been concerned with the
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concept of voice. As Bowden (1995) and Ramathan & Atkinson (1999) show, voice has been an influential term in writing research since the 1970’s. The concept is still present in writing studies nowadays but has slowly subsided due to its difficult definition and excess of subjectivity (Matsuda, 2001; Matsuda & Tardy, 2008; Stapleton, 2002; Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008). Moreover, due to the difficulty in empirically investigating the concept of voice, scholars have abandoned the concept and started to consider identity in writing as a more viable and plausible one (Ivanic, 1998; Hyland, 2002a; Dueñas, 2007). The main difference between the two terms is that writing identity tries to correlate social-historical perspectives, writer’s personal history, and texts (Ivanic, 1998), while voice is historically correlated to textual aspects and writers’ subjectivity (Bowden, 1995).

Of the studies of writing identity, Ivanic’s (1998) perspective on academic writing identity has been the most influential until the present day (Hyland, 2002a; Hyland, 2002b; Abasi, Akbari & Graves, 2006; Dueñas, 2007). Ivanic (1998) proposes that writing identity can be divided into four selves: the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, the self as author and the possibilities for self-hood. The autobiographical self is the personal history which every writer brings to their writing. The discoursal self relates to how writers want to be seen by their readers, “it is concerned with the writer’s ‘voice’ in the sense of the way they want to sound, rather than in the sense of the stance they are taking” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 25). Self as author is concerned with the opinions writers want to express in their text, their beliefs and how they position themselves in accordance to a specific context of writing. Lastly, possibilities for self-hood refers to the discoursal identities available in a given environment considering the social context of writing. In brief, possibilities for self-hood are social identities which the writer can adopt or reject.

Although studies on academic writing identity have increased in recent years, research on writing identity have been few in Writing Center studies. Grimm’s (2008) study, for example, focused on tutorials with writers who have difficulty adapting to mainstream academic discourse. Her study adopts the concept of narratives to explain the conflict between the institution and the individual from a perspective on discourse. Jackson (2008) also suggests a similar discussion. The author analyzes writer’s resistance to the mainstream higher education narrative and the Writing Center tutorial’s aid in helping those writers accommodate to the higher education narrative without resigning. As the studies above show, research on the development of writing identity through Writing Center tutorial has not yet been thoroughly examined as the focus have been mainly on discourse and narrative. Therefore, the present study analyses how writing center tutorial can help students develop their writing identity taking into consideration the concepts of academic literacy (Lea & Street, 1998) and writing identity (Ivanic, 1998). Lastly, development of writing identity is defined here as how writers balance the interaction of Ivanic’s four selves taking into consideration the reader, the writers’ authorship, and the social context, during the construction of a text.
Method

Setting and Participants
Data was collected at the Writing Center at Waseda University. The Waseda University Writing Center follows the writing center philosophy established in the United States. Students from any field can bring their paper at any stage of their writing. Three undergraduate students and one graduate student participated in this study. They visited the writing center at least three times for sessions conducted in English for papers written in English.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Graduation Thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>English/ Japanese</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Writing Assignment</td>
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<td>Soyoung</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Japanese Language</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
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<td>Kim</td>
<td>Korean</td>
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Data Collection
A total of 20 sessions were recorded by the researcher. Among those sessions, 8 had the researcher as the tutor while the other 12 had tutor M for 11 sessions and tutor J for 1 session. The sessions in which the tutor was other than the researcher were all observed by the researcher. Writers’ papers were also collected from all of the sessions.

A total of five interviews which lasted from 40 minutes to 1 hour were conducted with the four writers. These were semi-structured interviews with the objective of learning more about writers’ academic literacy, their personal lives, their writing practices, and eventually about specific parts of their text which were discussed during the sessions. The writers’ texts were also analyzed before and after the interviews.

Data Analysis
Data was analyzed taking into consideration three perspectives: the writer, the writing and the session. These perspectives were weaved in order to describe each writer in detail. The objective of fusing these three perspectives was to create an understanding of their personal background and their writing practices and relate them to writers’ writing and sessions. Open coding was used in the transcripts from the sessions and the interviews, and writers’ texts as framework of analysis.

Case Studies
This section will discuss each case separately presenting the issues in the development of students’ writing identity and how the Writing Center tutorial assisted the writers in that.
The case of Kim

In Kim’s sessions three main issues arose: Kim’s confidence in her writing, her resistance and resignation to academic literacy and the meanings she gives to her own words.

Kim and I had three sessions together. In two of those sessions we worked on an assignment for her “Intro to Arts” course. In the other session, we worked on an assignment from her seminar on “Putin’s Russia”.

Kim was very talkative during the sessions. She was also always very willing to explain the parts of her text we would discuss, although she was a little dependent during the sessions with phrases such as “I can’t choose. Which one do you think is better?” or “I don’t know. Your advice?” meaning “give me the answer”. Kim was very active as well, always taking notes and bringing points to discuss.

Kim learned how to write essays in her high school in the U.S. What she learned in the U.S with her teachers and her friends, she brought to her writing in academia. MLA citation, opinion essay, and searching for sources to support her argument, were all aspects of academic writing she learned before she actually entered university. Perhaps this explains why she found it difficult to define academic writing. Kim believed that academic writing should be factual without any positioning from the writer.

Very similar [in high school] but here [university] is, like, a more academic way of writing ‘cause there [high school] it was, like, more like, my based on my opinion right? But the Chinese politics should be more, like, an informative article kind of writing… I don’t know, it’s just like, I have to use a lot of, you know? Other person’s opinion as well. I don’t know, I don’t know” (interview).

Kim confessed in the interview that she was not confident about her writing. Even though she was a good writer, she did not believe herself to be one. Her use of the Writing Center was closely connected to her lack of confidence. She revealed during the interview that her visits to the Writing Center were due to her need to have her writing confirmed as good, and to calm her anxiety over thinking that she was not a good writer. This fact also made her become quite dependent on tutors when she had to make a decision on her writing. In order to encourage her to assume ownership over her writing, silence during sessions proved to be effective by pushing her to try to find a solution on her own. After those silences discussion usually became more profitable with Kim more participatory and less dependent.

On another session, Kim’s use of quotations in her text revealed the conflicts in her academic writing identity. The demands of her professor to use at least three direct quotes in the writing assignment seemed to be beyond Kim’s understanding of the task. Although she did not understand the reason for the direct quotes, she inserted three quotes on her text. As a result the quotes seemed to have no importance in her text whatsoever. It seemed as if they were there only to complete her
sentences. In fact, Kim did not want to use direct quotes; she was only following the requirements of her assignment. In the session we tried to work on the reasons for using quotes and how to use them. One of our sessions on quotation (transcript below) demonstrated Kim’s resistance and resignation to the demands of academic literacy when she refers to quoting as her “duty”.

Tutor - What is the point that you are trying to make here?
Kim - Loyalty.
Tutor - Why did you choose this quote? Why didn’t you say… loyal?
Kim - (laughs) I have to use three direct quotes.
(both laugh)
Kim - (laughing) It is my duty. Otherwise I’m just gonna use my words. No option.

Finally, our sessions together showed how words and meanings have a personal connection to writers. Kim’s choice to use the word “one” as representing people in general was closely related to her understanding of the word as having a meaning beyond physical aspects that is spiritual aspects. During the session she felt unhappy with her writing because she thought she was repeating the word “one” too many times and she wanted a substitute. Our discussion on the topic seems to have helped her understand the different meanings she gives to similar words. For example, although “people”, “one”, “human beings” and “person” can be used with similar meanings, Kim was able to distinguish each one of them. In her final text she maintained the word “one” because she felt no other word could represent the meaning she wanted to express.

When I’m thinking of one, just my perspective, “one” it also means your mind that persons mind, soul. I was thinking in that way because when you refer to God people never say person, they say, “one”, “the one”. You know what I’m talking about? So from that perspective I’m thinking “one” can also refer to the mind the inner mind and the soul in a way but “person” it can be like only person not really sociable but just the person (interview)

The aspects discussed in Kim’s case are part of her process of forming an academic writing identity. Building confidence in her writing, her resistance and resignation to her professor demands, her selection of words to express specific meanings, and her educational background, all form Kim’s academic writing identity.

**The Case of Rachel**

Rachel’s struggles were related to her belief that academic papers should have a strict format, her wish to write according to what she thought were her professor’s expectations, and her difficulty assuming authorship over her writing through concepts which she had created.
Rachel was very active during the sessions. She put a lot of effort in making her ideas clear and she took many notes. Our discussions had long silent pauses when she would be taking notes or when she was thinking, trying to find ways to explain herself. Even though her English was quite good, she seemed sometimes to have difficulties expressing herself in the language. In spite of being quite serious about her work, Rachel was always in a relaxed mood and she would often laugh at her own answers to the questions I would ask.

She also took every suggestion quite seriously even though she didn’t accept all of them. Eventually, she would say that a certain topic was better to be discussed with her professor first before she made any changes to the text. Nonetheless, she always seemed quite open to the ideas which arose from our discussions.

Rachel’s case revealed that her view of academic writing was strongly related to format and vocabulary, but that content was not considered to be a strong issue. Rachel thought that the number of words, that the length of her thesis was the measure of the writing. Moreover, she imagined that academic papers should all have the same format.

Rachel – I just wanted to divide this in two parts so this is why I did this.
Tutor – Why do you want to do this?
Rachel – Because for final thesis it is more like (laughs) academic. One, two, like in one chapter two parts or three parts, I only have two.
Tutor – Why do think this seems more academic?
Rachel – uh?
Tutor – Why do you think if you have more subsections, it makes it more academic?
Rachel – Because I … that is what I saw from others… thesis.

Rachel’s case also shows that developing an academic writing identity has to be a process not only where the writer understands the demands of academic literacy and is able to comply, but also one where the novice writer learns how to bend the norms through their own efforts by utilizing the same rules which constrain him or her.

Moreover, Rachel’s attempt to write in the way she imagined her professor would like her to write shows her resignation to academic literacy practices. It also shows that the power imbalance between students, as writers, and professors, as readers, is of great importance for students’ development of their writing identity. When Rachel says that she needs to talk to her professor because she gives the grades, Rachel shows that her compliance with academic literacy practices is based not only on knowledge but also on the imbalance of the power of the reader over the writer.

Lastly, the case of Rachel also showed how words chosen by writers are impregnated with meanings beyond the obvious ones. Rachel’s choice of words demonstrated her own personal conflict between being academic and expressing her views on a specific topic. In order to deal
with this conflict, Rachel was required to elaborate new concepts which united the meanings of academia and her own personal meanings.

Tutor – Where did you get this idea from?
Rachel – No, no. I made it up.
Tutor – Good!
Rachel – Uh? (laughs)
Tutor – That’s ok, you can make it up, no problem but you need to explain.
Rachel – Really?!
Tutor – What are you saying is “the ideology of men”?
Rachel – Like what?
Tutor – Like what?
Rachel – the definition in the dictionary or … what?
Tutor – No, you. Your definition. What are you calling the “ideology of men”? 
Rachel – Ah!!! Ok, ok, I see, I see. My own explanation.
Tutor – What is this that men have that you think it is an ideology?
Rachel – Uh! Good question. Why? I think it is kind of value which leads them to behave like… (silence)
Tutor – Good. Behave like what?
Rachel – Behave like in the novel men admire Strickland and ah…
Tutor – So what kind of values do men value?
Rachel – Ah!
Tutor – According to your idea.
Rachel – Ah! … like just I said power, the desire for power. They … they treat women lowly
Tutor – Why do they do that?
Rachel – Uh!… Because I think they think women deserve that… maybe, maybe I should call this the ideology of Strickland… I’m not sure.
Tutor – Ok, that’s also ok.
Rachel – Because the husband of Mrs. Strove is quite a kind person… yeah… he doesn’t like [meaning is not like] Strickland… [silence 13 seconds]
Rachel – Maybe I should change the word to Strickland… yeah, yeah… I think so because Maugham has some comments with the main character I will analyze later with the main character. I think it is better. Yeah, yeah think so. It is “more easier” for me to summarize.
Tutor – You can explain what is this ideology?
Rachel – Uh,uh,uh, yeah. Good.
The dialogue above reveals the construction of one concept in Rachel’s writing. This concept is not only an argument but it represents ideas and feelings from the writer. Rachel, when lead to explain her concept of the “ideology of men”, decides to rename it as the “ideology of Strickland”. Listening to her own arguments, she realizes that “men”, the generalization aspect of her concept, does not reflect what she actually thinks all men represent. She recognizes that there are “good men” and “bad men” in the novel; consequently, she cannot simply leave the term as representing all men in society.

The three aspects discussed in the sessions with Rachel, her fixation with format, her wish to please her professor, and her difficulty in assuming authorship over her concepts, were obstacles which she had to face in order to develop her writer’s identity.

**The case of Maria**

Maria had difficulty understanding the writing assignment and the requirements her professor was making. However, her biggest issue was deciding her position in her text, having to choose between two sides.

The first session we had was dedicated to brainstorming and creating an outline for her text. Maria was not sure of the position she wanted to take in her essay and she also believed she had to take a definite position. As a first strategy, I decided to create a table comparing Democrats’ and Republicans’ positions in relation to tax since that was the first topic for which she suggested Democrats and Republicans had different positions, I wrote Democrats on the left side of a paper and Republicans on the other, I wrote tax in the middle and asked Maria about their positions on taxation. She said Democrats wanted to increase taxes to help the poor while Republicans, taking sides with the wealthy, wanted to decrease taxation.

Next, I gave the paper and the pencil to Maria to continue writing the table. She started to come up with a series of ideas all somehow related to taxation: Obamacare, government size, public money expenditure and minimum wage. When all these ideas had been written on the paper and discussed, Maria wrote at the bottom of the page “my personal point of view”.

Her views on academic literacy are reflected on the structure she developed for the brainstorming: first facts then opinion; first objectivity then subjectivity. As she explained in the interview:

> As I said in the last paragraph, I agree with the democrats but at the first phase actually I’ve been to… (pause) because this paper is actually about, not about which I favor, I do have to mention that but the main topic is about compare Republicans and Democrats. I wanted to give an idea how democrats see republicans and how republicans actually act from not my point of view but from the democrat point of view (interview)

When Maria first came to the Writing Center, she was confused about how to organize her thoughts in the paper. She had difficulty taking a position on the topic of the assignment. At the beginning
of the session, she had mentioned she did not know whether she was in favor of Democrats or Republicans. I told her she did not have to choose one side since the assignment did not ask her to do so. As the session developed and her ideas became clearer, she was able to start taking a position, which she wrote at the bottom of the page under “my personal view (put in opposing ideas)”. This is exactly how she starts her last paragraph and brings a resolution to her conflicting ideas from the beginning of the session (which side to take, Republicans or Democrats):

Both Democrats and Republicans have their positive and negative points, and they will always disagree about most issues. However, even if it causes bad feelings, disagreement can be good. Disagreement is necessary for voters to see both sides of an argument, and it helps a country to grow and change. A society always needs more than one opinion (Maria’s text).

Maria’s development from the first session to the final paper shows an important part of the process of creating a writing identity. Maria needed for this paper to take a position of any kind in relation to the two parties; however, she thought she had to choose one of the sides. Unable to do so, she was in conflict as a writer. When her ideas were exposed and she was asked to explain her position, she was able to take a position which satisfied her as a writer.

Maria brought to the sessions at the writing center several facets of her identity as a writer in academia: her ability to respond to her reader’s expectations and to pretend to be writing to other readers when she knows there will be no other readers, and the objective and subjective aspects of her views on academic writing. However, one aspect of her writing identity for this paper which she had not considered before coming to the writing center was her position on the topic. Was she a writer, a voice, for the Democrats or for the Republicans? Or was she nobody’s voice but her own? She had to decide it before she started the paper.

The Case of Soyoung

Soyoung’s case exposed two important aspects: one related to writer’s identity, her fixation with correctness and structure; the other, important to the work of the Writing Center concerning peer-learning.

“What do I write in conclusion?” was Soyoung first question at the beginning of her sixth session after discussing the introduction, literature review, method, and results chapters in previous sessions. In fact, most of her sessions revolved around similar questions: what, how and where to write the message she wanted to put in her paper.

Like... how... I make it easier for others in terms of structure. I didn’t have any knowledge on structure how I have to consist of papers like this. At the first session Tutor M told me how to consist a paper like this, overall (interview).
Soyoung’s concern with structure and correctness which arose during her sessions can be related to her views of academic literacy. Her belief that there is a correct form of writing academic papers and the importance she gave to that fact changed her focus from the content of the writing to the format of the paper. Her views also influenced directly her choice of tutor and the kind of sessions they had. Tutor M was more directive in his sessions than tutor J and I were which pleased her more since she was more concerned with correctness and format. Nonetheless, when asked about the discussions of the headings for the method chapter, Soyoung revealed a certain discomfort:

(Hesitation for about 10 seconds) I think it is… he makes quite sense, like, but before getting his advices I thought the heading should be more in a simple way as I did before like “result” or “interpretation” or like “qualitative survey” like that way. But I think I don’t know, like, now I think it is maybe better to specify what this section is about or what this chapter is about. I don’t know… I don’t quite accept the fact that the heading should be specified that much. I just tried to follow his advice because he is more professional. I didn’t ask him about that. I did follow his advice (interview).

Her words show that she did not agree with the suggestions given to her by the tutor but still she made the changes to the text. The balance of knowledge power seems to have affected her decision to make the changes as she said “I tried to follow his advice because he is more professional”. Believing the tutor to have more knowledge about the subject than herself, she simply accepted his advice although not agreeing with it. Also, when asked in the interview whether in her final thesis in Japanese she would make the headings as specific as those in the English paper, she said she would not.

No. I will make it “more simple”. Because I think it is enough. The simple way is still enough. This is what I am going to submit for my future, so I thought it would be better for me to be “more clear” than to be vague. So I just try to be “more clear” and more detailed. But definitely I won’t do it in my other papers. (interview)

The negotiation of writing identity in Soyoung’s case revealed that the balance of power is delicate in tutorial sessions. Tutor M’s directiveness was sometimes intrusive for Soyoung as she revealed during the interview. Although she accepted all the changes and advice given by tutor M, Soyoung confessed not feeling comfortable in using some of them in her next papers. Soyoung admitted making the changes due to her belief that the tutor knew more than she did. Her case revealed that the traditional balance of knowledge apprentice-master in which knowledge is transmitted from the one who knows, the professor, to the one who does not know, the student, was kept intact. This imbalance which tutorial is meant to end through peer-learning and protection of writer’s
ownership was not always present during Kim’s sessions. When the knowledge balance of power between the two parts involved in the session is broken, the writer’s writing identity might be jeopardized, as he or she might give in their own ideas to follow those of the tutor even when in disagreement.

All in all, Soyoung’s case demonstrated the impact that the writer’s belief in academic literacy as having a unique format can have on their sessions. However, most importantly it showed how thin is the line between peer-learning and teaching in tutorial sessions, and how it can constrain the writer’s identity.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the above case studies on writing identity and tutorial are divided into three categories: a) pressure and demands on writing identity in academia, b) consequences of refusing or resigning to demands and pressures, and c) dealing with the consequences of refusing and resigning and developing writing identity in the Writing Center.

Pressure and demands on writing identity in academia

Three of the cases described in this paper revealed to some extent the weight of the demands of academic literacy on the writers. The weight was expressed some times through professors’ requirements; other times, through writers own pressure over themselves. Academic literacy was proposed by Lea & Street (1998) as way of dealing with issues of academic writing which go beyond the writing skills or simple acculturation of students to academic discourse. Lea & Street (1998) suggest that the university as an institution is a site of discourse and power relations which influence directly the literacy practices of academia.

In Kim and Rachel’s cases, academic literacy practices, discourse, and hierarchical power relations, were clear. In Kim’s case, for example, she struggled with the requirements of her professor as to the three direct quotes she should have in her writing. She showed in her text, in the session and in the interview that she was clearly uncomfortable with this demand. She could not understand the reason why the quotations were required. Moreover, even after the session in which she learned how to quote, she was still not able to understand the logic of quoting in academic writing.

Rachel also had impositions from her professor who told her that her English was “too high school level” for a final undergraduate thesis, and that she needed to improve. She wanted to make her text more academic by learning “more academic words”. Moreover, she was concerned with the length of her text and whether her chapters were long enough to be academic.

The demands of academic literacy on Kim and Rachel were mostly based on their readers’ (their professors) understanding of academic literacy practices. Their professors’ requirements
were based on how they, professors, see academic writing, how they understand it should be, and how they understand academic literacy practices; consequently, how they want their students to write. Students, on the other hand, are obliged to comply since their readers are the ones who will evaluate and grade their work. Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic (2000) have pointed out that literacy practices have social rules which determine who the writer is and who the reader is. The hierarchical aspect of academic literacy present in the cases of Kim and Rachel shows that academic literacy practices often put writers in a subaltern position to their readers in which they have no choice but to comply.

In the sessions, Writing Center tutorial worked as a bridge between the professors’ demands and the writers’ will. The tutorial was based on discussing with those writers the possibilities available for handling their professors’ demands and entering academic discourse. In Kim’s session, Kim and I tried to create a new understanding about quotations and their use on academia, in other words, how quotations should play a part in her text either as adding credibility to her argument, showing what other authors have to say about the topic or facilitating reader’s understanding. In Rachel’s, it was how her words carried meanings beyond “high school level” or “academic level” representations. Rachel was trying to use what she thought were academic words because of her professor’s request. Nevertheless, her use of those words was, in fact, Rachel’s process of creating her own concepts and interpretations for her study. Moreover, her struggle with the length of chapters in an academic paper was a matter of her understanding of academic literacy practices. However, she eventually realized that content should regulate length more than length regulate content.

Consequences of refusing or resigning to demands and pressures

The second point related to writing identity was students’ refusal of or resignation to academic literacy practices. Ivanic (1998) on her study with mature students in a British university described one of her participant’s conflict with her writing as “a tension between accommodating to and resisting the readers’ construction of her identity” (p.159). By readers, Ivanic means the professors for whom the student is writing her paper. The tension is whether the student will submit to the demands of her readers, the requirements of the writing, or resist it. In terms of Ivanic’s (1998) four aspects of writer identity, this conflict involves the discoursal self of the writer, in the sense of how the writer wants to sound, what image he/she wants readers to have of him/her. This aspect of writers’ identity needs to be constantly negotiated with the demands of their readers. Nonetheless, in academic literacy the unequal balance of power between writers and readers makes negotiation a difficult task. How writers respond to this negotiation is part of the process of identity formation which they go through in producing an academic text.

Kim, Soyoung and Maria’s cases are examples of how students deal with the impositions of academia when those demands try to shape their writing identity. Kim’s difficulty with the direct quotes requirement was solved by herself by simply inserting the three direct quotes in her text.
Even after we discussed the use of quotes and she learned how to use quotations, Kim confessed during the interview she still did not understand the reasons why she had to comment on the quotes. Nevertheless, Kim resorted to simply doing what was being asked of her in the writing and included comments to her quotes. Soyoung changed all the titles for her method chapter as suggested by the tutor. Although she did not agree with the suggestions, she wrote them all as the tutor recommended. She later revealed in the interview that she followed his suggestions because she believed that as a tutor he knew more about writing than she did. She also confessed that she was not willing to follow those suggestions for her next writings. Maria did not know whether she should write the information from her citations on the “footnotes” or “works cited section”. Even though we discussed during the sessions that there was no need to write the same information for both, Maria wrote both the “footnotes” and the “works cited” section.

In these three cases, resignation seems to have been the path chosen by the writers, at least for the writings discussed in this paper. In the cases of Kim and Maria perhaps because they were still novice writers having their first experiences writing in academia, they chose to comply even though new forms of dealing with the demands were discussed during the sessions. Soyoung, on the other hand, refused the tutor’s advice for her next papers, but accepted them for the paper she discussed in the session. While Kim and Maria’s choices were made on the basis of the hierarchical relation professor-student of academic literacy, Soyoung’s choice was made on the imbalanced relation of knowledge/power judged so by her. Nevertheless, for Soyoung’s final graduation dissertation in which she would write the same paper in a longer version but in Japanese, she chose not to follow the tutor’s suggestion. Soyoung’s choice to follow the suggestions for her Ph.D. writing sample might have been motivated by her wish to be seen as a mature writer to those who were going to evaluate her application papers in the U.S. Thus, she decided that following the advice of tutor M, already a Ph.D. graduate, would make her writing seem more professional.

The conflict of the three writers with their readers’ expectations is the struggle of constructing a discoursal self which they feel satisfied with. In academic literacy this process of constructing a discoursal self is marked by unevenness since writers have to respond to their readers’ expectations and the power imbalance instilled in academic literacy practices. Bawarshi & Pelkowski (1999) suggests that writing center work should focus in developing writers not only capable of writing academic papers but also capable of dealing with the discourse and power relations of academia.

Knowing not only what writing does, but also why and where it does it, allows these student writers to make more informed choices. Writing becomes no longer a guessing game… Rather, the student begins to recognize that the act of writing invests him or her into a community’s social pattern of action, and that the discourse he or she writes
is a rhetorical dramatization of that pattern. (p. 55)

The issue is how writing center work can encourage students to find their own writing in this hierarchical institution in which they have little power of choice. The place of the Writing Center with the institution of the universities has been one of little recognition for its work. North (1984) denounced the total misunderstanding of the writing center as a space for students who could not be dealt with in the classroom or a place for students to improve their grades. Boquet (2002), almost twenty years after North, was still asking other members of the academia to recognize the seriousness of the work done in writing centers. Moreover, Carter’s (2009) Writing Center paradox denounces Writing Center struggles to serve the institutional discourse and power structure of universities while, helping students in conflict with the same institutional demands. Although this discussion seems to be one of macro concerns, they affect directly the relationship between tutor and writer and, consequently, writers and their writing identities.

Maria’s case demonstrates how the Writing Center and the tutor respectively are considered within the hierarchical structure of academia and how Writing Center tutorial has to deal with that structure. In spite of telling her that she could write the name of the author in either a “footnotes” or a “cited works” section, Maria decided to use both. Maria’s attitude of resignation to her writing requirements could not be stopped, perhaps due to the tutor’s position as lower than that of the professor. Moreover, Maria’s case, and also Kim’s case, reveals how tutors have to deal with the institutional requirements, Carter’s (2009) suggested paradox, following institutional hierarchies and demands while at the same time responding to students’ refusal of those exigencies.

Lastly, Soyoung’s case showed a contradiction to what writing center theory has proposed until present. Soyoung’s choice to follow the advice given by tutor M was based on the same academic hierarchical system which the writing center is meant to question and to help student writers manage (North, 1984; Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999; Grimm, 2008; Carter, 2009). Not having any professor’s writing requirements, Soyoung, in order to comply with academic literacy practices, followed the suggestions of the next hierarchical position in academia according to her thinking: the tutor. She said in the interview, tutor M knew more than her, thus, it was better to follow his advice than her own ideas.

The problem is that accepting the advice based on a question of knowledge/power goes against the main principles of tutorial: peer-learning and promotion of writers’ authorship (Bruffee, 1984; Sadoshima, 2013). Peer-learning assumes there should not be any hierarchical relation between tutor and writer. Moreover, promoting writers’ authorship implies that writers are making the final decision on their text based on their own judgments. Soyoung’s choice to accept tutor M’s suggestion due to her belief that he was higher than her in the institutional structure reveals a side of the Writing Center which has not been thoroughly explored by research: Writing Centers representing the institutional power and promoting simple acculturation processes. Soyoung’s case shows that writing
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center tutorial might be a threat to writers’ writing identity when their relationship is considered in hierarchical terms.

In summary, the writers’ choices to resign or refuse the expectations of their readers and the demands of academic literacy were determined by their position in the hierarchy of academia. This hierarchical position was determined by knowledge which equals power in higher education. In this sense, professors are recognized as knowledgeable which in turn gives them the right to demand and to evaluate students’ work according to what they expect an academic paper to be. This hierarchical structure also revealed itself in the Writing Center with students’ following tutors’ suggestions in belief that tutors “know more”. In this situation, students negotiating their writing identity in academia are put always in cases of compliance or failure.

Dealing with the consequences of refusing or resigning and developing writing identity in the Writing Center

The four case studies presented in this paper have shown how tutorial assistance through the Writing Center can help student writers develop their writing identity. Mainly this was done through the Writing Center sessions function as a unique literacy event in writers’ academic literacy practices and by the fundamentals of the tutorial to promote writers’ ownership, peer learning and discussion.

Literacy events are the actual activities one engages in when literacy is used, whether it is writing or reading or simply speaking about texts (Barton, 1991; Ivanic; 1998; Street, 1995). These events are determined by and also determine the literacy practices of which they are part. Literacy events can also vary from one individual to another although there are some norms and regularities which all those involved in a certain literacy practice must obey. Academic literacy has its own literacy events with its rules and forms, Writing Center sessions can be considered one of these literacy events in which student writers can take part in when all the others have failed to produce the result writers wanted.

Three of the case studies show that when the demands of academic literacy became overwhelming, the usual literacy events of academia were not helpful enough for the writers to deal with those demands. In Maria’s first visit to the Writing Center, the requirements for her writing assignment were so many that she had difficulties starting it or even deciding what to write about in her paper. Rachel had been told by her professor that the language in her writing was not at the level it should be; nonetheless, she did not know what to do to make her writing reach the level her professor expected. Kim’s visit and Maria’s second visit to the Writing Center were motivated by their wish to know whether their writing was of the standard expected of academic writing. Soyoung had to write her Ph.D. writing sample in English. Her professor, however, had told her she could not help her since her own English was not at a level to do so. Even though Soyoung’s visit to the Writing Center four years before had not been considered satisfactory by
her, she decided to come again for, in her words, there was no other place to go.

The new literacy events offered at the Writing Center provided these writers with an opportunity which they could not have in any other place inside the university: an opportunity to talk about their texts and their ideas individually without being evaluated in any way. The difference between the literacy events which can happen at writing centers and the others which are part of academic literacy is that in the writing center those literacy events are meant to respond to the writer’s needs. Most academic literacy events are supposed to do the opposite; they are expected to answer to institutional necessities. For example, writing classes are meant to teach students how to write by showing them the skills of writing and exposing them all to the same content, thus, eliminating the context of literacy practices and individuality. Writing assignments are meant to evaluate the final product of student writers, without any consideration for the process of writing. The Writing Center tutorial because it is individualized, peer oriented, and writers can have tutorial sessions at any part of the process of writing, can offer a range of literacy events which are not normally available at university.

Moreover, as Goffman (1959) and Berger & Luckmann (1966) propose, social identities are formed through the process of interaction, in that case, writing identity development can be better supported if writers are assisted during the process of writing. In the terms proposed by Ivanic (1998), Writing Center tutorial offers the stage for writer-as-performer, characterized by the act of writing or the part which the writer takes as producer of texts, to act the writer-as-character, how a writer is seen by a reader, by receiving constant feedback on their performances. The constant non-evaluative feedback helps writer-as-performer rearrange his/her performances to better represent his/her writer-as-character in the writing. In the four case studies presented in this paper writers had to develop their writer-as-performer.

Lastly, Kim, Soyoung, Rachel and Maria’s writing identities were supported by the Writing Center fundamental principles of promoting ownership, peer-learning and discussion. In Kim’s case her ownership was promoted through silence. Murphy (1989) points out the importance of conversation in writing center sessions by making a comparison between Writing Center tutorial and psychoanalysis. She claims that conversation is fundamental to the development of the writer and the session. Nevertheless, Kim’s showed the importance of silence in tutorial sessions and how it helps writers. Kim tended to rely on tutors to give her what she thought was “the right answer”, so when the tutor did not answer right away Kim was led to try to find her own solution for her writing. Leading Kim to think about her text herself is meant to help her develop confidence on her writing, consequently, leading her to uncover her ideas and writing style without worrying so much about the evaluation from her readers.

Soyoung learned how to structure an academic paper through discussion and by the tutor’s promotion of her ownership over content. Since she evaluated academic writing in terms of correctness, especially in grammar and form, knowing how to organize information in long
academic papers gave her confidence that she can write a paper according to her own views of academic writing. Rachel’s discussion of concepts which she had created but for which she had not claimed authorship was an important aspect in her sessions for the development of her writing identity. At first she just wanted to use “academic words”, but through discussions in the sessions, she learned that “academic words” had no meaning on their own. She had created concepts from her understanding of those words and she needed to explain those to her readers. Lastly, Maria, similar to Rachel’s case, came to discuss ideas and to take a position in her writing. By promoting her ownership, her sessions helped her find what she wanted to express in her writing.

Participants’ development could also be understood through the concepts of writing identity elaborated by Ivanic (1998). Kim’s having to make decisions by herself would have developed her discoursal self, how she wants to be seen by her readers, and, especially, her self as author, meaning how much authority she claims over her ideas. Soyoung taking over the organization of her texts would also have developed her discoursal self. Rachel and Maria by assuming authorship and claiming ownership over their text’s ideas would have developed their selves as author. Nonetheless, I believe the writers developed their writing identity as a whole, through the interaction that only Writing Center tutorial sessions can offer. By focusing on the writers’ needs and trying to bridge the institutional demands, Writing Center tutorial was able to help those writers gain understanding of the subject positions they have available at academia, the possibilities for self-hood. Whether writers chose refusal of or resignation towards the exigencies of academic literacy, it is not to be judge. The main point of the tutorial was to suggest possibilities to writers. In the end, it is for each writer to make the choice, and the most relevant part of this choice is that it be an informed one.

Implications for Writing Center Theory and Practice

The case studies in this paper show the relevance of academic literacy theory in Writing Center tutorial and the need of an understanding of writers’ perspective on tutorial sessions. Not only have concepts such as literacy practices and literacy events proved to be relevant to writing center theory, but they also proved to be relevant to actual tutorial sessions. Tutorial manuals tend to focus on strategies for the sessions such as how to ask questions, design an outline, work with grammar and so on (Meyer & Smith, 1987; Gillespie & Lerner, 2000). The interviews conducted after the sessions with the writers showed that tutors need to know more than just session strategies. In the interviews the participants revealed how their understanding of academic literacy practices and their own personal literacy events influenced their writing and the sessions.

Tutors need to be aware of the theoretical background which is present at the work conducted at the Writing Center as well as the individual aspects of each writer. Asking writers about their process of writing, their motivations for the paper they are writing, what they want their paper to show readers and how they want it to be done might reveal aspects of their academic
literacy practices relevant for the sessions. Moreover, learning about those aspects may help tutors concentrate on the possibilities for self-hood inside the social context of academia which a writer might not be aware of or has not yet explored. It also can help tutors focus on writers’ development over the writing itself which is one of Writing Center tutorial’s basic principles (North, 1984; Grimm, 1999; Sadoshima, 2013).

Finally, these case studies have also shown that student writers may view tutorial assistance as another hierarchical practice of academic literacy. Writers may see tutors as more knowledgeable because of the position they hold as tutors. Tutors, consequently, may easily accept this hierarchy and start directly teaching writers, a contradiction between writing center theory of peer learning and practice. In summary, the balance between promoting ownership and directiveness needs to be considered carefully in the light of academic literacy practices and academic power structures.

References


