CONSTRUCTING CRITICAL DISCOURSE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENT WRITING

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Abstract

As language and communication educators we frequently hear students say how difficult it is to be 'critical' in their academic assignments because they lack the authority and expert status in their disciplinary fields, which, they believe, would equip them for this. This paper aims firstly, to present and analyse samples of students' critical writing in terms of writer identity and authorial presence; secondly, to explore how academic staff can encourage students to develop confidence in their abilities to critically evaluate and respond to the ideas they encounter in their areas of study. Interview data from students and academic staff, together with samples of student writing, will be discussed. Clark and Ivanic's theory of authorship and identity in texts (1997) provides the primary framework through which the data have been analysed. Data analysis highlights the importance of the relationship between academic task and students' 'autobiographical selves'. In addition, findings suggest that increased understanding of students' 'discoursal' and 'authorial' selves may lead university lecturers to question the conventions of disciplinary discourse and consider the value of allowing textual hybridity, both in terms of content and form, in student writing. These findings offer a number of insights into how lecturers can enable students to become confident and legitimate speakers and writers of disciplinary discourses, thus assisting students in their development of a critical approach to their studies.

Introduction

The teaching and learning of "critical" approaches to academic study have become cornerstones of university educational practice in recent times. University faculties seem to be keener than ever to acknowledge the importance of critical thinking in their curricula. For example, if the phrase "critical thinking" is entered as a search through the University of Melbourne website homepage (http://www.unimelb.edu.au), 30, 759 search results can be found. The term critical thinking is included as one of the generic skills to be taught at the University in faculties as varied as Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, Arts, Economics and Commerce, Education and Engineering.

As I have outlined elsewhere (see Thompson, 2002), there are very different opinions as to what the expression "critical thinking" might mean. McPeck (1981), for instance, focuses on the cognitive and reflective aspects of the term, while Ennis (1992) links the notion of "reflective (or critical) thinking" to the actions and behaviours of individuals, suggesting that these are based on decisions that reflect people's particular belief systems. Educationalists such as Benesch (2001) and Pennycook (2001) highlight the political nature of any kind of teaching and learning and urge both students and teachers alike to continually question the ways in which relations of power underpin all pedagogical undertakings. It is little wonder, then, that

given the diverse approaches to critical thinking discussed above, that students might feel somewhat daunted by the prospect of engaging critically with their fields of study.

The aim of this paper is firstly, to present and discuss samples of critical writing by students and to consider how their previous background knowledge and study experiences assisted them in their writing; secondly, to explore how discipline-specific staff can encourage students to develop confidence in their abilities to critically evaluate and respond to the ideas they encounter in their studies. It will be argued that writer identity and the development of a sense of authorial presence are central to students becoming critical writers and legitimate members of their disciplinary discourse communities. The importance of "hybrid" texts, in relation to students' construction of critical written discourse, will also be highlighted.

Much has been produced in the literature on academic writing, particularly by educators in the field of second language acquisition (see for example, Angelil-Carter, 1997; Starfield, 2002), on the difficulties students encounter in becoming critical and authoritative writers of academic discourse. Developing the confidence and level of writing proficiency required to effectively challenge the ideas of others, especially those contained in "authoritative texts" is a long and slow process. In addition, as Bourdieu points out (1991), it is important to acknowledge the broader context in which any form of communication occurs. Such contexts, he suggests, both reflect and produce particular sociohistorically constructed power formations. In order for students to become legitimate and authoritative, they need to gain entry into and acceptance by their academic communities; this they can achieve by acquiring what Bourdieu terms "elevated" style: "the means by which a discourse declares itself to be *authorized"* (p. 152) (emphasis in the original).

Dominant practices, however, can be contested and resisted in ways that can result in the creation of alternatives possibilities, or what Kramsch (1993) has called a "third space". With respect to student academic writing, the notion of a "third space" opens up the possibility of considering alternative kinds of student writing that have the potential to become legitimised by the academy. In other words, although the dominant genre of academic discourse may be typified by an "elevated" writing style, alternatives can and should be considered. It follows, therefore, as I have argued previously (Thompson, 2000), that the kinds of texts recommended for study in the academy also need to be inclusive of different writing styles.

The relationship between writing style and writer identity has been explored from a sociohistorical perspective by Clark and Ivanic (1997). These possibilities are based on Bartholomae's description of the tension that exists when a student has to:

> *appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse ... as though he [sic] were a member of the academy ... by mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of the discipline on the other. (1985, p. 134)*

Clark and Ivanic suggest that when we write we represent different aspects of ourselves through the kinds of linguistic and discursive choices we make. These

choices, they propose, represent the *discoursal self*. For example, whether we use passive and impersonal sentence structures or use the first person singular "I" form; how we might "ventriloquise" (Pennycook, 1996) our own "voice" through the ideas and words of others. Writing also incorporates elements of our personal histories (the *autobiographical self*) as well as a sense of authority and authorial presence (the *self as author*). These different "selves" or identities are not fixed and autonomous but fluid, interrelated and sometimes conflicting (1997, pp. 134 -136).

An example of the difficulties a convergence of such identities can produce is discussed by Phan, a postgraduate Vietnamese student and Viete, her supervisor (Phan and Viete, 2002). They describe their experiences of co-constructing academic discourse (as "elevated" style) and discuss their deliberations over whether Phan should incorporate her own experiences of academic writing (her *autobiographical self*) into the writing she was required to produce as part of her postgraduate assessment on the subject of academic literacy. They also consider whether Phan's desire to write in the first person singular (the way she chose to represent her *discoursal self*) would compromise her ability to assert her authority and authorial presence (her *self as author*) in her writing. They argue that Phan's descriptions of writing in English are very relevant to her assignment and that since these are her "own" experiences, the use of the first person singular would not only be an appropriate, but a necessary linguistic vehicle for the expression of these experiences. They advocate the notion of textual hybridity as "generative of new spaces" (2002, p. 6) and growth in terms of knowledge, as well as being educative for both students and academics.

Phan and Viete's position concurs with Gore's analysis of the nature of knowledge production. Gore proposes that one way of overcoming hierarchical differences in educational settings is by including students' personal experiences in the content of what is taught (1993, p. 79), thus ensuring that students are able to participate more fully in, as well as having the potential to transform, the processes of knowledge production.

As the literature shows, the construction of critical discourse for students in university settings raises a number of key issues. Firstly, we need to clarify what we mean by the term "critical". Secondly, it is important to consider the broader sociohistorical and political contexts in which academic discourse is produced. Thirdly, the relationship between writing and writer identity requires careful examination and finally, textual hybridity, both in terms of form and content, not only offers the possibility of resistance to dominant academic discursive norms, but also a pedagogical way forward for both students and educators.

Methodology

Data from three students and two staff members have been selected for this paper from a larger corpus of material collected between the years 2000 and 2002 at a major Australian university. Data comprise student assignments and transcriptions of student and staff semi-structured interviews of between one and one-and-a-half hour's duration. In the interests of confidentiality, the names of the research participants have been changed, except in the case of the Professor of History, Ron Ridley, who expressly asked for his name to be given. The assignments and interview comments

of three students: Alvin, Alan and Lily will be discussed together with comments based on interviews with two staff members: Ron and Sharon.

Research participant profiles

Alvin is a PhD student who has been in Australia for 12 months and is writing his doctoral dissertation on Gender Studies; he is aged in his 40s. Alvin's first language is Twi (a Ghanaian language). His language use at his parents' home has always been oral as neither parent reads nor writes. He has been learning English for 18 years and is a lecturer in History at a university in Ghana. Part of his training as an undergraduate included analysing different kinds of primary and secondary source materials in order to evaluate the kinds of evidence used by different authors in the construction of historical theories and hypotheses.

Alan is a first year undergraduate enrolled in a joint Arts/Science degree and is aged in his early twenties. He was born in Hong Kong and his first language is Cantonese. Alan's secondary education in Hong Kong focussed more on Mathematics than English, so he felt comparatively unfamiliar with essay writing expectations and conventions. The assignment on Ancient History, which Alan submitted for this research, was the first time he had written an essay of 2,500 words.

Lily was born in Czechoslovakia, is a third year undergraduate student studying for a Bachelor of Engineering degree and is aged in her twenties. Although her first language is English, Lily commented in her interview that she found an enormous difference between the kind of language she had been required to use at High School in Australia compared with university level study, claiming that she had to do "double the work" in order to understand the content of her coursework at university.

Ron is 60 years old, a Professor of History and is the staff member with whom I discussed Alan's essay. He has been lecturing at universities for 30 years. Ron has unbounded enthusiasm for his disciplinary field and is passionately interested in student learning. The second staff member selected for this study is Sharon. She is in her 30s and has been lecturing on business and management in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce, interspersed with positions in industrial relations and management, for eight years. Sharon has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and incorporates her interest in language and textuality into her teaching of business management. We talked about Lily's essay in our interview.

I will discuss the data in two sections: the first will focus on an assignment by Alvin, a postgraduate student; the second includes a discussion of Alan's and Lily's undergraduate assignments, followed by an analysis of interview data provided by students and staff.

Data analysis and discussion

Alvin

As mentioned above, Alvin's writing shows a high level of mastery over a number of complex linguistic and discursive features of writing that are required to produce argumentation and critique at university level. The assignment Alvin submitted for this research was written in response to the question "Discuss the origins of

Australia's indigenous peoples". This was part of a series of class exercises that I gave to students who attended a short course entitled "Critical thinking, reading and writing" (See Thompson, 2002 for more detail). Alvin completed the work at home so that he could spend more time on summarising, paraphrasing, synthesising and critiquing the four source texts provided. Two of the texts were written by indigenous Australians (one of which was an example of what might be termed a 'hybrid' text: a poetic version of an oral performance by Noonuccal and Noonuccal, 1988) and two texts by European historians.

Rather than writing two or three paragraphs as directed, Alvin's response was in the form of a highly sophisticated and cohesive short essay in which he effectively asserted his own perspective on the question as well as critiquing the shortcomings of the arguments presented in the source texts. He was able to draw on his previous historiographical and personal experiences, his *autobiographical, discoursal* and *authorial selves*, (Clark and Ivanic, 1997) to produce this piece of writing. Alvin writes with a sense of authority as a result of being competent in and familiar with the linguistic and discursive features of the discipline of History. He possesses the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1991, Starfield, 2002) to succeed as a writer from a non-English speaking background (NESB), not only as a producer of "elevated" style but as an author capable of constructing critical discourse. In his conclusion, Alvin summarised his interpretation of the source texts and voiced his answer to the task question by using the words and propositional content of Narogin (1990 *)*, one of the indigenous writers, as a ventriloquist uses a dummy (Pennycook, 1996). He asserted:

> *... there is no consensus with regard to the origin of Australia's indigenous population. Clearly there are two positions: that of the people being 'absolute indigenes' as can be discerned from Aborigine [sic] traditions of origin; and the 'immigrant theory' generally accepted by white or non-Aborigine [sic] scholars.* **A consideration of material from a wider range of sources, including the traditions and folklore of the Aboriginal communities, as Narogin seems to suggest** *[my emphasis] in his critique, is thus necessary to bridge the gap and give a clearer picture of the history of the origin of Australia's indigenous populations.*

Alvin's writing exemplifies a text in which multiple identities (e.g., *autobiographical, discoursal* and *authorial selves*) converge. He is able to engage with the source texts he used in a way that challenges the dominant non-indigenous historical perspectives about the origins of Australia's indigenous peoples by promoting the views presented in the indigenous writers' texts. He also proposes going beyond the parameters set by his source texts by suggesting the need for further research. Alvin is a highly sophisticated postgraduate writer who possesses rich stores of cultural capital: he incorporates his knowledge of societies with oral traditions, as well as his prior experiences of producing historical academic discourse, into his writing. He writes authoritatively and has an indisputable authorial presence. By chance, the topic he was required to write on enabled him to draw on both previous study and personal experiences that were directly relevant, which, as Gore has emphasised (1993), should be integral to all learning activities and the production of knowledge. This is clearly not always the case when students write, which can lead to difficulties, particularly at first year undergraduate level.

Alan and Lily

The assignment Alan submitted for this research required students to address the following topic and questions: "Discuss the position of the king in the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. How much power did he exercise? What were the major restraints upon him?" A salient feature of Alan's writing, not surprisingly, is his reliance on source texts. One page lists nine footnotes, with some lines of his essay containing as many as two references. In addition, there is an abundance of the use of direct quotation. This kind of dependency by NESB writers on source texts is explored by Campbell (1990), who concludes that such over-reliance is a developmental stage in NESB learner-writers. She also discusses the difficulties such writers have in making the shift from being source-dependent when framing the propositional content of their writing, to being able to draw on source texts in order to support particular claims the student-as-author wishes to make.

Referencing was a practice Alan had had no prior experience of at school since they were not required to provide source texts. Unlike Alvin, Alan's *biographical self* was of little assistance to him in constructing his text. In discussing with Alan how much "of his own ideas" he felt he had been able to include in the essay, he explained that sometimes he might have to copy the words and ideas of the authors he read because he did not always understand them very well. He explained:

> *Most of time you can't have very good idea. You just copy some idea or just agree with somebody's idea … he [the author of a source text] think about … the topic for 40 years … but you just think for six weeks.*

Alan's response is similar to that of the Cantonese student in a study by Currie (1998). This student sees copying from source texts as a strategy for coping with the demands of academic writing in a second language; copying therefore, claims Currie, becomes a way of learning (p.11).

In my interview with Ron, I raised the fact that sometimes students find it difficult to understand source texts and to develop opinions and arguments on topics about which they lack expert knowledge. He replied that one way he tried to develop confidence in students' abilities to interpret and evaluate ideas was to permit them, in their written assignments, to refer to their tutorial discussions. While this might result in some unorthodox referencing and documentation procedures, he felt very strongly that this was a way of "legitimising" (Bourdieu, 1991) students' thinking, as well as reinforcing the pedagogical value of the tutorial itself.

Ron was very keen to emphasise the importance of encouraging students to engage directly with primary texts in order to avoid becoming over-reliant on secondary sources for interpretation. He seemed very aware of the need to facilitate this process in his teaching in order to encourage students to become independent learners. He also mentioned the educational value of publishing Student Journals containing good examples of student writing, both as a means of institutional recognition of students as authors, and also for the benefit of potential student readers. Furthermore, Ron stressed that he was neither an ideological nor a stylistic pedant. When we talked about whether students should write using the first person singular, as opposed to using impersonal sentence structures, he acknowledged that the latter tended to be

more common in published work, but that student writing should not have to follow these conventions:

> *I don't see any point in artificially suppressing yourself, if you really are making a personal point. I don't see any problem with using 'I'. I mean, this is an essay, which means a personal account of something by you, you know. I think you should have the chance to say 'I' and especially if it is something of your own.*

Clearly, Ron seems to be assisting students to integrate their *autobiographical, discursive* and *authorial selves* in both in their writing and in the broader pedagogical context in which students and teachers are working. His attempt to create a pedagogical bridge between spoken and written academic discourses echoes the findings of a study by Ivanic and Camps (2001) into "voice" and the academic writing practices of second language learners in British universities. Their research highlights the need for educators of NESB students to understand how "voice can help learners maintain control over the personal and cultural identity they are projecting in their writing" (p. 3). These findings are also borne out particularly strongly by the experiences of Phan and Viete (2002).

Lily completed the following assignment in her third year of university: "Goals too clearly defined can become blinkers" (Mary Catherine Bateson, 1989)[1]. Carefully evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of clearly defined goals for different levels of management. Unlike Alan, Lily found that she was able to use some of her previous study experience (a part of her *autobiographical self*) to assist her with her assignment. In High School, she recalled that they were encouraged to make essay plans and this is what she tried to do for this assignment in order to help her to develop a clear line of argument. However, Lily saw the ways in which she represented her *discoursal* and *authorial selves* less clearly. In her interview, she acknowledged that she had difficulty distinguishing what might be considered her "own" words from those of her reading texts because "sometimes the words that come naturally to your mind are the ones that you've read".

Lily also described her confusion in working out exactly what an idea was, lamenting that "no-one really defines what's called an idea". She was unsure whether or not she was presenting her 'own' ideas in her writing, and then using the names of other authors to support these, or whether she was simply reporting on the ideas she had read. As Lily explained:

> *You've had to work out what you think is a logical argument and what can be substantiated ... that's come from you ... but then it's based on your reading, so maybe it is their [the authors of the source texts] argument even though you've thought about it ... it's hard to know.*

While poststructuralist thinkers such as Barthes may caution against searching for the origins of texts (1977, p. 160), such questions remain fundamental to the work of language and communication practitioners. Lily's confusion is heartfelt and clearly requires a pedagogical response that is constructive and practical if she is to be

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[1] The full reference was not given.

enabled to produce the kind of critical written discourse required by Western university communities today.

Sharon (Lily's lecturer), seemed both aware of such difficulties in her students and able to adopt a pragmatic approach to pedagogy. In her interview, she demonstrated a very clear understanding of the problems students experience in developing their own arguments and acknowledged the importance of establishing an authorial presence through the language students use in their assignments. She commented that being a successful academic writer is often thought to require an impersonal writing style, which in turn, could militate against students fully engaging with the ideas they are presenting, as well as increasing their difficulty in asserting their authorial presence. Sharon commented: "We're asking students to build their own argument, but in a way that their writing is giving the impression of objectiveness and neutrality and impartiality, like there is no author. And I think that that confuses them".

She elaborated, later in the interview, that she was prepared for students to use the first person singular form in their writing, so that they could feel more engaged with the writing they were producing. Sharon also believes that there should be more attempts by universities to create continuity between the expectations placed on students coming from school and those they encounter at university. One way she suggested that this could be achieved is by studying newspaper articles, not only conventional academic texts. She believes that such writing could assist students in being able to more readily identify particular arguments and viewpoints than is the case with more traditional academic texts. This, in turn, she claimed, could lead to students writing "opinion pieces" first before launching forth into more research-based academic essays, especially at first year undergraduate level.

Conclusion
In this paper I have discussed a number of factors involved in the construction of critical discourse in university student writing. I have suggested that it is useful to conceive of these factors as interrelated and dynamic in nature as opposed to discrete and fixed. Firstly, it is important as educators that we realise that learner-writers have multiple and sociohistorically constructed identities (their *autobiographical selves*) which influence the formation of the linguistic and propositional content of their texts. We need to be able to tap into these resources, which may be culturally very different from our own, in ways that assist our students to be engaged with, rather than alienated from, the assignments we set. Secondly, we need a deeper understanding of how and why students may choose to ventriloquise their "own" thoughts, or may sometimes simply copy the words and ideas of others (students' *discoursal selves*). Thirdly, students' intertextual resources need to be legitimised so that they can learn to use source texts to support (*self as author*) rather than govern the content of their writing. Fourthly, the transitional and developmental nature of learning should not be forgotten.

Finally, it would seem that, according to the academic staff I interviewed for this study, it is possible to engage students from very different sociohistorical and educational backgrounds in the construction of critical academic discourse. For instance, students can be encouraged to refer to their 'own' oral texts (e.g.tutorial discussions) in their written assignments; they can be permitted to use the first person singular in their writing; student writing can be legitimised by being published in

departmental journals. While such practices might result in the production of textual hybridities (Kramsch's "third space"), they deserve consideration as part of an ever-evolving critical pedagogy of possibility for writing which aims to foster dialogic and alternative forms of discourse construction between teachers and their students.

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