

Writing by Numbers? Exploring the role of essay writing and assessment in the construction of students' identities

Paper Outline

Success in higher education is inextricably entwined with learning and knowledge construction demonstrated in academic writing (Sommerville and Crème, 2005) as summative assessments usually contain a written element (Lea, 1999). Against the backdrop of the expansion of higher education, internationalisation and diversification of the student population (Ashwin, 2006) increasing demands are being placed on lecturers and specialists such as writing tutors to ensure students meet the standards of writing demanded in Higher Education (HE). This is exacerbated by tensions between writing being considered as a 'high stakes' activity (Lillis and Scott, 2007: 9) and the notion that students cannot write at a university standard as they are insufficiently prepared for such demands in their previous education (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Therefore, as universities are required to respond in new ways to meet the needs of students (BIS, 2011) it is essential to ask questions about how we can ensure that all students can meet the demands of Higher Education. Developing our understandings of student writing and assessment in relation to this changing context is essential to ensuring equality and appreciating diversity for all students. This paper is based upon the findings of case study research which explores undergraduate students' narratives of essay writing and assessment. In particular the focus is on the interplay between students' experiences of essay writing, assessment and tutor feedback and the construction of their evolving learner identities. The paper will explore notions of 'authenticity', 'agency' and 'authorising voice' to provide insight into how students can share the same ambition of achieving good marks whilst also adopting contesting ideas and approaches towards writing and assessment. In addition, it will also discuss the ways in which this can influence the development of students' autonomous academic participation.

Identity is central to students' learning, as writing at university requires the entering of a new practice, one that is unfamiliar with different rules and requirements. Students can utilise their previous knowledge about writing as they will be doing many of the same tasks such as writing essays and reports, taking notes and listening to receive knowledge about a subject. However, they will also have to change and develop these whilst also learning new ones to succeed at university. Previous research suggests this can be problematic as a result of difficulties associated with power imbalances between tutors and their students (Boud, 1995); students' and tutors' differing expectations of the requirements of essay writing (Lea and Street, 1998) and implicit assessment criteria which means some students struggle to know what is required (Harrington, Elander, Norton, Reddy & Pitt, 2006). In addition to identifying with a new practice, identity is also essential to students' beliefs about themselves as learners (Ivanic, 2004; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009)

To further understand the complexities of students' identities in relation to essay writing and assessment practices within the changing context of higher education this study explores the public group and individual narratives of a sample of thirty-one undergraduate students from two universities. The universities varied in terms of their

research-led and teaching focus and student demographic intakes. The students were in their first, second and third year and were studying subjects where the majority of the assessment was essay based. The students were self-selecting and were invited to take part in the study during the Autumn term; focus groups and individual interviews were carried out during the autumn and the following spring.

The paper will utilise Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain's (1998) theory of identity and agency as a theoretical framework to explore the narratives. As Holland et al. (1998: 3) argue, narratives are central to the shaping of identities as 'people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and they try to act as though they are who they say they are'. Conceptualising students' writing as figured worlds, this paper draws on tools of objectification, rupturing, resistance and agency and provides an insight into how students' relationships with writing and their related identities develop and evolve over time. A particular focus is placed on two identity positions which were described by one student as 'studier' and 'socialiser'. These contrasting identities were located at opposite ends of a sliding continuum and students resourced and rejected these shifting positions and others as they drew on cultural models (Gee, 1999) of university and student life. The 'studiers' frequently engaged with cultural models about university as 'a place to study' whereas the 'socialisers' drew on ideas about it being 'a place to socialise'. These two identity positions illustrate the shaping of students' understandings of themselves and what was important to them in the context of essay writing and assessment. Analysis of the focus group and semi-structured interview data illuminate how recurring themes relate to students' negotiations of independence and autonomy and effort and recognition. Many of the students entered university with expectations of independence yet found it difficult to develop autonomous academic participation within the context of assessment practices as a result of the perceived dependence on their tutors' authorisation through the marking process.

The paper will explore the ways in which students' ideas and expectations of university study, aspects of assessment and tutor feedback can shape their identities and related approaches to essay writing. It will also illuminate the fluidity of these and show how some of the students exercised a sense of agency in relation to negotiating and resisting certain identity positions in relation to issues of authenticity and authoring voice. It is hoped that this research will further illuminate the complexities of students' relationships with writing and generate new understandings that will be useful in future discussions regarding academic writing and assessment processes to ensure a sense of shared rather than contested ambition between students and tutors within pedagogical practices.

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