

## **Social Writing Profiles (0050)**

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The use of the first person as an enunciative strategy ... can constitute a form of political engagement.... The social is not collapsed into the self but rather the self is a social and historic event.... Critical reflection might then become speaking with experience and speaking with the self in ways that point to our social location, positioning and classed cultural resources we have to speak the self (Swan 2008, 396).

Speaking the self can involve constructing a position. Talking about writing in the first person can identify academics' social location, while constructing and/or contesting their positioning and cultural resources. Analysing first-person accounts of writing is, therefore, a way to understand this component of academic work.

To extend my work on social writing (Murray 2015) I created 'profiles' of academic writers, in which I distilled my observations over ten years to show patterns in academics' first-person talk about their writing. This is not to create 'types', but to define 'positioning work' that academics do to embed writing in academic work.

The following profiles draw on my observations, interviews and conversations with academics, researchers and professionals doing social writing at Structured Writing Retreats (Murray and Newton 2008) between 2005 and 2015. For the people on whom these profiles draw, social writing involved short periods of spontaneous self-defining talk and extended periods of writing with others present. I converted their talk into profiles to illustrate self-defining positions they constructed during social writing. This is not, therefore, strictly speaking, 'speaking with the self', but a distillation of many self-speaking events.

These three profiles do not, by any means, represent the totality of the academic writing experience; I selected three for this paper that represented stages in academic careers. I constructed these profiles with two aims: firstly, to capture individual accounts of writing experiences, and, secondly, to illustrate what I see as emerging writing selves. First-hand accounts of writing practices – that include not

only goals and outputs but also emotions and contests – are not routine in academic life, but they can be revealing, instructive and useful.

### **Profile 1: Head of Department/Professor**

I hadn't written anything for so long, I wasn't sure I'd be able to write again. I've got several things on the go. They're all late. I've a chapter promised to a colleague about a year ago. When you're Head of Department writing is impossible. I haven't been able to get to retreats till now, but I know the others still find them productive. I'm writing that chapter here, and I'll try and get to another retreat this year. It's the only way I'll get all these things written. I'm relieved to find that I am still able to write.

### **Profile 2: Researcher**

We went to our first structured writing retreats when we were doing our PhDs. We had never been so productive. We thought, we must keep this going. So we set up the writing groups that now meet regularly on campus. We took the role of writing group leaders: booking rooms, sending emails, setting up the Facebook page and mailing list, making sure that everyone stuck to the timetable of writing slots. Not everyone is comfortable telling people when to stop talking and start writing, which someone in a writing group must do, but we're OK with that.

### **Profile 3: Academic**

I attend retreats as often as I can – at least one a month. If there isn't one on, I set up a mini-retreat with others in work, a café or at home. This means that I can be incredibly productive while not worrying about writing the rest of the time. If I know a retreat is coming up next week, I don't worry about not writing this week. When I know the retreat dates, I decide what to write then and know what to read in order to be ready to write. I can write, and revise and resubmit, regularly.

While using subjective accounts of writing experiences in this way may seem confessional (Swan 2008), these profiles show that social writing provided opportunities to articulate social positions, construct positions for writing selves and assemble cultural resources for writing. In this sense and to this extent, self-writing can facilitate performance of this key academic role.

In addition, I use these profiles to reiterate both an established point – that academic writing practices should not only be constituted in terms of skills or time – and a contested point – that first-hand accounts of writing selves are important ‘events’. There is a risk that first-hand accounts are seen as time wasting, involving aimless rambling, excuses and digressions – and my construction of profiles is, partly, intended to minimise this risk – but there may also be risks in minimising self-writing.

These profiles show academics positioning writing in academic work in a context of contested-ness: if/where writing is contested in academic work, understanding of writing – by individuals and institutions – includes these negotiations with self and others. These profiles complement previous work by adding individual voices to accounts of social writing theory and practice (Murray 2015).

In the broader context, and over the next five years in the UK and in other higher education cultures, it may also be important to foreground individual voices – professors, researchers and academics – in strategic discussions of research assessment, in order to attend to ‘the significance of representation within structures of domination’ (hooks [sic] 1999: 139).

## References

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