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## TEACHING AND LEARNING ACADEMIC WRITING: NARRATIVES OF FUTURE DESTINATION

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### Abstract

*This study contributes to an ongoing project on academic writing portfolios and relates their contents and forms to student destinations and imagined communities. Tertiary writing programs such as English for Special Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) need more specificity and focus in their teaching and assessment of tasks for academic purposes in order to create disciplinary identities. Drawing on a series of 41 elicited student narratives from two cohorts over two semesters, this study considers what this 'focus' might comprise and describes how a portfolio approach to academic writing prepares students for generic writing skills and strategies while engaging with the types of texts students will read and create in future destinations. The study uses student voices to propel a narrative enquiry into what motivates them to participate in the unit 'Academic Writing' and what they realise is useful for their future disciplinary identities.*

### Background and purpose

This paper reports on a qualitative research project relating the content and form of the writing portfolios of students enrolled in the first-year tertiary unit 'Academic Writing' (AW) to three dimensions. The first of these is a focus on student 'destinations', which we relate to the concepts of 'disciplinary communities' and 'imagined communities'. Secondly, we respond to the identification in recent scholarship of the need for more specificity in creating 'disciplinary identities' (Coffin, et al., 2005) for 'professional membership' (Flowerdew, 1993). Thirdly, and more broadly, we produce findings stressing the role of the 'portfolio approach' in engaging students with discourses needed for future destinations. In short, this paper comprises an investigation into how AW programs in English as an Additional Language (EAL) engage students to invest in assessed portfolios where they analyse and create text types characteristic of their destinations.

We begin by analyzing student needs. Clearly, there is the instrumental need to achieve the outcomes of course; but there is a more integrative need for students to write for their future disciplinary communities, communities of their imaginings. Gardner (1985, p. 10) defined such motivation as "the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity." Acknowledging Gardner's (1985) view of motivation as a concept involving goal, effortful behaviour, desire to attain the goal and positive affect, we use the term 'investment' referencing the poststructuralist non-fixedness of identity and desire (Norton, 2000) to capture the centrality of students' desires to identify with academic and professional destinations as more representative of the

sociocultural reality of students in AW in 2014. AW utilises an investment-focused pedagogy that acknowledges students “for the complexity underlying their motivations, desires, and hopes for the future” (Pittaway, 2004, p. 216). At the same time it resituates the intercultural academic literacies AW students studying in a New Zealand context require for a globalised world, noting that such conceptions of literacy incorporates “competencies, attitudes and identities in addition to understandings” and crosses ‘cultural boundaries’ (Heywood, 2002, p. 10).

Since a great deal of recent research in both social identity theory (Norton, 2000) and future selves theory (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) has argued that student identities are shaped by a range of motivational factors including desired destinations, we view the concepts of the *discourse community* and more latterly *disciplinary communities* as an inseparable part of the social constructivist idea of students as apprentices to a specified or privileged discourse (Woodward-Kron, 2004) desiring to belong to future communities. Borg (2003) saw as the major characteristic of discourse communities the sharing of goals and use of written communication to engage in repertoire-sharing. Swales (1988, 1990) had viewed them in terms of employing genres, each with their own fields of language and each characteristic of the particular community. To apply this notion pedagogically is to understand that the texts characteristic of discourse communities comprise ‘teachable’ texts and practices (skills, strategies, conventions, ways of structuring, cultural understandings, ways of being). With our better understanding of the role of desired destination as a key focus of investment in AW, discourse communities are, perhaps, more appropriately called ‘disciplinary communities’ (Coffin, et al., 2005).

This concept aligns with Anderson’s (1983) notion of ‘imagined communities’ since they are, as Kanno and Norton (2003) point out, desired, not current, discourse communities. In summarising literature on imagined communities, Norton and Gao (2008) make the case that “the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner” (p. 114). Students imagine themselves as members of future academic, local, national or professional communities using the language of these communities in specific ways characteristic of them (Kanno & Norton, 2003). In terms of engaging students of AW in producing texts encountered in their future destinations, instructors need to enquire into these communities and collect samples of their repertoire. Teaching writing moves from being an individual activity to a social one: “learning to write is part of becoming socialised to the academic community – finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it” (Silva, 1990, p. 17). Two insights from Caroline Coffin and her collaborators (2005) are helpful at this point:

As they progress through the university, students are often expected to produce texts that increasingly approximate the norms and conventions of their chosen disciplines, with this expectation peaking at the level of postgraduate study (p.2).

Students have greater control over their writing if they are helped by lecturers to develop an explicit awareness of how different disciplines employ different text types and how these text types construct and represent knowledge (both through their text structure and through their use of register) (p. 46).

These ideas led us to ask (i) how considering imagined discourse communities impacts the teaching and learning of AW and (ii) how such a pedagogy enhances students’ investment by enabling their creating and recreating of discourses of these future destinations (Woodward-Kron, 2004)? We partially answered the first part of this enquiry in another article (Andrew & Romova, 2012), and in the present study we continue with the latter part of the question. This investigation also allows us to develop our earlier demonstration that the benefits of a portfolio-based pedagogy and mode of assessment provide spaces to negotiate cross-cultural and individual voices within the conventions of the discourse (Romova & Andrew, 2011). We also continue the argument that portfolios provide multiple opportunities for rehearsing a variety of text types, creating an “album of literacy performances” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 322). We argue that in an AW program such literacy performances need ideally to suit student future destinations, eclectic though they may be.

### Context, participants and pedagogy

The data was collected in the context of the unit Academic Writing, a year-one, 36-hour, 12-week EAL program aimed at both EAL majors and students from the wider university community who had achieved IELTS 6.0. Within the course, EAL learners meet the academic demands of tertiary study in their chosen fields. Specifically, the 41 students in the study aimed to develop abilities to write discourses aligned with various present and future majors: Nursing, Business Studies, ECE, Computer Science, Communication, Medicine, Statistics and Social Practice.

Participants, all aged between 18 and 39, hailed from China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Russia, Vietnam, Somalia, Ethiopia, Israel, Tonga, Nepal, and Malaysia. The gender ratio (14M-27F) is typical of EAL programs in the institution. National identity is not a variable of significance in the current study although clearly future studies will explore intercultural dimensions.

Within AW students produced portfolios comprising seven text types from critiques to expository and argumentative essays. The pedagogy working towards this final output involved learners in weekly multi-draft formative written tasks and used peer and tutor micro- and macro-level feedback techniques (Hamp-Lyons, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Leki, 2006; Rollinson, 2005). Class tasks focused on instruction of text features so students “can better understand how to make a piece of writing more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose” (Reppen, 2002, p. 322). While similar in genre, the text types students produced were tailored to suit the communicative purposes of their imagined and desired communities (Borg, 2003; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000) via the collection of a library of disciplinary-specific texts (Flowerdew,

1993; Hinkel, 2002). Hence, while producing critiques, some students might critique nursing texts, and others those from the discipline of Statistics. Swales (1988) offers a rationale for such pedagogy: he views communities as systems where the multiple beliefs and practices of text users overlap and intersect. Further, Hyland (2002) argues: "the teaching of key genres is seen as a means of helping learners gain access to ways of communicating that have accrued cultural capital in particular communities" (p. 125).

Effectively, as much as practicable, the program catered to students' present career choices. Pedagogical interventions include teacher monitoring and conferencing, peer review and collaborative group work. To be specific, the pedagogy involves focusing on unpacking the generic features of authentic texts belonging to students' desired disciplinary and professional futures (Flowerdew, 2000; Reppen, 2002) in terms of the *action* they aim to achieve.

A range of principles informing the teaching and learning incorporated in portfolio assessment will enable readers to better understand the situated nature of the pedagogical approach used in AW. From Granville and Dison (2005), we understand that the processes of multi-drafting that imparts critical and reflective elements to students' work are crucial to creating increased discourse awareness within such an approach. Portfolios are sites for practicing membership of imagined communities by highlighting applications of the literacy practices of those communities (Johns, 1997, 2002; Hyland, 2000). Importantly, students' reflections on each draft feed back into the teaching and point to a formative and developmental function (Lam & Lee, 2009). A further feature of the approach is multi-drafting, which itself comprises the sequence: collection, reflection, selection, and ongoing peer and teacher feedback (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2003). Johns (1995) maintained academic literacies develop through the multiple (re)production of target texts. We have itemised a range of these literacies from appreciations of paraphrasing, brainstorming and self-editing to the role of listenership during teacher monitoring and conferencing in another article (Romova & Andrew, 2011). In this paper, we wish to emphasise the importance of developing individual learners' understandings of a range of generic text types from future 'imagined' discourse communities (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000) and to expand on the argument that writing is social practice as well as process (Coffin, et al., 2005). To do so is to pay tribute to Carolyn Miller's (1984) 'rhetorical' view in relation to L1 writers writing in disciplines: genres incorporate social actions and reflect understandings about participation in communities with "cultural rationality" (p. 165).

### Methodology

We reconstructed narratives of the 41 participants' learning trajectories. These narratives used a range of qualitative data. Focus groups were held in week 2 and three weeks after the completion of the 12-week course, with guided questions. Transcriptions of the focus group sessions were triangulated with students' reflections on their learning tasks. The researchers' goal is to construct narratives of destination as

part of an extended study, but for the current report we present analysis of narrative while our narrative enquiry percolates. The findings we report here are thematic (Sandelowski, 1995) to embody the authentic, reflective, evaluative insights of real learner experience and bring out "indigenous themes" (Patton, 1990) and avoid descriptive statistics. Effectively we present an analysis of student narratives of destination. Ethically, all students formally agreed to participate and for their words to be used. All names are pseudonyms.

The interviews in week two and what is effectively week 15 had specific foci. In week two students responded to cues about reasons for enrolling; identifiable challenges of writing academic texts; their future imagined communities; the writing skills they perceived as needed for future studies; and ways they imagined they would use writing in the future. In week 15, responses focused on the impacts of regular writing/rewriting, feedback and follow-up in the target genres; any learning about structure and discourse; the usefulness of academic styles of writing to their future needs; and, with an eye on critical pedagogies, whether the style of writing taught on the course is culturally different from students' expectations. Students also spoke of emerging and developing literacies (brainstorming, self-editing, summarising and paraphrasing) and their connections with their future plans.

### Findings

We organised the findings into three broad themes:

1. *Target genres and future destinations*: Writing academic texts in target genres enables investment in AW due to the texts' connections with future discourse communities and destinations;
2. *Generic features of academic texts and imagined communities*: Micro- and macro-level learning from the generic text types rehearses practices found in students' imagined communities;
3. *The universality of planning and organising as literacy practices*: AW promotes literacy practices that are recognised as valuable for learners' long-term futures.

### Target genres and future destinations

Student narratives demonstrate a future-focused orientation that is vocational ('to practice medicine'), academic ('to write reports for future studies') and sociocultural ('to interact with future co-workers'). The chance to write authentic text types appears to enhance learner investment.

To paraphrase Mabel (a future Business major), the literacy practices of AW (she calls them "skills" and "conventions") are applicable to a business context (her imagined community). She adds her creation of a business-style paragraph made her feel she had worked "usefully". Irma (Future destination: ECE) stated: "I think this type of writing [can help] my future study." Asked to be more specific (and hence of relevance to theme 2 above), she states she values "restructuring the writing to suit 'academic

writing” and “finding the right words for the topic.” Sue (also ECE) was more specific: “understanding the logic of the expected order – topic sentence and conclusion” are as useful for ECE as for any discipline. Farah (Business) appreciated the work at a metacognitive level: “developing the thinking skills needed to fit in with learning expectations of the genre.” Emma (Computer Sciences) contributed the insight that “thinking in a logical and chronological order while focusing on sentence structure too” are strategies she will require “next year.” It is, of course, impossible to cover all desired genres, and this too is reflected in the narratives with Miwa (ECE) lamenting: “for the future I want to learn not only this argumentative essay but also other different genres of writing.” William (Nursing) articulated the connection most broadly: “What I am learning to do here is related to what I want to do. I am getting ready for further study – looking into the future.”

#### *Generic features of academic texts and imagined communities*

The narratives we are unfurling tell the tale that learning from text types helps to engage learners. Yuichi (bound for the Royal New Zealand Police College) is forced to think about learning writing in a way that challenges his lexically-focused comfort zone. Academic writing genre, he says, “brings its own stress, so you can’t merely focus on vocabulary...I need more logic, as in academic reports.” This “logic” he needs is clearly related to the internal coherence of academic discourse. Kirma (ECE) specifically thought at the discourse level and nominated ‘textual organization’ as a key learning gain: “the process – pre-writing, outlining and so on – controls my ideas when I write my essay for Academic Writing and for Education”. She calls it “a skill [she] will reapply in her later career.” Helen (ECE) would agree, seeing ‘outlining’ as a crucial macro-level skill: “A good outline is guarantee of a good draft. I have learnt the writing process in AW and I will apply it in my studies in Education.” Interestingly, she explicitly looks to her future community.

For Ella (Nursing), brainstorming came closest to giving her an eureka moment about the generic features of academic texts: “Brainstorming...is the cornerstone that makes your whole essay link well. AW for IELTS and TOEFL is different from AW for nursing. The idea of logical development of text is different”. Michael (Computing) sums up the generic nature of AW as taught in this program: “In every subject, there is AW though they differ from one another.” Jad (Architecture) appreciates the formula due to his personal interest rather than a vocational one: “Writing is my interest as I was a journalist in the university newspaper in China. So I’d like to write articles. My major’s architecture. When we do models, we don’t need AW, but I like it – that’s my interest.”

Farat (Business) observed starting with the thesis and then writing topic-based sentences helps those wanting to write academically in subjects other than merely English. Emma (Computer Science) contributed that understanding the “conventions of structure [that] affect the coherence of an essay and give it its overall quality” is a crucial outcome for her as a student bound for a discipline beyond EAL. Yohana

(Health Science) related AW to a personal imagined community:

My auntie died from cancer – because there was not enough medical care. So I am planning to be a surgeon – not only to operate on people, but also to find the reason of cancer and to find treatment for it. AW will help me write reports of my discoveries + research skills.

Similarly, Dan sees big ambitions beyond the AW horizon:

AW reflects the way we think, so it helps the person to develop as a critical thinker, so it’s a good tool to have in the future...You have to develop your thought, you have to deliver your thinking, to organise, to edit. So it helps you to reflect on yourself...In writing you have more time to develop what you want to say, to research and to have more thinking about your ideas than in speaking on the spot...It comes back to the role of education in the world. It is to increase awareness of people, to kill diseases and to help improve our lives.

Investment in imagined communities is tied to perceived learning gains in AW. Tala (Social Practice) reflected: “I need to improve my AW as at tertiary level you are going to do a lot of writing, and my writing is not up to standard.”

Occasionally those already employed enrol in AW, as in the case of Nicky who has a job in insurance: “I have come here to study only English so that I could come up in my job. My position is supervisor and I need to write to insurance companies. Underwriter.” Nicky sees a connection between the work of an AV program and potential for promotion. Similarly, Wanli (career in nursing) narrates her own reasons for investing in AW:

If you want to write a good assignment, you need to do AW. For your AW, speaking well is not enough. I have worked in a private hospital for several years. Sometimes, my letter to the pharmacy or the doctor came back as they needed to confirm what exactly I needed. So AW is vital for us, especially for this kind of professional work. I am a registered nurse and got my registration six years ago, but I have complaints from families...That’s why I’ve come to this course. It is not only the speaking, but the AW that is going to help me as we must connect with doctors, or other nurses, or with the community, or a specialist from somewhere else and hear from them.

On the other hand, some students report that their future discipline will not specifically require AW:

I plan to go to Uni next year, and I’ve never been trained in writing academic things. My Chinese friend told me Chinese students have a lot of difficulty at Uni in writing academic things. I chose statistics because I need a good job in the future. Secondly, there are fewer assignments in statistics (Esson, Statistics).

Actually, I don’t like AW – it’s too hard for me, but I want to go onto further study. I am thinking of becoming an interpreter for courts and hospitals. And

good writing influences speaking. They go together: writing and speaking (Kenny, Interpreting/Translation).

Kenny's oral rather than written orientation and Esson's unfamiliarity with 'writing academic things' appear to reduce their investment in AW; nonetheless their comments concede to the need and usefulness of the subject.

### *The universality of planning and organising as literacy practices*

The third group of key indigenous themes relates to specific literacies – viewed as skills, strategies, techniques and procedural 'how to's – identified in focus group interviews and reflective writings. Dan (Psychology) observes: "The structuring of an essay and organising it in an academic way. It's like a new language I need to learn to speak to meet the expectations." He says he sees AW as a foundation for academic qualifications. Emily (Business) described her perceived learning capital:

How to improve in the future: copy some good phrases while reading, rehearse and practice them...There is not a shortcut to improve my English in a sudden way, but at least I have got some strategies to make it look better.

Vinna (Nursing) emphasised her learning of the value of prewriting and outlining: These "control my ideas when I write my essay – very central". Sadya had spoken to a family member who had graduated in Nursing and was now at Middlemore Hospital. She regularly complained of her needs to summarise patients' details, and specifically of her lack of vocabulary. This story shows Sadya's investment in utilising AW as a site for consciously gaining enough vocabulary to write essays. Yoh (Business) says of writing essays in his discipline in the future: "At Uni, it'll be busy and I'll have to do a lot of research and reference the sources...(these) can be useful in other types of writing: report writing and case study." He has heard reports that 'Kiwi' students in the disciplines are often impatient with EAL students: "At Uni, we are studying with native speakers, and they expect us to be as confident/competent as native speakers." A desire to be seen as competent, a desire to keep face if you like, is central to Yoh's investment in learning AW. He says later, understanding a sociocultural motivation, "When we write, it helps us to develop relationships with people". Thorne, with the same future in mind, speaks of summarising and paraphrasing. In business studies, "I have to read and summarise a lot of documents. It may help me collect the main idea and understand the whole thing". Emma (Computer Science) reported learning gains in planning and organising: "The process of AW (pre-writing and outlining) helped me to organise ideas simply and start to write easily."

Jenny (Business), like Helen (cited above) nominated 'outlining': "Above all, outlining is the best thing for me...and I feel that if I prepare the outline well and in detail, then the time of writing an essay gets shorter." Like the other voices reported in this section, Jenny claims applying literacy practices better equip her.

### **Discussion**

Examining the findings, we find that the acts of learning to write point to the process of becoming socialised to future, imagined communities. We observe learners "in continual discussion, analysis and evaluation of their processes and progress as writers" (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2003, p. 15). We find evidence of both enhanced reflective capacity (Kathalia & Heah, 2008) and the evolving literacy practices that are embedded in academic writing (Adamson, 1992; Johns, 1995). Specifically, students attend to such literacy practices as outlining and paraphrasing (Keck, 2006), self-editing (Ferris, 2005) and brainstorming (Rao, 2007). Interestingly, we find a particular awareness of macro-level, discourse-level thinking (Hyland, 2003, 2005). The evidence supports Silva's observation that portfolios "[enable] learners to find out what is expected (in their future imagined communities) and then try to approximate it" (Silva, 1990, p. 17).

In the students' reported emerging understandings, we see that students' needs are connected to being and becoming members of future discourse and disciplinary communities. Students' aspirations accord with understandings of imagined communities as places of the heart and mind that reference identity (Norton & Gao, 2008). As this paper works towards concluding, it is clear that an AW program needs to consider learners' investments, that is, their next destination. To do so is to understand from the outset of the course not just their desired identities and future selves (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) but also their spatial correlative: their destinations. Only from this point can we sculpture a curriculum that strives to allow spaces for individual identity even as it follows a curriculum inscribed within top-down institutional and governmental expectations.

### **Conclusion**

First-year degree level adult learners report English learning benefits from creating text types characteristic of their imagined communities and desired destinations. Specifically, they speak of gaining increased understanding of the discursive and generic features of academic texts necessary for participating in future discourse communities, whatever their future (or current) subject or vocation may be.

We might ask as a result of this discussion if EAP is indeed the way of the future. As Coffin and her co-authors wrote:

As the provision of writing instruction has increased, higher-level courses in academic writing have been developed. In some cases these courses link disciplinary lecturers with writing specialists to focus on disciplinary forms of writing, as in 'learning communities' (Coffin, et al., 2005, p. 6).

This paper, however, has offered an instance of an AW program that strives to replicate the known advantages of focused, vocational EAP curricula, but to do so in a way that allows for the individual writer as well as the writer of academic genre.

This paper has argued that a discourse/disciplinary community-based pedagogical approach can impact on learners' investments in an AW program, and that such a program highlights the literacy practices characteristic of future discourse communities. Students value these practices as capital that they can use in their future studies, workplaces and lives. This paper advocates, for teachers of tertiary academic writing, a pedagogical approach that emphasises the theoretical link between the pedagogical use of portfolios as "albums" of "individualised" genre-focused texts and the learners' future, imagined, disciplinary communities (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). To teach the student in front of us now, we need to have knowledge of their desired destination.

### Limitations

Any study relying on the self-reports of participants has the clear limitation of lacking triangulation by an objective observer. However, the goal of narrative research is increasingly in line with the foregrounding of participants' voices as naturalistic and authentic data that validate identity and experience. The findings above also come from a specific context – a tertiary institute in the Western part of Auckland – and may not be directly applicable to other contexts. The overall trajectory of the narratives reported here will, we hope, be insightful and applicable to a range of contexts.

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## REVIEWS

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