

Power and paragraphs: academic writing and emotion

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Abstract

Emotions play an important role in academic writing (Cameron, Nairn and Higgins, 2009), and, as learning developers, we often support students with the emotional aspects of their work. The process of writing is strongly linked to identity. Research into academic literacies has highlighted the fact that this often involves complex negotiations, especially for students from widening participation backgrounds (Lea and Street, 1998). Students' past experiences of learning strongly shape their identity as learners. For example, the early challenges with literacy faced by people with dyslexia often continue to affect their emotions in adulthood (Pollak, 2005; Alexander-Passe, 2015). The concept of learning identities (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Christie et al., 2007) helps us to understand students' emotional responses in the wider context of their lives. This paper uses two case histories of students with dyslexia, who were also the first in their family to go to university, to explore the role of academic writing in shaping a student's learning identity. It argues that learning developers are in a good position to help students develop a positive sense of themselves as academic writers.

Keywords: Emotion; academic writing; learning identity.

Introduction

This paper argues that supporting students with the emotional aspects of academic writing is a core element of the learning developer's work. It draws on the concept of learning identities (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) to provide a theoretical basis for discussing this aspect of our work and uses two students' 'case histories' to illustrate this argument. In my role as a lecturer in learning development, I am often asked by colleagues across the university to support their students with the technical aspects of writing. However, many of

the students who I see have come for support with what could be termed the emotional aspect of writing: for example, students who procrastinate and have difficulty finishing their assignments, or students who rewrite one paragraph over and over again to get it right. Students often come to us at challenging moments in their academic life, such as when going through an assessment for specific learning differences or after they have failed an assignment. Clughen and Connell note that writing support has much in common with counselling, 'with issues of self-esteem, rejection, and alienation being [the] everyday stuff' of writing support encounters (2015, p.46). Due to the relationships we have with students, we are well placed to provide them with emotional support, especially when it comes to orientating themselves to life at university (Dhillon, 2018).

Learning development emerged as a response to the massification of higher education (Hilsdon, 2011; Briggs, 2018). Although students from a more diverse range of backgrounds have entered university in recent years, universities have not adapted as much as they could do to include these students (Hilsdon, 2018). Students who came from 'non-traditional' or 'widening participation' backgrounds, such as students who were the first in their family to go to university, or dyslexic students were seen by universities and policy makers as lacking in basic skills. Skills departments were set up in universities and those who worked there challenged the notion that a lack of student skill was the problem. Instead some were critical of the universities' failure to adapt to meet the needs of their students (Haggis, 2006; Hilsdon, 2018). Hilsdon argues that a central tenet of learning development upholds 'opposition to a "deficit" model. Rather than seeing students and their needs as problematic, LD identifies aspects of learning environments which are inadequate or alienating' (2011, p.17). In exploring the emotional aspects of academic writing, my aim is not to adopt a deficit model, which sees any emotional response to academic writing as being due to the limitations of the student, but to address the structural barriers that make academic writing such an emotive issue.

The field of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998) looked at how writing is linked with student identity and highlighted the fact that it involves complex negotiations. This is particularly true for students from widening participation backgrounds. One of the strengths of this framework is that it focuses on the power dynamics at play in the production and assessment of academic writing and challenged a deficit model which positioned students as lacking basic skills (Wingate, 2019). The power dynamics inherent in academic life affect how people see themselves as belonging or not belonging to the university (Burke,

2017; Danvers, Hinton-Smith and Webb, 2019). Sara Ahmed argues that emotions show us how power affects our bodies and help us to understand the difference between ourselves and others (2014). As academic writing is central to the experience of being at university, it can shape our identity and how we see ourselves as being a student (Ivanic, 1998). It should not be surprising then, that academic writing should prove to be so emotionally charged.

Writing and emotion

Sara Maitland states that writers face three types of challenges, 'emotional challenges, practical challenges and technical challenges', and that all three are interlinked (2005). While she is discussing creative writing, this is also relevant to academic writing and our role as learning developers. However, there has been relatively little research carried out into the role emotion plays in the writing process. The major study is by Brand who studied the emotions of 191 writers (including students and professional writers) during the writing process (1990). During writing, positive emotions such as happiness or excitement rose and 'negative passive' emotions such as boredom and confusion decreased. 'Negative active' emotions such as anxiety and frustration increased when actually writing but dropped off at the end of the session. Relief and satisfaction peaked after a writing session. However, less skilled writers were more easily satisfied with their work than writers who were classed as more skilled, which showed that while relief may be a positive emotion it does not always have a positive impact on the quality of writing as dissatisfaction can spur writers on to improve their work. Brand asked the student writers to rate their skill level and also asked a teacher to rate them. Interestingly, what writers thought about how skilled they were at writing was more accurate in predicting what their emotional response would be than a teacher's rating of their skill. This shows that the relationship between confidence and writing is complicated and nuanced and there is not a one size fits all approach. Negative emotions do not always inhibit learning and 'productive discomfort' is an important aspect of student engagement (James and Brookfield, 2014, p.7). Janke, Wilby and Zavod recommend developing self-awareness of writing related emotions and using self-talk as a way to manage the writing process (2020). As learning developers, we are well placed to have conversations with students about their ways of working.

Another challenge students face is that the recursive nature of writing is often hidden which can lead student writers to judge their first draft by the standards of other writers' final products. Cameron, Narin and Higgins found that graduate students and early career researchers in writing groups benefited from the opportunity to share their feelings about the writing process and to realise that others felt the same way (2009). While they found it challenging to share early drafts with other students it helped them to see that other peoples' early drafts were similar to theirs. Part of our roles as learning developers is to make the invisible aspects of study visible to students.

In addition to this, as Rai highlights, 'the content of academic writing is not emotionally neutral and any theory or knowledge can potentially connect with the student writer's own experience' (2012, p.281). Having a personal connection to your writing can make it frustrating that the limitations of academic writing mean that you cannot always say all you want to say on the topic. This is highlighted particularly strongly in Lillis's 2003 research where she found that students often engaged critically with the topics they wrote about but felt constrained by having to respond to a set question rather than writing what they wanted to say. One of her participants, Mary, felt that it was important to include a positive portrayal of the black community in her assignment which she felt was lacking in the course content. When marking her assignment, the lecturer stated that this section of the assignment was 'not really relevant'.

Such emotional connections to the subject are often unacknowledged. A defining characteristic of academic writing is that it demonstrates critical thinking. Brand highlighted that emotion is not meant to play a part in critical thinking as the higher-level critical thinker is portrayed as emotionally detached (1987). This idea has possibly contributed to the stereotypes that exist around who is a critical thinker. Danvers observes that critical thinkers are seen as being older, privileged, white, and male (2016). She challenges the convention that critical thinkers should be emotionally detached from the topics they study and argues that this emotional connection can form the heart of critical thinking. Academics are often drawn to write about issues that have a personal resonance to them (Sword, 2017). In our service there is a high level of demand from both students and staff to teach critical thinking. This is also a topic that is much discussed on the ALDinHE JISMAIL. I often find that students are thinking critically about their subject but are not sure if they are allowed to express this in their writing. The writing tutorial can offer a space

where students are able to negotiate what they want to say and understand how to be critical in the terms expected from the assignment – what Lillis describes as ‘talk back’ (2003).

As academic writing is usually produced as a form of assessment there is the implication of being judged. With assessment comes the risk of failure but even for students who pass the assignment the process of engaging with feedback can produce strong emotional reactions (Han and Hyland, 2019). A failure to write ‘academically’ could mark a student out as not belonging in the university and failing their course could cause them to be excluded from the university: thus, there is a strong power dynamic in academic writing.

Writing and identity

The theory of learning identities can be useful for learning developers to understand writing and emotion and how this links to power and identity. Writing is central to the experience of being part of the university and as such forms a core part of our identity as students or academics (Lea and Street, 1998; Sword, 2017). The concept of learning identities (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Christie et al., 2007) is valuable in that it helps us understand students' emotional responses to writing in the wider context of their lives. While all students have dispositions that influence their sense of themselves as learners, learning identities are situational and influenced by social and cultural contexts. Learning is a social practice that is 'tightly bound up with matters of identity or situation and cannot be extracted from them' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, p.595). This relates strongly to the challenges students may experience involving academic writing and emotion. If the support that we give students is to be effective it needs to take their identity and situation into account.

Most discussions of learning identity draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of ‘habitus’ which refers to a ‘way of being’ that is unconsciously acquired through socialisation; how individual's dispositions such as vocabulary, interests, and way of speaking affect how they interact with the social world (1990). Students bring with them a particular life history with past experiences of learning that is both individual to them and shaped by social structure. Hodkinson and Bloomer's longitudinal qualitative research with sixth form college students found that learning identities were not static (at the time the research was

carried out, the idea that students had fixed 'learning styles' was popular), but highly malleable (2001). They developed the concept of a learning career to describe the process of how this develops over time. Learning careers encompass both the personal and the social by locating the uniqueness of an individual's journey in a broader social context. Individual teachers can be very influential in a student's learning career and research has shown that students can change their learning disposition as a result of a positive student/tutor relationship (Tet, 2016). The idea that students can change how they see themselves as learners speaks to a core motivation for learning developers.

Academic writing is a key site where students develop their learning identity. This can be seen from the two case histories I outline below. Rai argues that being able to have an open discussion around students' writing anxieties is important for all students but that not acknowledging 'identity-based barriers could seriously disadvantage particular students who had previous unhelpful educational experiences' (2012, p.282). For this reason, while the concept of 'learning identity' is relevant to all students, this paper will focus on two case histories of students who have dyslexia. The two case histories are taken from my PhD research, which was a bigger longitudinal study of transitions for young people who were considered by their school to have special educational needs (Forster, 2013). This followed 14 young people, aged 15/16 or 18/20 at the time of the first interview, who attended one rural mainstream secondary school. Life history interviews with both the young people and their parents were carried out 18 months apart. The interview covered their experiences of school, aspirations for the future, and any support they had received. Both India and Fraser* were 18 at the time of the first interview and later went on to university. They were also the first generation of their families to go to university (India was the first in her family; one of Fraser's elder sisters was studying nursing).

The challenges faced by students who are the first in the family to go to university are widely recognised in research. Reay argues that while working class students are going to university in increasing numbers, they still face many barriers compared to middle class students (2018). They are more likely to attend less prestigious universities with higher ratios of students to staff and to accumulate more debt. They also face more subtle forms of exclusion within the system. It is those with a superior advantage of economic, cultural, and social capitals who are best placed to play 'the academic game'. As a result of this, studying carries a high emotional cost. Reay highlights that working class students are

more likely to drop out due to a combination of educational, economic, and social factors: 'educational exclusion is often internalised as a failure of the self rather than a failure of the system' (2018, p.531). For students who drop out of university for academic reasons challenges involving academic writing often feature.

Fraser was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was 11 and said that the only thing he had liked about school was breaktime as he loved playing football. After doing better than he expected at GCSE, he stayed on to his school sixth form where he studied for A levels. He chose his favourite subject PE, despite being discouraged by his teacher who thought Fraser would do better with a less theoretical, more vocational subject. Fraser dropped AS level biology, as he was not keeping up with the work, but got a C in PE which he was pleased with and the teacher who had told him not to study it came up to him to say well done. He worked at a sport centre after leaving school and applied to university to study for an HND in Sports Management. He had hoped for a practical course but there was significantly more writing and theory involved than he anticipated, and he quickly became overwhelmed. Although he was aware that he could have accessed writing support, he 'didn't see how it could help' him as he thought he would never be able to do the work.

Fraser had a long history of struggling with reading and writing and he felt that this was something about himself that would not change. This was despite the fact that he had achieved more than he had expected to achieve at both GCSE and AS level. At the time of his last interview he was looking for more vocational ways to achieve his goal of being an outdoor activities instructor as he did not think he would pass his first year. Fraser's mother reflected that maybe he wasn't 'the sort of person who should go to university' while Fraser was looking for something that was 'more me'. There is a risk that learning identities can act as self-fulfilling prophecies, especially for people whose prior experiences of study have been very negative (Tet, 2016).

This experience of internalising educational exclusion as a personal failure is common in students who have dyslexia and other specific learning differences. There is a lack of recognition of dyslexia in school; as a result of this children often experience marginalisation and exclusion, are often labelled as low ability, and end up in the bottom sets with low expectations (Riddick, 2009; Alexander-Passe, 2015). A participant in Alexander-Pass's research said: 'I was too academic for all the practical stuff I was being

made to do in the lower sets, but I felt I was a visitor to the top sets of the subjects I was good at' (p.74). This experience of low expectations at school has an impact on dyslexic students' confidence in applying to university and as a result they are under-represented in the university system (Madriaga, 2007). Many of those who do arrive at university have not been formally diagnosed with dyslexia and as a result have never received appropriate support (Pollak, 2005; Mandriaga, 2007). Dyslexic university students often bring with them an emotional legacy from their experiences of school (Pollak, 2005; Forster, 2013), and once there 'the entire experience of being a higher education student, involves for someone who accepts the dyslexic label, continuous confrontation with experiences which challenge self- concept and self-esteem, not least academic writing' (Pollak, 2005, p.28). However, it is possible for students to change the perceptions they have of themselves as learners. India, a student with dyslexia from my own research (Forster, 2013), was 17 at the time of our first interview and studying for a BTEC in Fine Art. In her first interview she was very self-critical and compared herself negatively to her higher attaining friends: 'There was this one project we had, it was on Macbeth and I spent hours doing it. It was really hard, and my friend Sam did it on the bus on the way to school and she got a better mark than me and you just think what's the point?' She described having difficulties with writing and spelling at school and felt she had done really badly at GCSE (she had achieved six GCSEs at grades A*-C) as she could not do exams.

Prior to starting her course she had not considered going to university as she 'didn't think she was clever enough' but had applied to university to study Graphic Design after achieving good marks on her diploma: 'I went from being the one that struggled to being one of the best in the class'. Despite her improved confidence she worried about not being as good as the students who had done A levels. At the time of her second interview she was coming towards the end of the first year of her Graphic Design course and sounded surprised to be 'doing really well'. She was receiving support from the university's dyslexia service and had more understanding of what it meant to have dyslexia, realising that her organisational difficulties were something that she could get help with and improve. Despite studying art- and design- based courses in both further and higher education (subjects she had always been good at), India's conception of someone who was clever and who belonged at university was based on being good at writing. Due to the challenges she faced with writing she did not consider herself to be clever, which caused her to doubt herself even when she was doing well. However, by the time of her second interview she

was starting to realise that she could still do as well as other students, even in written tasks, despite having dyslexia.

What is interesting about both case histories is that despite the fact that India and Fraser were studying courses that were more practice-based, academic writing was central to their learning identities and their ideas about 'the sort of person' who should be at university. This is a reflection of how central writing is to dominant discourses about learning and who is a successful learner. These discourses shape students' learning identities: whether someone sees themselves as a low or a high achiever or someone who has 'special educational needs' has a link to their writing history. However, in higher education, students will have some positive experiences to draw upon even though, as in Fraser's case, they may not always be able to recognise this. Sometimes their experience of success can come from outside the area of academic writing. From India's case history in particular, we get a sense of how she drew on her strengths as an artist in order to develop in other areas of learning. Therefore, how students see themselves as learners and how they see the role of writing (as something to be feared or something that is part, but not the decisive part, of being a student) is important.

These issues of identity, writing, and emotion are areas where learning developers can support students. The one-to-one tutorial format provides students with a confidential space to bring up their anxieties. As part of my role I offer longer tutorials for students who are going through assessments for specific learning differences. These can be very emotional as students share their previous educational experiences. While many students have developed good coping strategies - they have, after all, successfully entered university under the same entrance criteria as their neurotypical peers - they often lack confidence in their writing ability and some even fear that their coping strategies mean that they are doing it wrong. In these situations, I often share my own experiences of having a learning difference, the things I struggle with about writing, and share some of the strategies that I use. Sharing experiences can help break down the power dynamic between student and lecturer and give students more confidence in their own ways of working. When students bring up their past experiences of study in tutorials it is often because they are trying to make sense of themselves as learners or constructing their learning identity. Tet (2016) stresses the importance of working through negative past

learning experiences in order to construct a more positive sense of themselves as learners. As learning developers, we are well placed to do this.

Conclusion

Research shows that experiencing a range of emotions is a normal part of the writing process. This does not need to be a negative thing and some level of 'productive discomfort' is to be expected. Making students aware of this and helping them understand the recursive nature of writing can help students manage the emotional aspects of writing, as can helping them to develop self-awareness around their own feelings and approaches to writing.

There are particular emotional challenges involved in academic writing due to the power dynamics at play and its link to identity and how someone sees themselves as a student and as belonging in the university. The concept of learning identities (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001) helps us to understand that how students see themselves as learners is situated in the wider context of their lives. In order to tackle the emotional challenges associated with academic writing, students need to understand how they developed. This is particularly important for those students who have had more negative earlier educational experiences (a group who we, as learning developers, see regularly in our service). An important aspect of learning identities is that they are fluid and can change with the context of students' lives. This can give students space for growth whilst at the same time acknowledging the challenges they face. By focusing on the emotions related to academic writing we can help students to develop both new ways of working and more positive learning identities.

*pseudonyms are used.

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