

Learning and Assessing for Future Imagined Communities: Academic Writing Texts within Portfolios

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Abstract

How can first year, tertiary-level EAL academic writing programmes for adult learners use both portfolio assessment and emerging understandings about the importance of discourse community and imagined communities to target participant needs? This paper considers the value of portfolios as sites for practising membership of future imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Kanno & Norton, 2003). Portfolios can achieve this through reproducing texts similar to the authentic artefacts of those discourse communities (Flowerdew, 2000; Hyland, 2003, 2005). Teaching and learning via portfolio involves multi-drafting, where learners reflect on the learning of a text type characteristic of students' future imagined communities. We begin with Hamp-Lyons and Condon's belief (2000) that portfolios "critically engage students and teachers in continual discussion, analysis and evaluation of their processes and progress as writers, as reflected in multiple written products" (p.15) and outline a situated pedagogical approach, where students report on their improvement across three portfolio drafts and assess their learning reflectively. This approach is compatible with established research into the value of genre as a way of socialising learners to future discourse communities. A multicultural group of 41 learners enrolled in the degree-level course Academic Writing (AW) at a tertiary institution in New Zealand took part in a study reflecting on this approach to building awareness of one's own writing. Focus group interviews with a researcher at the final stage of the programme provided qualitative data, transcribed and analysed using textual analysis methods (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). One of the key benefits identified was that the chance to produce and reproduce texts perceived as useful to the students' immediate futures was reflected in the overall value of the portfolio-focussed academic writing programme.

1. Introduction: Portfolios, Community and Academic Writing

How can first year, tertiary-level EAL academic writing programmes for adult learners use both portfolio assessment and emerging understandings about the importance of discourse community and imagined communities to target participant needs?

To answer this question we assume that such Academic Writing (AW) programmes need to base the production aspect of students' output on texts characteristic of those likely to be encountered in their future educational, workplace or professional destinations. Since portfolios provide multiple opportunities for rehearsing a variety of text types, creating an "album of literacy performances" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p.322), it follows they are a logical focus for this output as well as a valid site for learner preparations for future learning contexts. This paper discusses the value of portfolios as vehicles for rehearsing membership of future imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Kanno & Norton, 2003) through reproducing texts similar to the authentic artefacts of those discourse communities (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000; Flowerdew, 2000; Borg, 2003; Hyland, 2003, 2005).

Hamp-Lyons and Condon asserted that portfolios "critically engage students and teachers in continual discussion, analysis and evaluation of their processes and progress as writers, as reflected in multiple written products" (2000, p.15). Since then, Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), amongst others, have reconsidered the nature of the critical engagement involved in producing multi-draft portfolios, and the learner benefits from such engagement. Recent studies suggest that portfolios can offer such bi-products (Katznelson, Perpignan, & Rubin, 2001) and advantages as maximising formative learning occurring within the key sites of participation (Lam & Lee, 2009) and promoting meta-cognition, particularly in the context of learner reflectivity on the development of autonomous use of literacies associated with academic writing (Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999; Hyland, 2000; Adamson, 1993; Granville & Dison, 2005; Lucas, 2008).

More specifically, studies reveal that these literacies generated during students' participation in portfolio-focussed programmes include enhanced reflective capacity (Woodward, 1998; Reynolds 2000; Kathpalia & Heah, 2008) leading to more self-reflective awareness of one's own text and of academic literacies. This in turn may lead to responsive learning through peer feedback (Murray, 1992, 1994; Rollinson, 2005; Zhao, 2010), listenership during midcourse tutor conferences (Farr, 2003; Williams, 2004; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) and response to written feedback (Weigle, 2002; Leki, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Hamp-Lyons, 2006). These literacies can also be specific subliteracies such as enhanced understanding of paraphrasing (Keck, 2006), self-editing (Xiang, 2004; Ferris, 2005; Andrew, 2005; Vickers & Ene, 2006) or brainstorming (Rao, 2007). The iterative, recursive nature of multi-drafting provides them with such aspects of academic writing literacy as self-editing and the insight to reorganise academic texts by applying target genre and discourse knowledge. To do this is to teach AW texts as understanding the linguistic and generic discourse community of particular academic genre (Flowerdew, 1993;

Swales, 1988; Johns, 1995; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000; Clark, 2003; Hyland 2003, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2005).

Instruction of AW by multi-draft portfolio is an effective teaching, learning and assessment tool both because it provides a formative feedback loop and data about learners' cognitive operations, and because it enhances learners' understanding of writing as a socially-situated process (Gee, 1996) providing for participation in "language socialisation" (Duff & Hornberger, 2008). It develops learners' understandings of generic text types as flexible goals from likely target discourse communities (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000) not as the ideologically-bound models Canagarajah (2001, 2002) and Casanave (2004) suspect emerge in a writing programme ignorant of critical identity-related and culturally-fraught issues. Throughout sections 2, 3 and 4 we discuss the role that portfolio writing can have in socialising learners to their short-term target discourse communities.

2. Context of the study and participants

The study occurred within 'AW', a paper on a BA (EAL) programme in an Auckland tertiary institution. A diverse group of 41 subjects (14 male and 27 female, aged 17 to 39) included first-year BA (EAL) major students and institute-wide degree-level students taking the course to develop their ability to write and succeed in their major subjects. The paper is at Level 5 on the national framework of assessments, that is, first year tertiary. Entry requirements are an IELTS Band 5.5 or equivalent. The participants come from a variety of countries: China, Hong-Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, India, Iran, Russia, Mexico, Germany, Somalia, Ethiopia and Kuwait.

2.1. The course 'Academic writing'

The 14-week course is made up of 6 contact hours per week and follows Brown's (2002) prescription for curricular development. The assessment includes a performance-based component in the form of regular weekly multi-draft formative written tasks presented as a portfolio to be graded summatively at the end of the semester. The portfolio tasks vary in text types: from academic description and evaluation to the argumentative essay, incorporating micro- and macro-level writing and learning. The structure of the course is such that the portfolio and the regular work on its tasks provide the development of a range of strategies for the final timed classroom essay assessment. The portfolio procedure adopted in the study comprised collection, reflection and peer and ongoing teacher feedback (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000).

2.2. Portfolios in AW

In foregrounding portfolios as instruments of learning, teaching and assessing, we emphasise their role in socialising learners to target discourse communities (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000; Borg, 2003). This role is enhanced by mid-course tutor interviews, pair and group work involved in workshopping learners' early drafts, and by understanding that chosen text types are the kinds of texts found in the learners' destination communities, namely further study in such subjects as English, Commerce, Nursing and Early Childhood Education. This course is situated in the students' past and current experiences as they are

embedded in the very institutional practices required by the university community. The AW course aims to prepare students to join the multiple activities of their future academic community.

2.3. Multidrafting and reflectivity in AW

We consider how the processes of multi-drafting and reflexivity work within the context of the portfolios. With each first draft, students are required to submit a reflective commentary responding to prompts about (a) the purpose of the task, the requirements in terms of content, text organisation, discourse and language features for each of the text types, and (b) what they have learnt from writing the text, what their difficulties have been and how they would work to improve the areas of difficulties themselves. With the second draft, the students submit another piece of reflective writing, answering the question of whether the teacher's feedback to the first draft and their own assessment of the writing and learning correlated. They identify areas of weaknesses and select those to work on urgently.

The reflective component of learning, teaching and assessing by portfolio points to a formative function (Andrew, 2005; Lam and Lee, 2009). Such formative strategies, together with the pedagogical interventions of teacher conferencing, peer review and collaborative group work, give the course cohesion and balance the high-stakes summative focus. The criteria for assessing the portfolio are performance-based, achievement-focussed, and allow for a measure of progress, response to feedback and self-reflexivity (Woodward, 1998; Lucas, 2008). The AW portfolios comprise all drafts of work described in the curriculum plus reflections, ensuring that all AW portfolios are comparable.

3. Methodology

Qualitative, grounded research approaches provide authentic, reflective, evaluative insights of real learner experience. Our data comes from transcriptions of open-ended focus group interviews (of 4 or 5 participants), recorded in weeks 3 (start) and 13 (end) and conducted by a researcher external to the teaching team. Interviewing was repeated over three intakes, with data collected from 41 students. This method adopts the rationale of open-ended interviewing: "the only person who understands the social reality in which they live is the person themselves" (Burns, 2000, p.425). The phenomenological emphasis on the learner allows researchers access to participants' words. Triangulation data comes from mid-course tutor interviews and student reflections. We also have the complete portfolios themselves for evidential use in future studies.

3.1. Focus group interviews

For the focus group interviews, students volunteered themselves into groups of four or five. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30 minutes. After the students completed AW, the interviews were transcribed. Students had the chance to check the transcriptions for accuracy. Two researchers, the interviewer-researcher and the teacher-researcher, used open-coding to

analyse the transcriptions. All participants gave their permission for their words to be quoted, and all quotations reported here are attributed to pseudonyms.

Our method aligns with Sandelowski's (1995) in nursing. She describes closely reading the material, identifying key storylines in an attempt to understand everyday practices and underlining key phrases 'because they make "inchoate sense" (p.373). The researchers used a holistic, instinctive, multiple-technique method to bring out "indigenous themes" (Patton, 1990). This method draws on recognized 'word-based' and 'scrutiny-based' techniques of observation (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Other analytic techniques are 'querying the text' to locate specific kinds of topics likely to generate major social and cultural themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Brice, 2005), and Glaser and Strauss's (1967) 'constant comparison method' (pp.101-116).

In week 3, students were asked about their past experiences of academic writing, their reasons for enrolling in the course, their strengths and weaknesses in writing, and their hoped future imagined communities where they would use their improved academic writing.

In week13, students were given a card asking how the following aspects of the course had impacted on their understanding of AW and to respond freely:

- Regular writing, feedback and follow-up in an assessed portfolio
- Increased learning about structure and discourse
- Understanding about the features of academic writing
- Building literacies, e.g. editing, proofreading, following up corrections.

Groups were then guided to answer key questions:

- In the light of your learning on AW, when you have a writing task in any academic subject, how will you approach it now?
- What are the main challenges for you in writing an academic text?
- How will AW be useful to you in your future life?

3.2. Reflections on portfolio tasks

The student portfolios provide rich data about learners' attempts to produce accurate, authentic, generic text-types. Reflections, as Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) write, "describe, explain, or otherwise account for the samples included" (p.4). The learners regularly wrote reflections of 250 words accompanying their first and second text drafts. These reflective writings contain answers to the question on the purpose of the written task, the learning that has occurred in the course of fulfilling the task, students' self-reports about areas of progress or lack of progress, and projections about what actions they need to take to ensure progress after they finish AW. Analysis of our data using the coding methods mentioned above (Sandelowski, 1995; Ryan & Bernard, 2003) enables us to identify how students see multi-draft portfolios as useful for developing their AW strategies with particular focus on how their understandings of discourse and genre have evolved and the effectiveness of literacies they have adopted.

4. Literature Review

Imagined communities and discourse communities

The concept of “imagined community” (Anderson 1983; Norton 2000; Kanno & Norton 2003; Murphey, Chen & Chen 2005; Norton & Gao, 2008) can be applied to EAL AW since the students have in their minds idealised visions of themselves as members of future academic, local, national or professional communities using particular language in specific ways. Beyond the classroom our students have imagined communities. For instance, Ferez (2005) has shown that learners’ involvement in social networks provides them with additional investment in the classroom. Abasi, Akbari and Graves (2006) demonstrate student perception of the importance of imitation as a strategy for creating texts characteristic of postgraduate discourse communities, and imitation that can lead to what teachers might see as plagiarism. As our description of participants indicated, the learner’s voice desires to achieve a good job (either in New Zealand or their home community), participate in higher education or go to a better university in a course of their choice. Many imagine themselves speaking, writing and performing better English within more native-speaker-oriented contexts. EAL learners, then, also imagine communities they wish to belong to, but as yet do not. Their imaginings can become explicit when they are asked about the contexts they imagine themselves using writing in their futures. Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) demonstrated how EAL learners’ language learning histories effectively project their investments in their future imagined communities and Norton (2000) demonstrated how learner investments are captured in diaries narrating real-world learning experiences.

Future communities are conceptualised as imagined spaces and individuals idealise community and create a sense of self through these imaginings (Anderson, 1983). Kanno and Norton (2003) believe the analogy of nationhood and community helps those desirous of belonging feel a sense of community with people not yet met (2003, p.241). Norton and Gao (2008), summarizing literature on imagined communities in language education, point out 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). “Imagined community”, then, describes learners’ investment: in our case in writing the texts characteristic of discourse communities of their imagined futures. Learner investments impact on future goals, ambitions, dream communities and desires for belonging and recognition. Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) analysed learner histories to conclude: “as learners want to belong to a community and construct their identities as members of the group, they invest energy and time into learning how to be like those members” (p.85).

This framework allows, then, for desire to *belong* to be connected to desire to *become* while being compatible with existing studies of genre-based teaching as preparatory for entry into future discourse communities (Hinds, 1987; Johns, 1995, 1997; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2000, 2003, 2005; Borg, 2003; Flowerdew, 1993, 2000; Reppen, 2002; Woodward-

Kron, 2004; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2005). As Silva (1990) put it, “learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community – finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it” (p.17).

5. Findings

Our study identifies a number of themes from the focus group data triangulated with student reflections and mid-course tutor interviews. Here, we describe and discuss three themes. The first of these is that the choice of text genres in the portfolio is ‘valuable’ for future life. Second, we consider students respond positively to learning from generic types. Third, we consider the literacies of planning and organisation inherent in the draft-focussed portfolio-based writing process.

5.1 The choice of text types in the portfolio was useful

In the week 3 interviews, twenty-five students indicated a desire to gain the AW skills required for future study in vocational subjects, namely Early Childhood Education, Nursing, Commerce and Information Technology. Mabel (Iran) pointed out, for instance, that AW skills and conventions can be applied to a business context. Five saw developing AW as part of a longer English learning journey, resulting in more professional and social interactions. Eleven others said they needed AW skills for vocational reasons, such as being able to practise medicine in New Zealand. Of the 41 interviewees, twenty mentioned grammatical accuracy and sentence structure as core needs, with eight speaking about the structuring of academic texts, five about turning research into writing and the remainder detailing such needs as the ability to write ‘selecting appropriate words’, ‘using formal vocabulary’, ‘in a web’ or ‘in the western way’.

All were focused on future imagined communities and on the discourses seen as characterising them, for example, on: restructuring the writing to suit the genre ‘academic writing’ and finding the right word for the topic (Iranian female); developing the thinking skills needed to fit in with learning expectations of the genre (Iranian female); understanding the logic of the expected order – topic sentence and conclusion (Korean female); writing with formality and having the vocabulary to sustain a longer text (Iranian male); thinking in a logical and chronological order while focussing on sentence structure too (Korean female); grammar worry that “prevents you from being able to be conscious of sentence structure” (Chinese female); expectations of academic writing genre that “brings its own stress, so you can’t merely focus on vocabulary” (Japanese male). Miwa (Korean) states: “...for the future I want to learn not only this argumentative essay but also other different genre of writing”. Emily (Chinese) is positive: “How to improve in the future: copy some good phrases while reading, rehearse and practise them, build up the vocab. Read more and be familiar with these pronouns. 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”.

In week 13, the learners commented on the usefulness of the macro- and micro-focus on task related to paragraph development and essay writing, critiquing and evaluating and writing a short researched report. William (Korean) says: “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”.

5.2 Learning from generic text types helps to socialise learners into discourse communities

Nine students comment that a genre-focussed approach with an emphasis on normative conventions can enhance their awareness of target discourse communities. German Yulia reflects: “formal reports is what I need in my future, study and work”. Genre-focussing can draw attention to lexical, syntactical and discursive levels of writing. They comment that this pedagogy is more creative than that of Korea, where students look for discursively locked ways of writing, formula and models. Focussing on discursive features within the genre approach provides learners with a scaffold that did not exist in their home cultures. Farina remarks that Kuwaiti students “have to write, but they don’t have to be very serious about that, students, they copy”, a comment supported by Mabel (Iran): “students just choose a book and copy from the book. They don’t have to worry about discourse”.

5.3 Planning and organisational skills prove to be learning gains for future study

Planning and organisational skills, such as outlining and brainstorming, emerge as learning gains notably among 24 learners from Asian backgrounds, who specifically comment on them. Vinna (Chinese) emphasises the value of prewriting and outlining: “they control my ideas when I write my essay - very central.” For Jenny (Chinese), a chance to apply outlining also made an impact: “I have learnt many things through [AW] class. Above all, outlining is the best thing for me... now, I have learnt how to write an outline, and I feel that if I prepare the outline well and in detail, then the time of writing an essay gets shorter.”

For Emma (Korean) timesaving is capital too, but so is adapting the literacy of planning: “The process of AW (pre-writing, outlining) helped me to organise ideas simply and start to write easily.” Kirma (Kuwait) views the process as assisting textual organisation: “the process – pre-writing, outlining and so on – controls my ideas when I write my essay”. For Ella (Chinese), “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”. Helen (Chinese) looks to her future community: “A good outline is guarantee of a good draft. I have learnt the writing process in Academic writing and I will apply it in my studies in education”.

6. Conclusion

This study suggests that instructors and researchers can gain insights into experiences of learning AW via a multi-draft portfolio community-based pedagogy. It contributes to researchers’ and instructors’ understanding of the usefulness of multi-draft portfolios for teaching and learning AW in

undergraduate EAL programmes by instantiating those aspects of learning directly related to learners' desired future and imagined discourse communities.

To answer our research question on how academic writing programmes can use both portfolio assessment and emerging understandings about the importance of discourse community and imagined communities to target participant needs, our project concludes that first-year degree level adult learners report a number of advantages of learning by portfolio, one of which relates to the benefits of the production of text types characteristic of the students' imagined communities. Besides, learners report increased understanding of discursive and generic features of academic texts necessary for participating in their future discourse communities. They report developments in embedded literacy skills contributing to socialising them into genres. Further, learners report on the role of and their progress in applying the situated literacies of planning and organising a text as a gain for achieving success in their future destinations.

Portfolios enhance learners' understanding of academic writing as the socially-situated process Gee (1996) describes, involving them in language socialisation (Duff & Hornberger, 2008). We therefore conclude that multi-draft portfolios within a communities-focussed, genre-oriented approach to tertiary AW is an effective teaching, learning and assessment tool.

7. References

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