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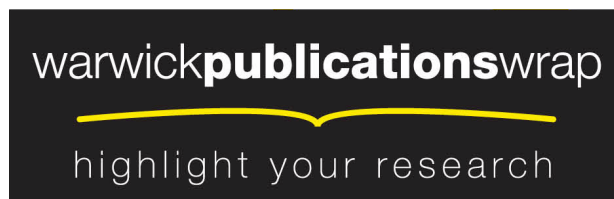
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Presenting a united front: assessed reflective writing on group experience.

(version accepted by *Reflective Practice*, January 2012)

Introduction

Systematic reflection is regarded as increasingly important in many professions and this has led to the rise of reflective writing assignments in higher education contexts (Burnard, 2005; Luk, 2008; Nesi, 2008; Spiro, 2011). Such assessed reflective writing has been studied from various perspectives such as authenticity of reflection, content of reflection, quality of reflection, and cognitive or metacognitive development. An important emerging theme is that of writer identity, with most work focusing on how writers represent themselves as individuals. In this paper, I take a different perspective and examine data from writers who are reflecting on a group experience. I am therefore able to discuss some ways in which reflective writers represent and construct not only themselves, but also their work group. The aim of the study is to look for any patterns in how writers represent themselves and their group, and to relate these to genre and community expectations of the reflective student writer. I conclude the paper with a discussion of pedagogic implications for the context where the data was collected.

Assessed reflective writing

I define assessed reflective writing in this paper as writing which is produced for formal evaluation in an educational course and which requires the writer to: narrate personal experience; comment on associated feelings; appraise their performance; discuss what they have learned; and relate the learning to some aspect of future action. Such writing is increasingly required across disciplines in UK universities (Nesi, 2008; Spiro, 2011).

University based reflective writing is not necessarily linked with reflective practice in Schön's (1983) sense. It can be implemented separately from any cycle of practice, and need not be linked to professional action or decision making by the student writer. Asking students to reflect, perhaps retrospectively, about their thoughts and feelings in a particular situation or learning experience, or about course content are examples of assessed reflective writing which need not be part of an action cycle.

Even when not part of an action cycle, reflective writing may have benefits for the learning process. Kathpalia & Heah (2008) claim that it allows students to synthesise new knowledge, and increase their awareness of its ongoing significance for their own experience. Stierer (2002) argues that it enables students to examine relationships between lived experiences and theoretical concepts, legitimating knowledge constructed through the reflective process alongside traditionally valued ways of knowing. Such scholars argue that reflective writing, like reflective practice, may provide a space wherein experiential knowledge and received knowledge (Wallace, 1991) can be integrated.

Luk (2008) raises a cautionary point. She draws a distinction between reflective writing used to develop students' reflective ability, and reflective writing used as evidence that reflection has taken place. She is supportive about the first function but expresses reservations about the second, arguing that such evidence may be unreliable. A number of scholars have gone further, arguing that assessed reflective writing is inherently problematic. Reflective accounts form a genre which is different on many dimensions from other assessed university genres and whose

conventions contradict those other genres (Rai, 2006; Nesi, 2008). Features of reflective writing include personalisation, self disclosure in terms of content, and a conversational style (Nesi, 2008), all of which are dispreferred in many other university genres. For 'traditional' forms of academic writing students may have been taught that the writer's identity is generically determined, but in assessed reflective writing the obligation on a writer to manifest a genre appropriate identity is less obvious. A novice writer may assume that they are required to disclose their normally private, lifeworld self.

Even where student writers are comfortable with the conventions of reflective writing, contradictions with assessment remain (Stierer, 2002; Halbach, 2002; Hargreaves, 2004; Hobbs, 2007). Assessment involves presenting ones best work, whereas reflection involves uncertain questioning, self criticism, exploring, trying out ideas and acknowledging the messy nature of reality. When reflective writing is assessed, students are unlikely to submit a text which either a) represents reflective action as honestly as possible, thus exposing the writer to judgments on the appropriacy of their behavior or b) is itself part of the process of reflection, thus exposing the writer to judgments of their ongoing thought processes. Rather, student writers will be conscious of the reader as assessor and will write to achieve academic success. They may mention setbacks and uncertainties, if they understand that this is genre- appropriate. But even so their purpose is likely to be to achieve a desired effect on the assessor. There is, of course, an irony here: one can protect oneself through deliberate construction of a persona but the more one does so, the further one gets from the spirit of 'reflection' and from the opportunity to use the writing for development. This brings us to the issue of writer identity.

Writer identity

Identity in student writing has been studied within traditions of academic literacy, for example by Ivanic (1998) who posited different ‘selves’ for the student writer, and by Hyland (2005) who examined the challenges faced by student writers as they project identities into text. Some research has focused on the use of personal pronouns, e.g. Tang & John (1999) examine the use of first person pronouns in student writing and suggest a continuum of possible authorial roles which students may inhabit. Within their model roles are categorised as implying greater, or lesser, degrees of authority for the student writer. Starfield & Ravelli (2006) use the same continuum to look at first person pronoun use in master’s thesis writing, and find that students experience a range of constraints in their identity options.

Writer identity in the specific context of assessed reflective writing is a newer focus of research. Scott (2005) shows how a particular curricular genre for reflective writing constrains the options of identity available to writers. Mkandawire (2010) uses the Tang & John continuum to examine reflective writing on an MA TESOL course and finds a new ‘I’ role specific to the data examined, which he labels I as the self-evaluator. Lindsay et al. (2010) focus on the experiences of nursing students as they are asked to engage personal identities through assessed reflective writing, and argue that this promotes epistemological development. Ross (2011) critically examines high-stakes online reflection in a university context, concluding that the demands of the situation push students to hide aspects of themselves about which they are insecure and to over-privilege, or even invent, identities that they hope will be more acceptable to assessors: “Rather than revealing and developing a true and unitary self, reflecting online and for assessment produces fragmented, performing, cautious, strategic selves” (2011 p124).

The work reviewed above tends to explore individual writer identity. My own work is different in that it also explores the identities that writers represent/ construct for the work group of which they are a part (termed 'group identity'). In order to encompass this dimension, I need a theory of identity which includes both enactment and representation via language.

Zimmerman (1998) argues that there are three aspects of identity to which speakers may orient as they use language: Discourse identity, Situated identity, and Transportable identity.

Transportable identity is the least obviously language related; it refers to attributes that a person may have or claim irrespective of the communicative situation in which they may find themselves, e.g. belonging to a specific ethnic group. Discourse identity is wholly constituted through language. It refers to the micro level and ever changing discourse roles which people take on in interaction; for example, questioner or responder. Situated identity is arguably positioned between the two: it refers to the roles that people take on in culturally recognised situations, for example doctor and patient or teacher and student; such roles have implications for appropriate uses of language.

Zimmerman's concepts of identity are rooted strongly in notions of performance and interactive talk, but they are also relevant to the study of written communication. My view of identity includes both the micro-level of Zimmerman's Discourse Identity and the cultural/ generic level of his Situated Identity. My work is focused on a small corpus of writing that was produced in response to a specific pedagogic situation. On a micro level, it examines writer's ongoing choices to represent themselves and/or the group of which they were a part. On a generic level, it

examines the identities that seem to be brought into play by the task and the prompt. It highlights a semantic, representational dimension of identity; I am seeking to understand writers' identities partly through the content of their self-descriptions. To do this, I use the concept of transitivity from Halliday's systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1994; Bloor & Bloor, 2004) in combination with Hoey's (2001) concept of semantic relations.

The transitivity framework accounts for the use of language at clause level to represent realities. It uses the terms *process* and *participant* to categorise ways in which people and their actions, thoughts etc. are represented in text. It has been used in other recent studies of identity in academic writing, e.g. Holmes & Nesi (2009), and Romero (2009). The notion of semantic relations accounts for representations of reality developed across and between clauses; for example, whether an action is represented as the consequence of a preceding event.

This paper, then, shares the consensus that identities emerge and develop in expression and interaction (Gee, 2005; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Urzua & Vazquez, 2008). Because it highlights the contrast and the interplay between individual and group identities, it contributes a new perspective on research into identity construction in assessed reflective writing.

Data for the study

The reflective writing task examined was part of the assessment for a course module entitled 'Professional Practice: Developing English Language Teaching'. Assessed work consisted of a course design project which was done in groups, and a rationale for the designed course which

was written as an individual. The rationale included a reflective task, explained in the assignment brief as follows:

A final short piece of writing (about 500 words) reviewing the process of collaborative materials production. ... The reflective writing section will answer questions such as: What benefits did you find from working on materials development with other people? How did your group plan the work? How did you deal with problems? What informed the changes you made to your materials? How did your group reach decisions? How did you change as the project progressed – both in terms of your own approach to working with others and your own understandings of what is involved in the materials development?

The main data for this study was collected from a single cohort of MA TESOL students at Warwick University, UK. It consists of 12 pieces of reflective writing, giving a total of 5702 words and with text length varying from 167 to 736 words. Where data are quoted below, source texts are labelled using letters A through L. I also used the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus, available through the Oxford Text Archive (<http://ota.ahds.ac.uk>, resource number 2539). As will be discussed below, BAWE was used as a reference corpus to establish the salience of certain language items used in the main data to refer to the self and to the group.

Approach to analysis

In this section I will briefly list the analytical steps that I took to examine writers' construction of individual and group identity in their texts. I will then explain and justify each part of the process in detail. In summary, the steps of analysis were:

1. Identify the *participants* – usually nouns or pronouns referring to individuals and groups – most frequently appearing in the main data; compare this with BAWE.
2. Identify the *processes* – actions, states, etc. – with which these discourse participants are associated in the main data.
3. Identify key semantic relations appearing in the main data; for example, whether one action is represented as the consequence of another.

To conduct the above procedures, I used a computer programme yielding quantitative information (Wordsmith Tools 5) in combination with qualitative analysis. This combination of approaches benefits from the fast counting and matching capabilities of a software programme but also allows space for an analyst's interpretation. Having briefly summarised the analytical steps, I will now explain and justify them in more detail.

Identification of salient participants

Following Tang & John (1999), Starfield & Ravelli (2006) and Urzua & Vasquez (2008), I began by examining writers' deployment of first person forms. This justification from previous research is further supported by a keyword analysis (Scott & Tribble, 2006) of the main data against BAWE as a reference corpus. A keyword is one whose frequency in a test corpus when compared with its frequency in a reference corpus can be demonstrated to be statistically significant. Keywords are thus considered to be indicative of the particular propositional content of a test corpus. Wordsmith 5 uses a combination of chi square and log likelihood tests for the calculations.

In a keyword analysis of the Professional Practice corpus against BAWE the top 2 key words are *I* (accounting for 2.53% of test corpus, 0.19% of reference corpus) and *WE* (2.50% of test corpus, 0.19% of reference corpus). This quantitative analysis confirms that *I* and *WE* are salient in reflective writing data. It would not, however, be appropriate to rely solely on the words *I* and *WE* to locate statements referring to the writer or the group. Importantly, it is also necessary to identify references to the writer or the group where the words *I* and *WE* are not used. For example, the writer may use a passive form, or an alternative pronoun such as ‘everyone’ to refer to the group; e.g. *Everyone is aware of the fact that we all want...* (text H). These representations, which do not use pronouns but rely on alternative grammatical resources, can only be identified qualitatively. As will be seen below, it is important to include them to get a more nuanced picture of how writers choose to represent themselves in these texts.

Identification of salient processes

In order to search quantitatively for the processes most associated with participants *I* and *WE*, the concordance function of WS Tools was used as a starting point. This function highlights and sorts the co-text of all occurrences of *I* and *WE*, allowing the analyst to quickly locate the associated processes – typically, the verbs of which these pronouns are grammatical subject. Then as a second step, processes were qualitatively grouped into sets of approximate synonyms. For example, I categorised *we learned that* as functionally synonymous with *we discovered that*.

This categorisation of processes has much in common with I-statement analysis, a meaning-based approach to the study of identity. Gee (2005 p 141) argues that an examination of how people use first person forms to describe their actions, feelings etc, gives insight into the

identities they are constructing through their discourse. He advocates categorising I-statements on the basis of the type of predicate that follows the pronoun I. For example, in research into the socially situated identities of teenagers, Gee classifies statements into categories such as cognitive I-statement (I think, I know, I guess) or affective I-statements (I want, I like). (Gee, 2005 p141). I-statement analysis has been used in previous studies of reflective writing (e.g. Mkandawire, 2010; Ushioda, 2010).

I-statement analysis as described above is limited to predicates attached to the word *I* and possibly *WE*. An advantage of my own approach is that it also encompasses representation via a wider range of grammatical structures, thus including implicit as well as explicit representations of the self and the group. Such analysis, requiring qualitative identification of participants as well as qualitative grouping of associated processes, is feasible only with a relatively small data set such as the 12 Professional Practice texts.

Identification of salient semantic relations

Identification of semantic relations adds another dimension to the discussion of participants and processes above. Hoey (2001, ch. 8) identifies a range of basic semantic relations which occur across a range of genres and may help to indicate that genre's social purpose. Examples are problem-solution, goal-achievement, cause-consequence, and hypothetical-real. Such relations must be identified in text by a human analyst, since they are not inexorably linked with particular word combinations which a computer programme could identify.

Identification of semantic relations allows us to see not only what activities writers represent themselves and their groups as engaging in, but also the discourse value ascribed to these activities – whether they are represented, for example, as causes or consequences, as triggers to action or as responses to such triggers. An understanding of the semantic relations most frequently employed in these texts may facilitate more understanding of the reflective writing genre in terms of the narratives that it may privilege. As will be seen below, important aspects of the ‘situated identities’ inherent in this pedagogic situation can best be revealed by an analysis of frequent semantic relations.

Results and discussion

Identification of salient participants

In the Professional Practice data, the word *I* is the 5th most frequent word, appearing 147 times and present in all 12 texts. *WE* is the 6th most frequent, appearing 145 times and also present in 12/12 texts. These two are the highest frequency items with referential meaning – the 4 items with higher frequency are *the, to, and, of*. All instances of *WE* refer to the work group.

As explained above, I also examined the data to search for other grammatical resources used by writers to represent themselves or their groups. Three resources stood out: nominalisation (*Through our discussion* – K), passivisation (*work was divided* – G), and representation as object complement, whether direct (*might hinder me* – C), or indirect (*is beneficial to me* - E).

I counted 19 instances of reference to the group via nominalisation, and 4 instances of reference to self. Passivisation was used 15 times to refer to the group, and just once to refer to self.

Representation as object complement occurred 20 times for self, and just once for the group.

These results indicate that writers in this data make more use of grammatical alternatives to *WE* than of grammatical alternatives to *I*. The frequency count of pronouns showed that *I* and *WE* were used almost equally in the Professional Practice data, but this layer of analysis shows that when other grammatical options are considered, reference to the group is in fact more frequent than reference to self.

These results also suggest a link between the choice of alternative grammatical resources and the participant represented. Nominalisation and passivisation tend to be chosen to represent the group rather than the individual, whereas object complement structures are favoured to represent the individual.

In the next section I will develop these findings by examining whether there is also a pattern between the grammatical choice for representation and the content of what is said.

Identification of salient processes

Processes associated with pronouns I and WE

As discussed above, the first stage in examining this issue was to look at concordance lines of *I* and *WE*, and to group the processes associated with each pronoun on the basis of similarity of meaning.

In the concordances for *I*, three salient groupings were found. The first was around the mental process of learning, with the items learn /find/discover/realise (that)... occurring 21 times altogether. The second grouping was again around a mental process, that of belief. The items believe/ think / feel /know (that)... appeared 15 times altogether. A third frequent pattern was the item BE plus an attribute: (I am creative, I was supportive). This pattern occurred with 17 instances of *I*.

The processes most associated with *WE* seemed inverse to those associated with *I*. Of the three patterns found for *I*, none appeared more than twice in the *WE* concordance lines. Processes found in the *WE* concordance lines were quite disparate, referring to a wide range of actions. However, a certain amount of grouping was possible, with the three most salient groupings as follows.

The largest grouping was around modalisation for obligation, with need to / have to appearing 10 times in the *WE* data. The second group was around speech and communication, with discuss/negotiate/talk/utter/give opinion occurring 11 times altogether. The third grouping, around the idea of agreement, is on the interface between mental and verbal processes, and has positive valency: agree/ decide/ resolve/reach consensus occur 8 times altogether.

Processes associated with alternative grammatical representations of I and WE

The next step was to look for semantic groupings of processes associated with the alternative representations of *I* and *WE* identified in the previous section.

The clearest pattern appears where *I* is represented as object complement, thus taking the form *me*. All but two of the instances represent the *I* as benefiting in some way: examples are *gave me the opportunity* (B), *inspired me* (H). One instance seems neutral, *surprised me* (L). One appears negative, *might hinder me* (C), although this appears as part of a hypothetical-real semantic relation and does not represent the writer's final position, as a fuller text extract shows: *I felt that working with others might hinder me or at least lead to a weakening of my ideas. However, what actually happened was the opposite*. Overwhelmingly, then, writers use this grammatical option to represent themselves as benefiting in some way.

As discussed above, nominalisation and passivisation were used more to refer to the group than to the self. The most frequent content represented by nominalisation referring to the group is disagreement, occurring in 12 of the 19 instances: examples are nominalisations such as *problems came up* (A) or *due to the unsuccessful co-operation and communication between the 3 of us* (G).

Where passivisation is used to represent the group, 7 statements are quite neutral, representing actions undertaken, e.g. *a working schedule was set up* (A). However 7 other statements seem to refer to disagreement or conflict, or to face-threatening scenarios: *not every piece of work was accepted* (B).

These patterns indicate an association between grammatical resources chosen and content expressed – the idea of *I* as beneficiary is salient when *I* is represented as object complement, but

not in when *I* is subject of a verb. In the *WE* data, representations of interaction are salient in both explicit and implicit *WE* statements, but the representation of conflict is found more strongly in passivised or nominalised statements. Writers are happy to explicitly represent their group as communicating, but prefer less direct attribution when representing conflict: ‘our arguments’ rather than ‘we argued’.

What, then, are the dominant representations of self and group which emerge? In summary, the team is represented as being under obligation (explicit *WE*), as acting, discussing and negotiating (explicit and implicit *WE*) and then as agreeing (explicit *WE*) and as disagreeing (implicit *WE*). The individual is represented as having attributes and beliefs (explicit *I*) as learning new things (explicit *I*) and as benefiting from the experience (implicit *I*).

Identification of salient semantic relations

The task prompt encourages writers to think in terms of solving problems, and indeed, the most frequently occurring of Hoey’s (2001) range of semantic relations was the Problem-Solution pattern, occurring 19 times over the 12 texts. Problem-Solution patterns organise texts or portions of text by presenting a trigger to action; what Hoey terms an aspect of situation requiring a response. In the Professional Practice texts, the Problem is always a difficulty, to which the individual writer and/or the team needed to respond. Examination of Problem-Solution patterns casts interesting light on the representation of identity in text since the writer makes choices about who they represent as experiencing a problem, who they represent as attempting to solve it, and the extent to which they evaluate it as finally solved.

I found 3 representations of an individual experiencing a problem and responding to it themselves. For example: *Since we started our project I had been able to neither express my own opinion nor judge whether the ideas my team members raised were appropriate or not for our course design.... However, I changed my mind and proposed to keep all the records of our progress.* (D). In all three cases of individual Problem – individual Response, the Response is presented as a successful.

In all other cases, 16 of 19, the Problem is represented as belonging to the group. In one case the writer represents him/herself as supplying the Response – in all other cases, the Response is represented as coming from the group. In all but one case, the Response is presented as a successful solution.

Two major types of Response are represented. The first shows the group members as taking some action, e.g. *Our course consists of input materials of different media... which are not easily accessible on campus. So we needed to go out and search for them.* (A). I identified 7 Problem-Solution scenarios of this type. In 8 other cases, the Response is presented not in terms of actions taken by the group, but rather in terms of interaction styles adopted by the group, e.g. *Although arguments about various issues were inevitable, we tried to compromise as much as we could.* (A).

Those two variations on Response accounted for 15 of 16 Problem-Solution patterns where the Problem is represented as belonging to the group. It seems that Problem-Solution patterns in this data have a strong function of representing both group solidarity and group success. The writers

choose to assign difficulties to the group as a whole rather than to individual members, and then to represent the whole group as successfully solving the difficulty encountered. This is arguably a group identity which is privileged by this genre.

Positive valency of representations

The most salient identity which emerges for the individual writer is that of a learner who has benefited from the project and the group process. The group is represented as a hardworking team and as the context which makes the learning possible – the group discusses, takes actions, and solves problems. Both sets of identity are, in my view, overwhelmingly positive and rather non-critical. Writers have a strong tendency to show the module, the project, themselves and their groupmates in a positive light. They are willing to refer to difficulties or to negative aspects of group interaction, but only in order to show how the problems were later solved. As supposed reflections on a process, these representations significantly underplay the messy, confusing, contradictory aspects of working in a group.

As a teacher on the course for several years, I was all too conscious that this generally rosy picture was not the reality experienced by many students. Like my colleagues, I was often approached by students to discuss difficulties in group dynamics. What, then, are the factors which may have influenced our students to give an overly positive representation of their experience?

One issue may be the extent to which students perceive the reflective writing as a task in itself, where the learning opportunity is in the writing, or as a report on a task, where the learning

opportunity is the task itself. A prompt such as *How did your group plan the work?* may lead students to believe that they will be assessed not only on the quality of their reflections, but also on the quality and quantity of activities that they report. Under such an interpretation, it would be dangerous to portray self or group as having acted less than optimally. Gunn (2010) reports that student teachers were unwilling to represent themselves as having acted ineffectively in class; it seems that these writers have a similar reluctance, to portray themselves or their groups as having worked ineffectively in their project. Such reluctance would mitigate against the task offering an opportunity for genuine reflection.

A second, perhaps more important issue, is that of community expectations. Students were strongly encouraged to work in a group. The culture of the department communicated that staff believed that working in groups on this project would be beneficial. A textual indication of this is the positive emphasis of the task brief. Prompts such as *What benefits did you find? How did you deal with problems?* communicate to students that a positive report is expected. It seems likely that students pick up the cue – they wish to support the positive face of staff members by representing themselves as having benefitted from the task.

Hargreaves (2004) discusses the educational trend towards ever more transparent congruence between learning tasks, assessment criteria, and assessment tasks. She argues that as a consequence, learning outcomes may become over prescribed, and include not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also the acquisition of attitudes. A similar point is made by Littlewood (2009) who argues that prescription of learning outcomes from processes can inhibit students' actual learning. The Professional Practice task brief prescribes positive learning

outcomes, both in terms of the acquisition of skills and the development of personal understanding. The language of the task brief emphasises the expected positive nature of the group experience, and students may conclude that it would not be acceptable to criticise group members or be negative about one's own learning experience. A 'situated identity' associated with this task is that of a learner who benefits from the collaborative work of a conscientious group.

Implications for understanding assessed reflective writing

The current research, with its focus on representation of self and group, can contribute to our broader understanding of assessed reflective writing. The demands made of these particular writers – to represent their groups as well as themselves – are also an opportunity for them, since writers can make strategic choices about what to attribute to the group and what to the individual.

Reflective writing requires reports on actions. Such reports tend to be attributed in this data to *WE*. By choosing *WE*, students are able to avoid differentiating their own actions and contributions from those of colleagues. This may enable them to claim more credit than was due – if they personally did not contribute very much, the use of *WE* avoids the possibility of having to fictionalise. Various studies on assessed reflective writing (e.g. Stierer, 2002; Hargreaves, 2004; Hobbs, 2007) have argued that assessed reflective accounts are likely to be fictionalised to some degree, as writers attempt to portray themselves positively. In this data, students can also use the option of identifying themselves with a group.

Reflective writers know that they need to admit to having experienced difficulties. In our data it is explicit in the task brief; even if it was not, it could be recognised as a genre convention. Some researchers (e.g. Hatton & Smith, 1995; Cattley, 2007; Sutherland et al., 2010) relate this issue to the quality of reflection evident in students' reflective talk or writing, on a continuum from more superficial, to deeper, reflection. Recognition of difficulties is related to deeper reflection, and as such is desired by assessors; but as discussed above, it also carries risks for the writer.

In this data, writers are much more likely to associate difficult issues with the whole group than with themselves alone. This tendency suggests that they are using the association with the group strategically, as a layer of protection. Having associated a difficulty with the whole team, writers can distance themselves even further from the experience by nominalising or passivising. A good example of this is the student who writes: *Another problem we had is language barrier. ... Misunderstanding in the language occurred occasionally.* (J). To admit to language problems is face-threatening for a language teacher, and common sense suggests that not all members of the team will have experienced language difficulties to the same degree. By attributing the problem to the whole team and by nominalising, the writer avoids attribution to particular individuals. The writer is therefore able to comply with the genre expectation to write about problems, while avoiding potential threats to own or others' face. It is at least possible that this strategy enables them to appear to be engaging in relatively deep levels of reflection without committing themselves to an admission of weakness or to criticism of others, and also without resorting to fiction.

Reflective writers also know that they should show themselves as developing and improving; we should therefore not be surprised by the preponderance of an idea of ‘learn’ associated with *I*. However, it is challenging to claim development while at the same time appearing appropriately modest. Writers in this data are able to manage this delicate task by representing themselves as having benefited from team processes or from team mates directly. They claim to have developed, yet avoid taking all credit for this themselves. They show themselves learning new things, and also recognising the contribution of others. Praise goes to the group rather than to self.

This analysis, then, confirms the view that reflective writers may make use of a variety of strategies to protect their lifeworld selves and to reduce the face threats involved in admissions of, or accusations of, weakness. It also shows writers’ resourcefulness when claiming learning and development, narrating actions, commenting on the contribution of others, and expressing gratitude for learning opportunities.

The specific strategies used by these writers have been shown to be closely related to the task brief given and to the expectations of learning community. It may be useful for other researchers to examine other data sets to see whether relevant ‘situated identities’ can be uncovered following the methodology outlined here.

Developments in our context

This reflective writing task is no longer included in the assessment for the Professional Practice module. As a group of teachers responsible for the module, we found ourselves increasingly

unclear about the ways in which the task contributed to student learning and concerned that it may inhibit, rather than promote, honest reflection.

However, we remain committed to offering our students opportunities for reflection on their work as they are doing it. We have shifted from reflection as part of assessment, to reflection as a support to an assessed task. Currently, we use a presentation and a poster as an opportunity for reflective talk. We use a style of supportive questioning which we feel is likely to promote reflection (Mann, 2005). We now seek to promote non-assessed, dialogic spaces for reflection (Mann & Copland, 2010) rather than attempting to promote reflection through assessed, monologic work.

We have also moved away from preferring our students to undertake the course development task in teams. We continue to offer team work as an option, and it is regularly chosen by students who share similar professional contexts. Other students, however, prefer to work alone, and our current approach does not discourage them in any way. We hope that we now communicate fewer assumptions about beneficial ways of working, and so now allow our experienced, adult students more space in which to reflect on their own decisions.

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