

Chapter 18

Appraisal Theory: Opportunities for Social Networking Sites’ Complementation of Writing Centres

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ABSTRACT

While Writing Centres provide dialogic spaces for student articulation of voice, they insufficiently deal with asymmetrical power relations built into expert-novice conversations, which potentially disrupt novices’ democratic expression of their voices. Yet the conversational nature of Facebook presents opportunities for ESL students to express their voices. This chapter: 1) Employs draft essays of first-year ESL students submitted to a Writing Centre to unravel their challenges with asserting their voice, 2) Uses reflective narratives of Writing consultants and ESL students to understand how their English language acquisition is impacted by their appropriation of Facebook and 3) Unravels how Facebook complements the mandate of Writing Centres of developing the academic voice of students. Findings suggest that students lacked confidence in asserting their authorial presence and familiarisation with academic conventions. Students and consultants’ essays demonstrated a balanced appropriation of attitudinal and judgement categories and engagement resources, with implications for the potential of Facebook to mediate student expression of their voice.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most complex academic endeavours is to initiate first year students into the writing practices and academic discourses of their disciplines at university. Literature on language literacy in South Africa higher education (SAHE) underscores academically underprepared students’ (especially English as Second Language (ESL)) problems with academic writing in general (McKenna,

2004; Archer, 2010). More so, the same body of literature also acknowledges students’ inadequate knowledge of how to assert their academic authority due to a lack of familiarisation with academic conventions (Hodges, 1997; Lea & Street, 1998; Read, Francis, & Robson, 2001). Conventions of academic writing in mainstream academia are ambiguous, assumed and often confusing to students (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Lea & Street, 1998). As such, novices often struggle to develop,

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extend and challenge the ideas and arguments of established authors in ways that enact and assert their voice in writing. Hodges (1997) postulates that when novices first encounter theory, they often rely on parrot-speech in their endeavour to ventriloquise the academic voices of the established authors in their fields.

In recognition of this perennial challenge of scholarly writing, the need to increase consciousness of academic conventions and enactment individual voices, South African higher educational institutions (HEIs) have instituted structural interventions such as Writing Centres under the broader ambit of Academic Development Programmes (ADP) to tackle head on these literacy challenges. Among the various mandates of Writing Centres are training and socialising students into their disciplinary discourses (i.e. ways of conceptualising ideas and logical argumentation) and engaging in scholarly discourses through the enactment and development of student voices in writing. The challenge however, is that these Language and ADP created to assist students with their English language skills are often offered as support services situated out of the main teaching curricula within the disciplines (Wingate, 2006; Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). This 'quick fix' model contributed to the conception of Writing Centres as "mostly 'add on' measures where the weaker students were siphoned off from the mainstream" and "remediation centres to rectify language 'deficiencies' in individual students" (Archer, 2010, p. 496). This 'deficiency-based' approach seems inconsistent with the highly discipline-specific nature of the discourses that unfold within departments at university. Furthermore, the fact that Writing Centres are physically located as separate entities on the main campuses (and not in different disciplines) presents additional challenges for the delivery of academic support for part time students, students on distributed campuses, distance learners, disabled students who enroll at South African universities. More so, the philosophy of Writing Centres such as their assumptions

that scholarly discourses can be articulated and that student voices can be enacted and developed through academic training presupposes students' clear understanding of the conventions of academic engagement and argumentation of their disciplines. Yet the conventions of academic writing can be seen metaphorically as a type of 'code' to be 'cracked,' a form of knowledge that students must uncover for themselves (Read, Francis, & Robson, 2001, p. 388). Therefore, academic writing is considered rewarding for students who have identified, internalised and become effective in verbalising this code in academic writing.

Mindful of the heavy presence of South African young adults on social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, wikis and blogs), the inherently text-based nature of social media communication coupled with its capacity to support reflective writing and commentary, it is self evident that SNSs such as Facebook present potentially productive tools for training students in foreign language literacy, improving communicative competence and accessing academic conventions of their disciplines (Chen, 2013; Chen & Yang, 2014). Despite this emerging body of research, there still exists a concomitant recognition that the potential of SNSs to shape student [language] literacy practices and enact learner voices remains underexplored in mainstream literature (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Chen, 2013). Yet Internet based tools like SNSs have challenged traditional notions of language literacy and literacy as acquiring linguistic elements that are fixed, rule-governed, monomodal, and static through their redefinition of literacy as social practices that are fluid, sociocultural, multimodal, and dynamic (Chen, 2013). Similarly, SNSs such as weblogs provide a safe and structured online discussion environment for the articulation and discussion of personal stories by students across the world in their preferred digital form (Chen & Yang, 2014). Mindful of the aforementioned linguistic challenges of South African university entrants and the capacity of SNSs to transform academic

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