

CHAPTER 23

TELLING STORIES: INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' WRITING THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVE

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In an increasingly diverse educational context, the attempt to impose “one voice” and one “literacy” on the myriad of “voices” and “literacies” that now make up our student bodies seems ever more futile and ever less desirable. In this reflective piece, I suggest that in order to embrace this diversity, those who work in the field of academic literacies need to challenge and transgress the constraints inherent in “normative” texts in their own professional writing. By drawing on personal narrative and incorporating alternative textual forms, I hope to both argue and exemplify how those who work with student writers can, and should, be troubling dominant academic discourses.

Early responses to the massification of the British Higher Education system were very much informed by notions that many of the new type of university student were somehow lacking in the “skills” needed to succeed. Academic Literacies research has done much over the past 20 years to challenge this deficit model, yet, in my experience at least, the way the attributes and educational experiences of “international” students are conceptualized and described still very often perpetuate the perception that they are somehow “lacking” or “less.”

Discourses of internationalization often position Western and Asian education systems and scholarship in terms of binary opposites such as “deep/surface,” “adversarial/harmonious,” and “independent/dependent” and uncritically attribute these labels to whole populations and communities of practice. (Janette Ryan & Kam Louie, 2008, p. 65)

Within the binaries and generalizations commonly used to describe those who come from other cultural and educational backgrounds, there is little that does not

reflect traditional Western notions of knowledge production or that encourages a positive engagement with the rich diversity an international student body brings to the HE context. In the same way that those students labelled “non-traditional” may struggle to learn the rules of the game and to participate successfully in higher education, so many international students have also found themselves excluded from academic discourse because the language skills and modes of knowledge production that have served them well until their arrival in the United Kingdom are suddenly deemed “deficient.” Ursula Wingate and Christopher Tribble (2012, p. 484) argue that “all students, whether they are native or non-native speakers of English, or ‘non-traditional,’ or ‘traditional’ students, are novices when dealing with academic discourse in the disciplines” and will therefore need support with their academic writing. But if we accept the claim that all students are “novices,” then this begs the question: Who are the experts? It would seem to me that one answer might be; those of us who write and publish academic texts. As Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott point out (2007, p. 18), “the high status academic journal article continues to serve as an implicit model for the texts students are expected to produce,” and in almost every case that model closely follows the conventions of a “normative” text.

In my work I support both “home” and “international” students; my job is to help them improve their written language skills and to adapt to academic culture in the United Kingdom. I work closely with many students, often one on one, and while a student’s language skills may be the focus of my work, often the personal and the political intervene:

Angel came to see me because she wanted to practise her spoken English. What shall we talk about I ask her? She doesn’t know. Well, tell me how you came to be in Plymouth, I say. Angel begins to talk. She speaks of life under Saddam Hussein. Of chemical warfare and the rising levels of infertility that are the terrible consequence. Of twelve nights in the basement of her house, hiding in the dark. She tells me how she had to battle with a hostile administrative system to be here. Of her determination to complete her PhD and take back something of value to her homeland. To help rebuild Iraq.

More and more in my work and in my research I find that I cannot help but respond to the individuals I engage with, and to what their story is telling me about them and about the world we live in (see Scott and Mitchell Reflections 1 this volume). There is a richness, a depth, a multi-layering in these narrative accounts that fascinate me and which I wish to capture in my writing. Van Maanen (1998, cited in Jaber Gubrium & James Holstein, 2003) says that how research is presented is at least as important as what is presented. Conventional academic writing is a powerful discourse that conceals and excludes; as Laurel Richardson argues, “*how* we

are expected to write affects *what* we can write about; the form in which we write shapes the content” (cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 187). She argues that traditional modes of representation serve only to conceal the “lived, interactional context in which the text was co-produced” (Richardson, 1997, p. 139). And so, as I write about the individuals I meet and the way in which these encounters impact on my own writing practices, I try to embody these struggles in the shape and form and content of the text, and to “out” the personal in type (Ken Gale & Jonathan-Wyatt, 2009). I also write in the hope that this “story-telling” and “story-retelling” can help to break down some of the cultural, educational and emotional barriers that position students, and in particular “international” students, both as “other” and “deficient.” Stories reflect the discourses that work upon us and therefore there is a need to subject personal narratives to a very “intense and focused” gaze in order to arrive at a better “understanding of the social, of the way individual subjectivities are created and maintained through specific kinds of discursive practices, within particular historical moments, in particular contexts” (Bronwyn Davies & Susan Gannon, 2006, p. 4). Davies and Gannon argue that it is only by recognizing the ways in which discourse works on us, and we on it, that we can begin to initiate some kind of change, to begin the vital process of “disturbing and destabilizing sedimented thinking” (2006, p. 147).

My work with Angel has spanned several years now. In her initial visits to me she wanted to develop her spoken English skills. She hadn’t been in the United Kingdom much more than a year then, and had only recently begun work on her PhD. She struggled to convey quite basic information, both orally and in her writing, and gaining her doctorate seemed very far away, to both of us. We have been on a long and eventful journey, one that has revealed much to me about the nature of writing and the power of language. Angel is a university lecturer in Iraq. She is highly educated, and she is knowledgeable and passionate about her subject. Both academically and professionally I am her inferior, and yet because she has chosen to study in the United Kingdom, she is regarded as the one who is deficient. She has struggled to acculturate on a number of levels. Not just to the language of the academy and her discipline, but also to the myriad of other contexts and communities she must negotiate in order to “survive and succeed.” Often her “lack” of language has been perceived as a “problem.” Proof that she should not be here. An excuse to exclude and dismiss:

Angel is having a difficult time. She is losing weight again and there is a blankness behind her eyes. She has been on placement in a local secondary school for the past few weeks so I haven’t seen much of her. She thought she would be invited to teach, or perhaps share some of her expertise. But Angel has been treated very badly by some of the staff at the school. They ignore her in

the corridor and send her on menial errands.

“Miss, yes you Miss, I need some more lined paper.”

Angel is disappointed in these English women and their behavior toward her. I am disappointed too. I have met those kinds of people before.

Discourses can have very real effects on people’s lives. Failing to acknowledge the power discourses have to impact on the way we think and behave, or the way in which we are complicit in their construction and perpetration, is to become a prisoner of what Paulo Freire terms a “circle of certainty” (Freire, 2000, p. 39). If we believe that the world can be ordered and named, if we believe in absolute truths, then we lose the ability to “confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled” (Freire, 2000, p. 39). Freire argues that it is imperative that we engage in dialogues with our fellow men and women and to open ourselves up to what it is that is *really* being said. Working with Angel, listening to her stories and becoming her friend, has expanded my capacity to “know” and has helped me to begin to recognize and trouble the powerful discourses that are currently being constructed to define and maintain notions of the Muslim “other.” It has also helped me to recognize the ways in which similar discourses impact on my engagement with all those who might just as easily be categorised as “not us.” One of the things that drew me to write about (and with) Angel was the way her life and PhD work intertwined. In her research, she explores the communication barriers children who speak English as an Additional Language experience when they talk about pain and I know Angel and her family experienced the very same language and cultural barriers every day: Angel has lived the “real” experience of the EAL children she has chosen to research. Yet there is no evidence in Angel’s professional writing of the painful and personal challenges and obstacles that she has overcome in its creation. For though there is nothing more personal than the work of the “lone scholar,” traditional academic discourse encourages, even insists, that the writer must conceal herself and deny her subjective experience.

Angel has had an article published. She is pleased and proud. She sends me a copy to read. I recognize her work immediately. It is part of her thesis that we have spent many hours writing and rewriting. I am intrigued by the smooth, professionalism of the piece. It reads as a journal article “should.” Gone are the awkward sentences and faulty grammar. Her theoretical basis is fluently and clearly expounded. The research relevant and appropriately referenced. Angel’s work has been fully translated into the “accepted” language of the academy. Although I am excited for Angel, I am also saddened that she has been so successfully

“erased” from the text, that there is still no room for the personal or the subjective or the imperfect in the traditional “science story.”

I am convinced that in order to challenge the powerful discourses of the “normative” text and to make way for a richer more varied, and more inclusive notion of what can constitute “academic” writing, there is an imperative for those of us who write professionally to reveal our subjectivities in both what we write and in the way we write. Lillis and Scott (2007) note the value of ethnographic research as a tool for addressing inequalities but also suggest that the often small-scale nature of such research projects may have inhibited empirical and theoretical developments in the field of academic literacies. But writers such as Ron Peliás argue that, conversely, it is vital that educators and researchers engage *more* and not less in what he terms “empathetic scholarship.” The notion of a shared humanity is central to my research and my writing and I refuse to buy into the notion that ethnographic, even autoethnographic, practices are somehow lacking, less, or deficient. And so, like Peliás and others, I choose to position myself as a writer, and as a researcher who, “instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings [herself] forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study” (Peliás, 2004, p. 1). I choose to produce texts that create spaces in which both the personal and the political can resonate and where linguistic norms and textual forms can be troubled (Helen Bowstead, 2011). Inspired by Laurel Richardson I have experimented with poetic transcription and in doing so I have experienced the evocative power of words liberated from the “bloodless prose” of the traditional academic text (Stoller, p. xv, cited in Peliás, 2004, p. 10). In exploring alternative textual forms, I have found I am able to write my way into a place where I can not only formulate a more meaningful response to the social, political and educational issues that I face in my work, but also give voice to those I work with in a way that both honours and empowers them (Richardson, 1997):

Angel sits next to me while she writes. I try not to watch as her hand moves across the page. I think her hand will move right to left. Awkwardly, as my own would. But it dances across the page. There is nothing linear about the way she writes. When she is finished, I ask her to tell me what she has written. I write down her words but I am not sure I can capture in English what she has expressed in her own language. I decide not to try.

Angel talks of the pity she sees in people’s eyes, of how she feels “second-rate,” inferior. But I do not pity her. I have only admiration. She has a lion’s heart. I imagine how beautiful her PhD

know for many students, including Angel, that they get through by following the rules, rules that I help impose. But even when they become more skilled players of the game, when they have become more familiar and more articulate in the language of their subject and of the institution, they often don't have the time, the energy, or the confidence to challenge and contest the dominant discourses that they find themselves writing to. Though the academic literacies model has opened up spaces for students to explore notions of meaning-making, identity and power, and though it has foregrounded "the variety and specificity of institutional practices and students' struggles to make sense of these" (Mary Lea & Brian Street, 2006, p. 376), perhaps what those who work in the field still do not do enough is to explicitly challenge those institutional practices in terms of the *kinds* of texts they themselves create and publish.

Westernized notions of coherence and cohesion are, like any discourse, are a construction and, if I can quote George Gershwin, "it ain't necessarily so." I believe that engaging with alternative writing practices, and by that I mean writing that is not bound by the "often impoverished perspective on language and literacy that is trumpeted in official and public discourses" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 21), affords professional academic writers huge opportunities for engaging in the production of texts that embrace and promote forms of knowledge production that not only reflect and celebrate, but also *embody*, what it means to be part of the complex "new communicative order" that is emerging in our ever globalized world (Street, 2004, cited in Lillis & Scott, 2007). In her discussions with student writers, Theresa Lillis (2003, p. 205) often encountered "a desire to make meaning through logic and emotion, argument and poetry, impersonal and personal constructions of text," to create the kind of "hybrid" texts that are "pregnant with potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 36 cited in Lillis, 2003, p. 205). Yet, it is incredibly difficult for (novice) student writers to transform their writing practices unless they are exposed to (published) academic work that embodies this desire to trouble academic norms and to explore alternative textual forms. It is not that such texts do not exist, nor that they fail to meet the highest of academic standards. Writers such as John Danvers (2004), Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt (2009), Ron Pelias (2004), Laurel Richardson (1997,) Tammy Spry (2011) and Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997) have all published texts which, though they are often striking and personal, and sometimes challenging and difficult, easily meet the criteria that Richardson and St. Pierre (1994, p. 964) suggest can be used to measure texts produced through "creative analytical processes." That is to say that, as well as making a substantive contribution to our understanding of social life, these works demonstrate an aesthetic merit that is both complex and satisfying, and a deep reflexivity that clearly evidences the author's accountability to the people studied. And while it is important that "confounding expectations should not become a

new orthodoxy” (Danvers, 2004, p. 171), these are all texts that have a significant emotional and intellectual impact on the reader (see also Horner and Lillis Reflections 4 this volume). Therefore, I am convinced that if we wish to develop a system of higher education “premised upon the explicit aims of inclusion and diversity” (Lillis, 2003, p. 192), then it behoves us as the writers in the field to seek out and produce textual forms that embody and embrace the heterogeneity of our student populations, texts which can act as models of the kinds of alternative modes of mean-making that our student writers can engage with, and aspire to.

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