CHAPTER 12

Negotiating Rich Response Networks and Textual Ownership in Dissertation Writing

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Introduction

In May 2006, So Jin Park successfully defended her dissertation in Anthropology. Her dissertation examined how Korean working class and middle class mothers responded to pressures to have their children attend private after-school lessons to improve their chances for success in a shifting economy. At the start of her final dissertation defence, her advisor, Dr Abelmann, praised So Jin’s work, and importantly her approaches to work, using words like “stellar” to describe So Jin’s scholarship. So Jin felt pride in her accomplishment but she acknowledged that the road had not been easy, and she expressed a debt of gratitude to the writing support networks she had utilised while a post/graduate student. Such networks included expected sources like her advisor and tutors at her campus Writing Centre, but they also included other post/graduate students in her programme with whom she had interacted extensively throughout the writing process. This chapter draws on Bakhtinian theory of utterance and response to explore some of the writing networks she participated in, and argues that her interactions within those networks played a crucial role in the shaping of her text, in the growing of her identity as a scholar in Anthropology and in the development of her post/graduate level research literacies.

Conceptual Framework

In writing her dissertation, So Jin had to learn to inhabit multiple and competing social and discursive spheres. For example, since her research required her to talk about educational decisions with working class and middle class mothers who were less educated than she was, she sometimes had to empha-
prise, and sometimes had to de-emphasise, her expertise in educational matters (Park, 2006). Also, as an international student at a Midwestern American institution, she had to negotiate linguistic and cultural differences between herself and many of her professors and peers. In doing so, she drew on extensive networks for support for the complex writing and thinking necessary to craft a dissertation. In each of her interactions with these networks, So Jin was not merely a passive recipient of writing advice. To the contrary, she actively negotiated competing perspectives and perceptions about the scholarly work she was pursuing, and thereby acted with agency in eliciting and responding to feedback on her writing.

In academic writing, speakers and writers must draw on combinations of personal histories and social conventions (Clark & Doheny-Farina, 1990; Chiseri-Strater, 1991). Second-language speakers face particular challenges because their ways of knowing, understanding, interacting, and expressing may differ considerably from dominant mainstream styles (Rodby, 1992; Villanueva, 1993; Fox, 1994, Canagarajah, 2002, Casanave, 2002). Consequently, if we take “culture” to mean dynamic repertoires of linguistic and social practices (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) that stem from contact and interaction across multiple groups, then we can see that negotiations of writing take place in social environments where both writers and respondents act upon their own understandings of disciplinary, theoretical and textual expectations. Thus, “the role of the others for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely great” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 94). This broad social notion of voice suggests not only that speakers and writers add their own inflections to the words of others (Bakhtin, 1986), but also that voice itself incorporates a meshing of attitudes or stances about topics, as well as about words. Bakhtin (1986) theorised that an utterance “expresses the speaker’s attitudes toward other’s utterances and not just his attitude toward the object of his utterance […]. After all, our thought itself [… ] philosophical, scientific and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thoughts as well” (p. 92).

In a complex task like dissertation writing, response is not limited to advisor/student dyads but can incorporate many other interactions with what might be termed intermediary respondents and end respondents. “Intermediary respondents may help writers shape texts, but they do not pass binding, gate-keeping judgments on the text or the writer” (Buell, 2012, p. 6) as end readers do. Intermediary respondents often direct responses to the text or, as in So Jin’s case, to concepts raised in the text; in doing this, they may reflect what they imagine to be expectations of end readers within the given university, and more broadly, within the professional fields. In this framework, Bakhtinian theory