Reclaiming the Authorial Self in Academic Writing through Image Theatre

Aditi Hunma

Introduction

Academic writing remains one of the key modes of assessment in tertiary institutions. Students are assessed not only on the basis of their content knowledge but more so, on their ability to critically engage with ideas and with other knowers in the field. Thus, a mastery of academic writing norms does not restrict itself to students’ ‘proficiency’ to construct grammatical sentences or to follow genre specifications. It also requires an ability to enter discursive spaces where one’s voice can be asserted among other authors, and signs of critical thinking can be displayed in the written text (see also Williams, chapter 6, and Bell, chapter 7, this volume on the ways novices approach academic text writing).

Often, the term ‘voice’ is mistakenly understood as an inborn sense of self or consciousness. In this chapter, I lean towards a notion of voice as constructed and multiple, and hence prefer Clark and Ivanič’s (1997) term ‘writer identities’, which in their view encompasses different identity strands. These take the shape of the ‘autobiographical self’, which is the writer’s ‘life history’; the ‘discoursal self’, which can be understood as the writer’s discipline-specific self; and the ‘authorial self’, defined as ‘the writer’s sense of authority or authorial presence in the text’ (p. 137).

My interest in writer identities stems from a broader research on innovative methods and spaces to teach academic writing to international students with English as an additional language (EAL) (Hunma, 2012). I use EAL deliberately rather than the loaded ‘English as a second language’ which can construct false hierarchies between first and second language speakers (Pennycook, 2001). It would be more useful, as Norton (1997) suggests, to pose the following questions: ‘What is the learner’s linguistic repertoire? Is the learner’s relationship to...
these languages based on expertise, inheritance, affiliation, or a combination? The research also focused on questions around writer identities in students’ academic essays, exploring possible identity clashes, enablers and constraints from students’ previous school and home environments.

The research participants hailed from various nations within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and enrolled for courses across various disciplines at a South African university. As such, the groupings were far from homogeneous, and students from Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritius, Tanzania, Lesotho brought with them a variety of resources, or socio-cultural and symbolic capital, that would perhaps never find their way into an academic essay. From a lecturing perspective, one would agree that a writing pedagogy overlooking the tensions between texts, self and contexts could border on the ‘deficit model’ where students' writing issues would be viewed as an illness in urgent need of remedy (Street, 1993).

The participants signed up for a four session long Writers Workshop where they met with other international students and engaged with texts of different genres. The workshops were designed to introduce them not only to the academic writing conventions at the University, but also to the ways of negotiating voice within the ambit of their disciplinary discourses. While most of the participants had studied under the Cambridge education system and were fluent in written English, other layers of fluency were on the verge of gaining criticality at the tertiary institution in question. Here I allude to the conventions of academic writing in undergraduate studies, where critical thinking and argumentation are just some of the many concerns students need to address. In first year written essays in particular, I noticed a sense of loss, a strategic performance of the ‘discoursal self’ counter-balanced by a downplaying of the ‘authorial self’ in academic writing (Hunma, 2009), which at times could be equated with a lack of critical thinking.

This begs the question: How does one reclaim the ‘authorial self’ when the academic writing genre seems to privilege a reproduction of scholarly views rather than knowledge making in explicit ways? It would appear that a reliance on traditional methods or prescriptive approaches to nurture students’ authorial self in writing, falls short of achieving the set goals as students may become overly preoccupied with the required template. In this regard, I suggest alternative moves in which theatre performance, especially ‘Image Theatre’, can bring the self back to the centre of claims to knowledge and one’s experiences of the social world.

‘Image Theatre’ was first introduced in Brazil in the 1950s by Augusto Boal as part of his *Theatre of the Oppressed* to enable individuals, often living in informal settlements, to rise above disheartening circumstances or social