

CHAPTER 8

DISCIPLINED VOICES, DISCIPLINED FEELINGS: EXPLORING CONSTRAINTS AND CHOICES IN A THESIS WRITING CIRCLE

Kate Chanock, Sylvia Whitmore and Makiko Nishitani

Each author has contributed to this account, but we do not attempt to speak with one voice, for we occupy different positions in the university and come from different perspectives, as will be seen. To avoid confusion, therefore, Kate has produced an “I” narrative in which Sylvia and Makiko speak within quotation marks. All of us have then considered and amended the resulting article before submitting it for publication.

When Mary Lea and Brian Street articulated the concept of Academic Literacies, it spoke to the concerns of many Australian teachers of what was then, and still is now, known generally as academic skills (a role with various labels, but most often “Learning Advisers”). Although we were employed to impart the habits, forms, and conventions of academic performance, we resisted the delineation of our role as “study skills” support. The “how-to” focus was neither pedagogically effective nor intellectually persuasive, and (led by Gordon Taylor et al., 1988) many of us were re-framing our teaching to start with the “why-to”—the purposes and values underlying the diverse forms, practices and language of academic work encountered in the disciplines. Such teaching can, however, remain “assimilationist,” supporting students to produce writing that is “a demonstration of the acquisition of institutional, subject or disciplinary knowledge and insiderdom,” without questioning the context within which this all takes place (David Russell, Mary Lea, Jan Parker, Brian Street, & Christiane Donahue, 2009, pp. 411-412). When Learning Advisers are asked to work with students to improve their “academic literacies,” it is usually in conjunction with courses that discipline students and their writing in both senses of “discipline,” that is, control and intellectual training (Russell et al., 2009, p. 413).

It is possible, however, in some classes that focus on writing in or across particular fields, to find ways to talk about what the conventions enable and what

they constrain, and how much room there may be for “informed choice”. It is this effort at opening up spaces in which we can encourage “informed choice” that we consider transformatory. This is an account of one such discussion, in the context of a Thesis Writing Circle for research students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at an Australian university, to which the authors (the staff convenor, and two student members) belong—an example of an “alternative [space] for writing and meaning making in the academy” (Russell et al., 2009, p. 404, citing Theresa Lillis, 2006; for discussions of the purposes and benefits of writing circles, see Claire Aitchison & Alison Lee, 2006; Wendy Larcombe, Anthony McCosker, & Kieran O’Loughlin, 2007). For students engaged in the high-stakes enterprise of writing a thesis, where everything depends upon its acceptance by a few authorized and authorizing readers, the writing circle provides an alternative readership of people who are unconcerned with how the writing reflects on the writer (or the supervisor) in terms of mastery of content, theory or method, but who focus instead on how satisfying their texts can be for both writer and reader. This involves negotiating with each other on many levels simultaneously, about the grammar and punctuation, the sound and feel, the clarity and comprehensibility of their texts; and it suggests ways of negotiating further with supervisors about the possibilities that these discussions identify.

What I contribute, from a background in Applied Linguistics and long exposure to the faculty’s disciplinary cultures and discourses, is what Sara Cotterall describes as “a guide who can help demystify the writing process and provide opportunities to discuss and experience different ways of writing” (2011, p. 415). Following my invitation on the faculty’s postgraduate email list, interested students decided to meet fortnightly for an hour to share and respond to one another’s writing. Our meetings follow participants’ concerns, either flagged in the email accompanying their 1,000-word submissions, or arising in discussion at the meetings. These discussions exemplify the distinction Theresa Lillis has described between evaluative “feedback” focussing on “the student’s written text as a product,” and “talkback,” which focuses on the “text in process,” and recognizes “the partial nature of any text and hence the range of potential meanings, [in] an attempt to open up space where the student-writer can say what she likes and doesn’t like about her writing” (2003, p. 204).

Our circle had been meeting only a few weeks, and several students had expressed an interest in knowing more about “voice,” when Sylvia, whose turn it was to submit a piece for response, asked us to think about whether her writing was “pedestrian.” This concern arose, she explains, because “I have always been extremely careful in my writing to ensure that I have not embellished or distorted archaeological evidence. Therefore (although perhaps not always consciously), I have generally avoided the use of the first person to prevent falling into the trap of becoming “too creative,” particularly if the subject matter is not associated with

direct personal experience.” Sylvia’s piece was, in fact, an exemplary piece of archaeological discussion, and it was probably fortunate that the second piece submitted that week, by Makiko, was very different, while also very appropriate for her discipline of anthropology. The texts suggested, and the discussion confirmed, that we were looking at “disciplined” voices, about which the writers had “disciplined” feelings. Their contrasts afforded a way of approaching Sylvia’s question in terms of academic literacies, rather than in terms of a personal style derived simply from personality and constrained only by taste.

On receipt of both submissions I circulated an email ahead of that week’s meeting, suggesting questions the members might like to bear in mind while reading them:

- Whose voices do we hear in each text?
- What is the relationship of the writer to the objects she’s investigating?
- Is this different in different disciplines?

In other words, how far is the writer’s presence in, or absence from, the text a matter of personal choice and how far is it a convention of the discipline? Why do different disciplines have different conventions about this? (And do they change, and if so, why?)

I also attached a handout looking at voice as a constrained choice via a comparison of theses in different disciplines, and different sections within the same thesis, to facilitate consideration of how much choice a writer has (for full details of handout, see Chanock, 2007; for extracts see Figure 8.1). I included extracts from the writing of one writer who, while including a very unconventional, narrative and even lyrical “Prologue” in his front matter, had placed before it a highly conventional, analytical thesis “Summary” which would serve to reassure his examiners about his academic competence—absent from his published book (Christopher Houston, 2001) although the Prologue remains (a paragraph from each is shown in Figure 8.1).

Drawing on discussions of these examples and students’ own writing, it was possible at the writing circle meeting to identify what it was about Sylvia’s and Makiko’s pieces that shaped the “voice” we heard as we read them. In Extracts 1 and 2, which are selected because each one explains a decision the researcher has made in relation to her analysis, I have indicated the features on which our discussion focussed, by putting grammatical subjects in bold and verbs in italics. I used the same “marking up” in copies I distributed to the writing circle members ahead of our discussion of these pieces.

In Sylvia’s piece, which was an explication of the meaning of a particular month, the *wayeb’*, in the ancient Mayan calendar, the voice was formal, impersonal, and distant. This distance, from both her object of study and her readers, was created by particular language choices: a technical vocabulary, use of third person only, and

Summary

This thesis examines the Islamist political movement in Turkey, with special reference to its activities in Istanbul where I did my fieldwork from October 1994 to December 1996. The thesis identifies the particular characteristics of political Islam in the Turkish context. The movement's situating of itself in opposition to the enforced civilizing project of the Turkish Republic is argued to be the key to understanding its politics.

Prologue

Flags filing into Taksim Square. Flags teeming on the flagpoles outside the 5-star hotels. Flags draped over the balconies of offices, flags promenading down the boulevards. Shaking the hands of children sitting on fathers' shoulders, swishing over heads like snappy red butterflies. Abseiling down the face of the Ataturk Cultural Centre. Crawling out along the arm of the giant crane, swinging fearless as acrobats high over the unfinished hole of the Istanbul Metro. Flags pinning up the sky.

Figure 8.1: Extracts from writing circle handout.

a preference for passive verbs, with processes, practices, ideas, or texts more likely than people to be the grammatical subject of her clauses. Together, these choices created an objective stance congruent with the ethos of Sylvia's discipline, in which it is the object of study, not the researcher, that is the focus at all times. (Archaeology has developed, over the last hundred years, from an amateur pursuit to a science, and it seems possible that its avoidance of subjective language may reflect the desire to put its origins behind it.) In these extracts, ellipsis indicates minor factual details omitted in the interests of space.

EXTRACT 1: FROM SYLVIA'S WRITING

The most intriguing **month** in the Haab' calendar *is* the wayeb' The **wayeb'** *was perceived* by the Maya and the Mexicans **who had** a similar calendar, as an "unlucky and dangerous" period (Tozzer, 1941, p. 134; Boone, 2007, p. 17). This **reaction** *has been documented* by Landa and the other Spanish priests **who had** the opportunity to observe the behavior of the indigenous population after the Spanish conquest (Landa in Tozzer, 1941; Durán, 1971, p. 395, pp. 469-470). The **wayeb'** *represented* the transitional stage between the old year and the ensuing New Year. Hence, this short five day **month** also *had* cosmological associations for the Maya. The **intention** of this section *is* not to present an analysis of the entire New Year festival, but to focus on the transitional stage of the wayeb' because of the perceived negativity and danger associated with these five

days. Wayeb' **events** relating to period endings, rituals, a death, an intriguing accession and a birth date, *have been detected* in the Maya inscriptions researched for this dissertation. Furthermore, *it is known* that the contemporary Kiché **Maya** still *regard* the five days of the wayeb' as ominous (Tedlock, 1992, p. 100). The **wayeb'** *has* an obvious literal meaning in relation to time. However, *it is* apparent that this short five day **month** *is* also *associated* with a profound metaphorical dimension connected with transition and change.

Makiko's piece for anthropology, in contrast to Sylvia's analytical treatment of her material, presented a narrative of Makiko's decision to use a particular term to describe the people she had chosen to study. The writing was relatively informal, personal, and engaging, an effect created, again, by particular language choices: largely everyday vocabulary, first person narration, and active verbs whose subjects were most often people (indeed, twelve of these are "I," the researcher herself). The most striking contrast with Sylvia's piece was that, in Makiko's, the subjectivity of the researcher was explicitly reflected upon, as an integral part of the object and process of study.

EXTRACT 2: FROM MAKIKO'S WRITING

Throughout my thesis, **I call** my main participants, women of Tongan descent in their twenties and early thirties, girls **which** *is* a native term in a sense that other **people** at Tongan churches or **people** in different age groups or men's groups *call* them girls The **reason** why **I employ** a non-cultural or non-ethnic term to refer to them *is derived* from my bitter experience when **I had** just *started* my fieldwork in the late 2006. **I attended** a Tongan church regularly to broaden my network among the congregation so that **I could ask** people to participate in my research. At that time, **I explained** to people that **I was studying** about Tongans in Australia. Then, a **girl** in her twenties *responded* by asking me, "Oh, so **you think** I'm Tongan?" **This was** one of my embarrassing moments because **I felt** like my naïve **stance had been revealed** even though **I had read** about how **identities** of children of migrants *were* diverse and often located in between where **they live** and Tonga. During my fieldwork, **I actually encountered** similar questions several times, especially when **I wanted** to talk to people **who distanced** themselves from Tongan gatherings. So what else *can* **I call** them?

The consensus of the writing circle was that Makiko's writing was livelier and more accessible than Sylvia's, but interestingly, members had different feelings about the language choices that made it so. Some admired the accessible first person narration of the writer's dilemma and its resolution; one member commented "from my film and media background," on the way in which "voice" in a piece of writing possibly creates pictures in reader's mind. "... I see [Makiko] talking directly to me (as TV presenters do) as well as see the moving images of her field work, her experiences and relations to research participants. I can imagine I walk behind her to the community." Others, however, were uncomfortable with the anecdotal and personal character of the writing, which they felt would undermine their authority and be unacceptable to readers.

In fact, neither of these students' discursive "voices" was unconstrained, despite the apparent freedom of Makiko's writing, for as Makiko confirmed in the discussion, it is part of the ethos of anthropology that the writer should reflect upon her own position in, and therefore influence on, the research she is reporting. Many scholars have remarked upon students' acquisition of a disciplined voice apparently by osmosis from the discussions they read and hear, a discourse that is "privileged, expected, cultivated, [and] conventionalized" (Patricia Duff, 2010, p. 175; see also Tony Becher & Ludwig Huber, 1990, p. 237; Sharon Parry, 1998). Both Sylvia and Makiko had evidently internalized a disciplined voice, which they experienced as more or less "transparent," to use David Russell's (2002) expression. Russell argues that because researchers' apprenticeship to the discourse of their discipline is gradual, their writing seems to them like "a transparent recording of speech or thought" rather than "a complex rhetorical activity, embedded in the differentiated practices of academic discourse communities" (Russell, 2002, p. 9).

The writing circle, however, created a space in which members could examine how their academic socialization had shaped their writing. It is this recognition of, and reflection upon, their own socialization as manifested in their writing that takes the discussion beyond that socialization and into the territory of Academic Literacies. It has been observed elsewhere that mixed disciplinary membership in writing groups proves very useful to participants because "it gives them other disciplinary examples against which they can position their experience of writing and allows them to make explicit issues and ideas that have been largely tacit" (Phyllis Creme & Colleen McKenna, 2010, p. 164; cf. Denise Cuthbert, Ceridwen Spark, & Eliza Burke, 2009; Ken Hyland, 2002, p. 393).

Makiko's reflections very much confirm this:

Until I attended the writing circle, I had little idea about the diverse styles and voices among different disciplines. The mixed reaction toward my subjective writing in the circle surprised me because I had never thought that the way I wrote was difficult to

be accepted by people from different disciplines. Having majored only in anthropology since my undergraduate course, I think I naturally learned the appropriate styles without acknowledging that different disciplines have different styles. Of course, my thesis is not comprised of personal accounts: in some reflexive sections I use many subjective words, and in the other part which shows my research data, I write in rather impersonal ways. Since I had unconsciously written in different styles, the experience in the inter-disciplinary group led me discover the difference, and changed my perspective when I write. After the session, I became more conscious about my use of words, and started to think more about how potential readers would see the way I write.

In considering the pieces discussed in the meeting on which this chapter focusses, Sylvia and Makiko found that they appreciated the “fit” between their authorial voice and the ethos of their discipline. One minor aspect Sylvia decided to change was the repetition of “month” as the subject of so many of her clauses; but for the purpose of this passage justifying her choice of focus, she opted to preserve the authority that she felt derived from an objective voice (cf. Creme & McKenna, 2010, p. 162).

If exploring the constraints and choices involved in academic writing sometimes serves to make it more “internally persuasive” (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981), as on this occasion, does this mean that the activity has failed to be transformative? I do not think so, for the discussion itself creates a space for thinking more deliberately about voice. In so doing, it enables the goals of “academic literacies”: to make writing less “transparent” and to raise awareness of the multiple, yet constrained, possibilities for expression. Sylvia was satisfied that her “demonstration of ... insiderdom” was at the same time “a personal act of meaning making” (Russell et al., 2009, p. 413). However, in exploring alternatives, the group acquired the linguistic tools (such as the options of active or passive voice, concrete grammatical subjects or abstract nominalizations, first or third person, narrative or analysis, technical or lay vocabulary) to change their voice if any of them decide they want to—including Sylvia, who writes:

Through the analysis and discussion of each other’s work by the students in this multi-disciplined group, I have become more aware of the impact of one’s writing style on the reader. It is apparent that the level of creative “control” in writing varies according to the discipline, with some subjects such as Media Studies enabling a greater level of freedom. Nevertheless, the feedback has helped me to improve the creativity in my writing

and not to be afraid of including my own “voice” where appropriate.

We see this, indeed, in a subsequent piece, where Sylvia takes first-person ownership of some reservations about her sources:

I found it surprising that there is not a greater level of compatibility between Sahagún’s auguries for the first days of the trecenas and those of the Telleriano-Remensis I consider there are some questionable aspects associated with the Telleriano-Remensis. For instance, in the section relating to the veintenas From my perspective, this indicates a surprising lack of understanding of this “unlucky” month and does call into question the reliability of some of the scribes and artists associated with this work.

Since the writing circle discussion on which this article focuses, our circle has talked about such strategies of negotiation as asking supervisors for their views on particular language choices; writing two versions for supervisors’ consideration; voicing an oral presentation differently from a written chapter; or postponing experimentation in the belief that later, as “licensed” scholars, they will be able to take more risks. Research students are already well aware of their liminal status in the scholarly community, and the power relations surrounding their candidature; what the writing circle gives them is an awareness of the technology of expression, the interplay of discipline socialization and individual desires and aspirations, and the social nature of what can otherwise seem like individual concerns (see Kaufhold Chapter 8 this volume). What is transformative about the writing circle is not that it makes people write differently (although it may); but that instead of thinking of writers and writing as good or bad, they are thinking of both as situated. “Informed choice,” in this context, is informed by a greater understanding of *how* they are situated by disciplinary voices (see also Horner and Lillis, Reflections 4 this volume).

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