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# THE ESSAY AS A SITE OF CONFLICT- AN EXAMPLE STUDY IN SUCCESSFUL DYSLEXIC WRITERS

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been researched by several researchers from different perspectives, occurring at different 'sites', and being studied for different purposes, but generally, conflict is mostly studied as a negative that should be overcome. Some examples are (1) Lea and Street (1998) used the university as a 'site of conflict', where they observed in their study certain tensions within and between the university delivery of courses, and also between individual members of particular disciplines about what constituted academic excellence, to name a few examples. They also observed that students were affected by conflicts with their teachers on several levels, which influenced their academic achievement. (2) Ivanic (1998) and (Ivanic, 2010) has contributed a scheme for studying how identity develops over time as an interaction between the personal/autobiographical and the environment in learners, which could be described as incorporating notions of 'conflict as an element of development'. (3) Many researchers have studied how the diversity issues in universities, one example being advantaged/disadvantaged students, have generated conflicts over allocation of resources; others have studied the 'massification' of education or 'marketisation of education' as a cultural phenomenon which generates social conflicts in broader society. This acts as the context in which students study and has been seen as an example of 'conflict as a positive' in the research on student empowerment in the Student Centred Learning movement, in which the SCL movement could be construed as a response to the conflicts generated by the Inclusion movement.

In any of these interactions between the student and the representative of the institution/society, the essay (or other similar writing product) acts as the manifestation of that conflict (and resolution) in one way or another, whether in academic argument or the worthiness of the person/institution marking the essay. Thus, it is through essay writing from one essay to another that students must be always attempting to resolve those conflicts if they are to be successful. It is within these cultural parameters that students form their writer identities.

This paper argues that conflict has a dynamical nature, which may act as a form of development- through different stages or increments of development, and as such conflict has a positive part to play in learning. The example used here is the essay as ‘a site of conflict’, and how through **conflict and tensions organised around identity-building in essay writing**, students develop their student identity’s, which ultimately influence their potential as authors.

The author has used their research on Successful Dyslexic Writers in Academic Contexts (2019) to show, in the example of ‘disclosure’ of being dyslexic in academic and other writing contexts, that from a small qualitative study on successful dyslexic writers, conflict and tensions in their environment contributed to their empowerment/sense of empowerment as writers at the level of authorship and identity, which ultimately contributed to their success. Thus, it is proposed here that the writing product itself (e.g. the essay) acts as a site of conflict where students develop their sense of identity as writers under conditions of criticism from their lecturers. Other interesting observations include: ‘who is marking my essay?’ and whether or not the person marking their written work is ‘legitimate’ in some way (or not), are factors in how students respond to conflicts that arise in essay-writing/essay-judgements being somehow legitimised and, thus, acting as a source of learning and development. In other words, it is possible that students respond to criticism either by taking it on board or not as related to conflicts in their environment. In this way, conflict contributes to student development in both positive and negative ways- or, not all conflict that students experience has negative consequences and often makes a positive contribution to identity-building.

In the case of successful dyslexic writers in the academic context- writers worked through issues of disclosure of (their diversity category) being dyslexic to their essay markers and writers’ judgements about whether or not their markers were entitled to make the judgements they did (beneficial or damning) as a mechanism in identity-building (besides any academic instruction they received). From these

‘conflicts and tensions’ students took their own judgments into the next essay they wrote and under a more developed sense of identity. For example, if a student runs into a conflict with a marker of their essay about how their dyslexia affects their essay writing (maybe they would disclose their dyslexia or not), that impacted how they accepted the markers’ criticisms of their essay- deemed ‘worthy or not’. Thus, these interactions (inevitably) acted as forms of development and learning, which contributed to their attitudes and values concerning the next essay. For example, ‘how hard am I going to work on the next essay if that is the feedback I get?’ or ‘how do I explain my dyslexia better next time that situation arises?’ or ‘teacher says it is not my dyslexia influencing my essay product/production processes- I say it is my dyslexia- how much does he/she know about dyslexia?’ or, ‘should I take on board the comments about my essay of someone who knows so little about my dyslexia?’

These are the kinds of conflicts the author discovered in their 2019 research study on 10 successful dyslexic writers, all of whom had done at least one postgraduate course; and 7 of whom were studying for a PhD or had a PhD.