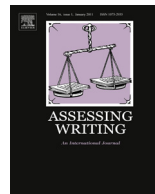




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Assessing Writing



Reflexive writers: Re-thinking writing development and assessment in schools



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ABSTRACT

Writing is a complex and highly individual activity, which is approached in different ways by different writers. Writers reflexively mediate subjective and objective conditions in specific and nuanced ways to produce a product in time and place. This paper uses a critical realist theory of reflexivity to argue that the teaching and assessment of writing must account for the different ways that students manage and make decisions in their writing. Data from linguistically and culturally diverse primary students in Australia are used to illustrate how four distinct reflexive modalities constitute the ways in which students approach writing. The paper offers a new approach to assessing writing for and of learning that considers writers as reflexive and agentic in different ways. It posits the importance of making visible and explicit the context and reflexive decision-making as writers shape a product for a purpose and audience.

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1. Introduction

Writing is a multifaceted and learned activity, requiring us to choose appropriate words, textual features and structures to communicate our purpose and position ourselves as writer to a known or unknown audience. Unlike many other activities which become easier with practice, writing remains

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highly demanding even for experienced writers (Cremin & Myhill, 2012). The writer must constantly make decisions about how to represent their subject matter and themselves through language. Language is a powerful communicative tool which can have unintended consequences if used without a good understanding of the social and cultural context in which it is produced and the audience for whom it is intended. Yet it also has the potential for reproduction beyond the original context and audience, particularly rendered in digital form and in networked platforms such as social media and messaging that are frequently used by young people. This means that the choices one makes in writing matter. Students need to develop a high level of awareness about the implications of their writing choices – in both formal and informal contexts.

Recent research in writing foregrounds the writer as an active designer of text, shaping meanings and expressing aspects of self within the social context (Dyson, 2009; Myhill, Jones, Watson, & Lines, 2013; Ryan & Barton, 2014). The ability to make effective choices that consider both the intentions of the individual and the conditions in which the writing is produced, is paramount in this conceptualisation of the writer (Ryan & Kettle, 2012). Effective choices are contingent upon access to a repertoire of textual knowledges and skills constituted by four main domains: (1) metalinguistic (grammar, cohesion, structures and lexical forms); (2) communicative purposes of texts and how they can be designed to achieve these purposes; (3) roles and relationships between the writer and the audience and how meaning is negotiable and contested; and (4) affordances and dynamics of the medium (Ivanic, 2004; Macken-Horarik & Morgan, 2011). The skill of the writer is evidenced in the ways that they negotiate and use these knowledges for the texts that they produce in different contexts. Indeed, our teaching and assessment of writing cannot separate these knowledges and skills from the different ways in which writers apply them in different contexts.

In this paper I argue that making students aware of their writing choices, the influences on those choices and the impact of those choices on their writing product, their audience and their writing success is a crucial aspect of self-assessment. First, I consider the writer as a self-conscious designer of text, which foregrounds their reflexive and agentic position as writer. Next, I use Archer's (1995, 2007, 2012) theory of reflexivity to explain the ways in which writers mediate objective (contextual structures) and subjective (personal) conditions to make decisions in writing, how such decisions can maintain or subvert the status quo, and the different reflexive modalities that can be ascribed to writers. I use data from a small-scale exploratory study in two linguistically and culturally diverse primary schools in Australia to illustrate these distinct reflexive modalities. Finally, I use these findings as a prompt to suggest a new reflexive focus in assessment of writing for and of learning.

2. Teaching for self-assessment: writers as reflexive designers

More than 30 years of research on writing has shown that writing development is more complex than simple knowledge transfer or vertical learning (Beard, Myhill, Nystrand, & Riley, 2009; Ryan & Barton, 2014). Writing development is mediated learning, that is, it requires intervention in different ways for different writers. Writing is uneven in its attainment and in the importance ascribed to it by individuals. Its uses, meanings, and transformations are informed by the contexts in which it is found (Macken-Horarik & Morgan, 2011; Myhill et al., 2013) and by the personal concerns of the writer. This means that developing writers must necessarily be positioned as self-conscious designers of writing, not just as learners of grammars, processes and structures. Individual writers are accorded the responsibility of choice (albeit with a range of influences) and self-assessment as they shape an identity as a writer.

Research has shown that diversity and identity matter in writing (Athanases, Bennett, & Michelsen Wahleithner, 2013; Canagarajah, 2006; Cremin & Myhill, 2012). Linguistic and culturally diverse writers, who are proficient writers, can switch their languages, discourses, and identities in response to contextual change. Canagarajah (2006) strongly argues that multilingual writers are not passively conditioned by their language and culture, but rather, they make choices as writers for different texts and contexts. In order for diverse writers to have the repertoires from which to choose, they need to be enabled as writers. Enablement involves using a variety of strategies, including: explicit instruction in forms and features of texts; modelling and facilitating the processes of writing over time and in different ways for different texts; deep immersion in subject matter; opportunities for purposeful

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