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# Becoming an 'authorised' postgraduate research writer

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# Becoming an ‘authorised’ postgraduate research writer<sup>i</sup>

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## Abstract

Within the context of postgraduate research education and training in the higher education sector, drafting might be understood as ‘not quite the final product’ produced by the student who is ‘not yet the final product’ of the university. In this paper, I turn this assumption ‘off centre’ to argue instead that writing and subjectivity are mutually constitutive. The execution of competent writing is, I will suggest, the effect of the repeated performance of a particular academic subjectivity, instantiated in text, over time.

The interconnected concepts of the social subject and the relational subject are central to the work of this paper and I draw on Judith Butler’s work on performativity to rethink the relationship between writing and academic subjectivity. Butler’s subject is an unstable subject rather than a fixed identity category, formed in and through discourse and language.

Extrapolating from her work to the context of higher education research writing pedagogy, my task in this paper is to exemplify some of what I will call the intersecting vectors; i.e., the limitations, exclusions, foreclosures and improvisations that work together in complex often unpredictable ways in the production of what and who is recognisable as an intelligible text and a competent research writer.

Keywords: subjectivity; postgraduate research writing; pedagogy

## Introduction

In this paper, I approach the question of what is involved in becoming an authorised postgraduate research writer, that is, a writer who is recognised as producing a competent and intelligible text, through a focus on the relationship between *writing* and *subjectivity*. I do this via a critical engagement with what might be called research student *becoming*, used here to signal my intention to work with understandings of discourse and subjectivity that have been inspired by the work of Judith Butler (1987, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2008).

There has, of course, been other discursively attentive work that has focused on the research student experience. Robyn Barnacle’s paper on the status of ‘knowledge’ and its relationship with doctoral becoming within the context of contemporary higher education policy (2005) and Bill Green’s (2005) work on the ‘discursive relationship between supervision and subjectivity’ (p. 151) are just two examples. There is also another body of work that attends to the relationship between subjectivity or identity, and academic writing (see for example, Canagarajah, 1999, 2002; Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Hawkins, 2005; Hutchings, 2006; Ivanic, 1998, 2004; Ivanic and Camps, 2001; Ivanic, Edwards, Sarchwell & Smith, 2009; Lillis, 2001, 2003; Singh & Doherty,

2004; Starfield, 2002; Tang & John, 1999). This academic literacy work occurs within a framework that views academic writing as a socially situated practice (Lea & Street, 1998) and is underpinned by the view that writing and identity function reflexively to both construe and construct identity in text.

While identity is not dealt with in any homogeneous way across this body of work, it is generally construed as multiple. Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic (1997) and Ivanic in her later works, for example, understand subject positions as ‘possibilities for self-hood that exist within the socio-cultural context of writing’ (p.136). Theresa Lillis (2003) draws on the work of Bakhtin to argue for a dialogic view of student writing pedagogy involving multiple identities. The text analytic work of Starfield (2002) uses Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) to demonstrate how a student writer employs the linguistic resources of authority to develop an authoritative textual and discursal identity.

This paper connects with these bodies of work and, at the same time, differs in the following ways. Firstly, the context of this paper is postgraduate research writing; a relatively unexplored area of linguistic research (Starfield & Ravelli, 2006). Secondly, and most relevant to this themed collection of papers, is my focus on the relationship between writing and becoming drawing particularly on Judith Butler’s work (1997a) on subjectivity and its relationship to language. I argue that the drafting/writing that a research student does is more than the ‘not quite final product’ produced by the student who is ‘not yet the final product’ of the university. Writing and subjectivity in the context of postgraduate research becoming and pedagogy are, I suggest, mutually constitutive.

In the paper that follows, I begin with a short explanation of Butler’s work in relation to subjectivity and the transferability of her work to the context of research writing and to the methodology that I employ in this paper. To illustrate and argue for the mutually constitutive relationship between writing and subjectivity, I use examples from drafts and accounts of her writing and thesis project provided by a Visual Arts Masters research student, ‘Bernadette’. Finally, I draw some implications of the relationship between writing and subjectivity for research writing pedagogy.

### **Becoming a subject who writes**

Butler’s ‘subject’ is a social and relational subject produced over time through language and ‘doing’ within certain boundaries or social norms. Butler’s subject is a ‘performative’ subject, i.e. discursively constrained and at the same time agential. We are, says Butler, ‘constituted socially in limited ways and through certain kinds of limitations, exclusions and foreclosures, we are not constituted for all time in that way; it is possible to undergo an alteration of the subject that permits new possibilities...’ (2004, pp. 333-334).

Extrapolating to the higher education research writing context, my task in this paper is to exemplify some of the intersecting vectors; i.e., the limitations, exclusions, foreclosures and improvisations that work together in complex, often unpredictable ways in the production of what is recognised as an intelligible text and who is recognisable as a competent research writer. Language is central to these processes of recognition and intelligibility.

Students studying in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are doing so within a higher education culture that is increasingly dominated by accountability and quality assurance measures (Blackmore, 2009; Marginson, 2007). By extension, doctoral and research education is under scrutiny particularly in relation to low completion rates, high attrition rates, and the quality of research training and research graduates (Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010). In Australia, the site of the research reported in this paper, the overseer and regulator of quality is currently The Australian Quality Agency (AUQA), soon to be replaced by The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) - anecdotally and threateningly described as 'AUQA with teeth'. Similar regulatory bodies exist in the wider Asia Pacific region (AUQA, 2006), the UK, and in Europe (Aitchison et al., 2010).

The 'teeth' of regulatory regimes like AUQA and TEQSA means that is increasingly difficult to think about pedagogy outside of predetermined measurable outcomes and standards, and to think about students as something more than potential 'authorised' products of the university. Terry Threadgold proposes that:

We have become more or less adept in these contexts at re-imagining and homogenising our students as 'markets' to be attracted by lists of quality assurance defined 'aims and outcomes' promising economic benefit and a secure future. (2003, p. 7)

I want to make an intervention into this way of imagining students, here research students, and in related move, rethink the role of writing and drafting in research student writing and becoming. To realise this task, I work with changes that Bernadette makes to two drafts of a section of her thesis. These are changes 'over time' and they allow me to develop the idea that difference across drafts potentially marks moments of material difference or rupture points, not only within the written texts, but also within ontological certainties that we might want to attach to the *subject who writes*<sup>ii</sup> the text.

This work challenges identity-based understandings of the student as a relatively coherent and unified *writing subject*, expressed for example as 'the mature-age writer', 'the Non English Speaking Background (NESB) writer' and so on. These identity based categories remain politically important in order to gain and deploy funding for programs to meet what we understand to be the specific learning needs of members of these groups, and to ensure their retention and graduation. In response to widening participation agendas in higher education (Baker, Brown and Fazey, 2006; Bradley, 2008), we are obliged to categorise the student body in such ways. These categories are, at all times, to use Beverley Skeggs words, 'intimately bound up in a politics of recognition and governance' (2002).

But part of the argument that I want to put forward in this paper is that despite the apparent expansion of the homogeneous notion of 'student' into these more heterogeneous categories, these and indeed any fixed and seemingly natural categories preclude or make unintelligible or easily discountable some of the things that students 'do' in becoming subjects who write in the university. This 'doing', if

brought into view and taken seriously, has the potential to expand our ideas of what is involved in learning to write and hence, in research education pedagogy.

In employing this methodology and arguing for a relationship between subjectivity and writing, I am working with a Butlerian view of the social subject: always in-excess, never singular, always in-process, constructed within language and discourse through stylised repetitions of actions that are themselves effects of discourse. This is a subject that is *performative* and unstable, and temporarily exceeds the more static identifiers of race, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity.

Through encounters with those who read and critique the written drafts and final thesis, ‘the body [here the subject who writes] is alternatively sustained and threatened through modes of address’ (Butler, 1997b, p. 5). Perhaps the text is found wanting and the student as the subject who writes becomes, for that moment, a desiring and yet unintelligible or abject subject haunted by ‘an anticipation of non-survivable social shame’ (Butler, 2008 p.89). Perhaps the text is deemed inappropriate or excessive, and the subject who writes becomes, for that moment, an unintelligible perhaps passionately attached (Petersen, 2008) subject. Perhaps the text gains recognition as an appropriate or even an innovative text, and the subject who writes becomes, in that moment, an obedient subject, or one who is innovative but still has ‘a firm grasp of the norms’ (Butler, 2008, p. 89). The ‘appearance’ of competent writing becomes an effect of the repeated performances of particular authorised academic subjectivities, instantiated in text, over time.

Writing at research level, understood in the light of the preceding discussion of subjectivity and language involves the *subject who writes* and does a lot of other things beside in making constrained ‘choices’ in relation to genre, structure, voice and style. These ‘choices’ exist within a discursive network of cultural norms and practices about what counts as the legitimate textual, experiential and interpersonal features of the written thesis genre and the disciplinary field within which a student writes. In the following section, I work with excerpts from two consecutive drafts of Bernadette’s thesis and her accounts of her writing to demonstrate the ways in which text and subjectivity are co-constructed, over time, within and through this discursive network. Bernadette’s drafts and accounts are data from of a small scale longitudinal study involving the written drafts or final theses of one postgraduate research student (Bernadette) and three doctoral students. Coupled with the drafts, which at times had been annotated by supervisors, I also interviewed each of the student writers a number of times in relation to the changes they had made across subsequent drafts.

### **Co-constructing text and subjectivity**

Bernadette is a visual artist completing the thesis component of a Masters Honours degree in Visual Arts. Her motivation for academic study and her art practice is a desire to communicate an experience which sits outside any easy verbal communication, even within the relatively private domain of the family.

#### **Interview excerpt 1 <sup>iii</sup>**

B: There aren't words to write the experience. Aah very soon, I realised that, very soon after the experience when I was in a

rapturous state and tried to describe it all to my family and there just weren't the words to describe it you know...So that's why I have chosen painting rather than any other form of art...

Painting offers Bernadette a semiotic system within which she can render her emotionally charged, embodied experience 'intelligible'. However, within the more highly circumscribed domain of the written thesis that must accompany her painting as part of the requirements for the research degree in visual arts, emotion is rarely encoded explicitly (Hood, 2004). Her supervisor, Greg, articulates the restraints of the thesis in his written feedback on draft 19. He articulates his view that her writing is 'far too poetic' in his written comments against a section of draft 19 (see **Excerpt 1** below). On the front page of the complete draft 19, Greg writes:

Writing is not a rapturous activity. Bernadette, when it comes to thesis writing you must resist being carried on a poetic swirl, only noting the emotive and eschewing arguments. You can however, run riot in your exegesis.

Greg's comments position Bernadette as an authorised writing subject; one who is

... not getting it right, or not getting it quite right, enacting relative "abjectivity". The abject, as Butler writes, "forms the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject" (1993a, 3). It constitutes the defining limit of the subject's domain (Petersen, 2008, p. 58).

Greg directs Bernadette to write differently, to write with restraint. Passionately attached as she is to communicating her experience, she works to comply.

### **Interview excerpt 2**

B: Mine is a primary experience. So what I do I feel I must be much more responsible. It must be truthful. It must be um, I must get as close as I can to the essence... I always knew that if I spoke about the experience, ah it was so personal, so enormous, so awesome that I would just have no control over my emotions.

I: And yet in some ways that has obviously come across in your writing because get comments from Greg: 'Writing a thesis is not a rapturous activity' ...

B: ...it comes across ... I kept saying to myself: 'well it's [the writing] not good enough yet. I've just got to refine it a little bit better. I've got to keep working on this. It's just not good enough'.

As a painter and as a writer, Bernadette desires to 'get as close as she can to the experience'. She desires what may be incoherent, in-excess of, or even undesirable

between and across these multiple cultural/semiotic domains. In order to be recognised as a ‘culturally intelligent and competent’ subject within each of these domains, Bernadette must enact and repeat the norm (Petersen, 2008, p. 62). She must recontextualise her experience through ‘re-present[ing] ... meaning materials in a manner apt for the new context in the light of the available modal resources’ (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 184). But, recontextualisation carries with it the potential for risk and loss, as Greg’s comments indicate. While her painting can provoke and embody the emotive, emotion is ‘culturally unintelligible’ within the deeply entrenched cultural norms of thesis writing.

### **Reconstructing text and subjectivity**

In the following section, I work in some detail with excerpts from two consecutive drafts in order to demonstrate the ways in which writing and subjectivity work together in the pursuit of an acceptable text.

In draft 19, Bernadette uses multiple instances of simile, provoking Greg’s handwritten comment in the margin: ‘this style of writing is far too poetic for a thesis’.

#### **Excerpt 1 (draft 19, instances of simile have been underlined)**

It is as if a gentle wind has blown over the painting Monk by the Sea and like the footprints obliterated all conventional landscape motifs even suspending light itself. The Sublime feeling is created by the threat of nothing happening but if something does we are relieved and delighted. It could be that this something is one of great simplicity, that goes unnoticed and unseen like the tiny cry of the wave on the dark ocean.

Multiply and complexly positioned through the demands of the academy, the different affordances of the visual and written semiotic domains, and her desire to give voice to her unvoicable experience, Bernadette annotates the section of the draft that Greg had highlighted with the words ‘delete and move to ...’ In draft 20, she works at re-writing her experience into the text in a way that will be acceptable.

Draft 20 receives double ticks from Greg. Placed side by side, the shaded sections of draft 19 reworked into the shaded sections of draft 20 allow for a closer comparison.

#### **Excerpt 2 (comparison drafts 19 and 20)**

Draft 19	Draft 20
In this given space, Friedrich, a deeply patriotic...	In the silence of this ‘space’, Friedrich, believed that only through landscape could he capture his most powerful feeling regarding the belief that God



<p>It is as if a gentle wind has blown over the painting Monk by the Sea and like the footprints obliterated all conventional landscape motifs even suspending light itself. The Sublime feeling is created by the threat of nothing happening but if something does we are relieved and delighted. It could be that this something is one of great simplicity, that goes unnoticed and unseen like the tiny cry of the wave on the dark ocean</p>	<p>was closely felt in nature. <sup>4</sup> " Why...do I so frequently choose death, transience and the grave as subjects for my paintings? One must submit oneself many times to death in order some day to attain eternal life" (cited in Borsch-Supan, 1974, p.9).</p>
	<p>Friedrich's painting of Monk by the Sea evokes the infinity of mathematical Sublime with eerie apprehension conveyed through the measurement of space, low foreground and a middle ground that merges the expanse of sky. <b>[Double ticks from Greg]</b></p>

Most obviously, in draft 20, Bernadette has eliminated the similes. In doing so, she has erased a group of interpersonal resources, i.e. those encoding explicit affect that are not generally desired in academic writing (Hood, 2004). This immediately renders her writing less poetic, less excessive, and places her again 'within the law' of the academy. She receives double ticks from Greg for the redrafted section. She becomes, in that moment, an appropriate and authorised writing subject.

In a more fine-grained comparison of two sections of drafts 19 and 29 (excerpts 3 and 4) several other replacements are evident. Bernadette has employed the nominalisations *infinity*, *apprehension*, and *measurement* in draft 20 to rework a segment of draft 19 (excerpt 3). Nominalisation is a device used to reword processes (verbs) and properties (adjectives) as nouns (Halliday, 1994, p. 352) and as such represents a 'high prestige' form in academic writing: 'a key component in successful student writing' (Woodward-Kron, 2009, p. 168).

### Excerpt 3 (detail drafts 19 and 20)

#### Draft 19

The Sublime feeling is created by the threat of nothing happening but if something does we are relieved and delighted.

#### Draft 20

...evokes the infinity of mathematical Sublime with eerie apprehension conveyed through the measurement of space, low foreground and a middle ground that merges the expanse of sky.

“Eerie *apprehension*” now does the work of “the threat of nothing happening but if something does we are relieved and delighted”. The human participants *we* and the existential clause *are relieved and delighted* are removed. The result is an impersonal and far less affective tone.

Similarly in excerpt 4, the combination of the nominalisation, ‘measurement’, with the technical terms, ‘space’, ‘low foreground’, ‘middle ground’ in draft 20 construe precision and replace the more emotionally evocative sections of draft 19 .

### Excerpt 4 (detail drafts 19 and 20)

#### Draft 19

“It is as if a gentle wind has blown over the painting Monk by the Sea and like the footprints obliterated all conventional landscape motifs even suspending light itself.”

“It could be that this something is one of great simplicity that goes unnoticed and unseen like the tiny cry of the wave on the dark ocean.”

#### Draft 20

“*Measurement* of space, low foreground and a middle ground...”

Greg’s double ticks indicate that Bernadette has written her experience ‘right’. No longer writing rapturously and ecstatically, Bernadette makes use of the grammatical resources of nominalisation and technical lexis to wrap up draft 19’s relatively dynamic, emotively evocative clauses involving participants and processes into more static and crystalline forms (Halliday, 1994, p. 352).

Through her drafting process, Bernadette, as a social subject in-excess and in-process; momentarily and contiguously, an ecstatic, desirous, vulnerable, abject and appropriate subject, mediates between her experience, her art work and the demands of writing at postgraduate research level. This involves Bernadette, as a *subject who writes*, in a corporeal and affective process of interpretation and negotiation. Writing, for Bernadette, is not simply a matter of learning the valued ways of writing of a particular discipline and genre but also an embodied and affective performance dynamically implicated with subjectivity and relations of power.

## **Conclusion**

My aim in this paper has been to explore the proposition that writing and subjectivity are mutually constitutive, through a fine grained analysis of changes to writing across drafts. This has revealed a number of intersecting vectors that, in Bernadette's case, worked together to provoke some unexpected changes in subsequent redrafting of her thesis. Bernadette's texts and accounts of her writing indicate that we would miss much if we simply understood drafting as matter of a less than competent writer producing a less than competent text. More broadly, the relationship between writing and subjectivity sketched in this paper suggests that the role of writing in the production of the student as research graduate of the university needs to be reconceptualised to take into account that writing and subjectivity are relational, social, and interrelated aspects of becoming an authorised research writer.

Creating a meaningful and cohesive text involves, as Halliday (1994, p. 339) has indicated, employing the resources of the lexicogrammar from those that are available and make sense within the register. As Butler also reminds us, selecting those resources is not a neutral activity:

...style [and here I would also include 'choice of lexicogrammatical resources'] is a complicated terrain, and not one that we unilaterally choose or control with the purposes we consciously intend...Certainly one can practice styles, but the styles that become available to you are not entirely a matter of choice. Moreover, neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalised language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself. (Preface to the 1999 edition, <sup>iv</sup>1999, p. xix)

A research writing pedagogy that engages with the issues raised by both the theory and data employed in this paper is likely to be labour intensive. Further work needs to be undertaken to elaborate how a pedagogy such as this might be achieved whilst working within the constraints and affordances that accrue within the current outcomes focused and quality assured higher education context.

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<sup>ii</sup> The phrase *the subject who writes* implies a subject in-excess and in-process. This is contrasted with *the writing subject*, implying more defined and stable understandings of subjectivity or identity. I owe this distinction to David McInnes (McInnes & James, 2003).

<sup>iii</sup> Transcript conventions- B: indicates Bernadette and I: indicates interviewer turn.