

# FROM MYSTERY TO MASTERY

**Kate Chanock**

La Trobe University

*c.chanock @Latrobe.edu.au*

The identity that universities assign to their students is a mystifying one; it moves continually from novice to expert, from out-group to in-group and back, sometimes by shifts so subtle that students have trouble recognizing them, sometimes by sickening lurches from which they have difficulty recovering. For example, students are expected to write as experts, but are marked as novices. They are expected to “invent the university” (Bartholemae 1985) when they could be oriented to its culture. They are asked for creativity but penalized for departing from convention. This paper looks at the various ways in which university teaching positions the learner, and the alienating effects of inconsistency in this regard. It goes on to suggest ways in which LAS advisers might help to clarify the students’ role as novice members of a discipline, and introduce some discussion of this into mainstream teaching practices.

**Keywords:** *maturity, individuation, originality, role, convention*

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## Introduction

The aspect of identity I want to focus on is one that most of our students have had drummed into them for a year before they start university, and will hear about, again, well into their first year. This is the idea that university study is a passage from childhood into adulthood. From both their teachers at Year 12, and their tutors in First Year, they hear the same refrain: “In Year 12, the teacher coddles you, spoonfeeds you, leads you by the hand. It’s not like that at uni; there, you take responsibility for yourself” (cf. Clerehan, Moore & Vance 2001). No longer will teachers monitor when, where, or whether the work gets done. Nor will they offer scaffolding to help their students think. Within this trope, there is very little room for manoeuvre. The original state, in which they had achieved a hard-won confidence, is constructed as somehow shameful, and to wish to remain in it is not an option. Likewise, failure to pass out of it can be experienced as a failure to grow up.

It may be that personal organisation is a function of maturity. It is largely a mystification, however, to identify the transition from novice to expert with the process of maturation, or to identify maturity with a movement from dependence to independence of mind. What is seen as individuation is at the same time socialisation, and what is represented as independence is conformity to a conventional academic role. That paradox is what I want to explore in this paper. I’ll look first at the ways in which maturity is bundled together with individuation, independence, and expertise in the university context, and at the damage this can do, when students misunderstand what it means to do “original” work at university. Then, I’ll discuss the reasons why I think this “bundling” is mistaken. Students’ difficulties stem, in large part, not from immaturity but from unfamiliarity with the academic subcultures in which they find themselves; and their response – to wish for guidelines – is that of any adult on unfamiliar ground. Finally, I look at some of the things that LAS tutors may be able to do to dispel this mystification, by helping students to think about the role(s) in which they write.

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## Standing Apart from the Crowd

Central to the image of the adult in this trope is that an adult walks alone. “At uni”, the Year 12 teachers tell their students, “you’ll be on your own.” (At our large academic orientation each year, I ask, “How many of you were told this?” and the room becomes a sea of hands.) When they commence their course, moreover, this impression is reinforced by the emphasis on originality, reiterated in the “statement of authorship” that every student must staple to every assignment to certify that “the attached document is my original work”.

This statement is part of the institution’s prohibition on plagiarism, and only the most visible part. If we read further in the advice on plagiarism on La Trobe’s Sociology and Anthropology website, for example, we find that it is largely about handling intertextuality, and includes advice on how students should take notes from their sources that will enable them to avoid plagiarism. The central emphasis on originality, however, is often misunderstood by students as requiring that each writer stand apart from others, and this interpretation fits well with the idea that maturation is individuation. While this idea comes from Western psychology, the claims of that science to universality make it seem natural, and right. Consistent with this paradigm of maturation is the idea that adults do not plagiarise, because they have something of their own to say.

Indeed, the wording of many assignments in the Humanities appears to call for a personal approach to the topic: “In your view/ in your opinion/ what do you think/ do you agree?” Often, students receive a list of marking criteria that includes “originality”. As one Anthropology assignment put it, “To do your essay well, you need to give it your own character. Try not to quote or paraphrase; instead, find your own angle on the subject”. The students are, in effect, being positioned as experts, and some may welcome thus being “validated as having something to say” (Sansevere 1999, p. 259). Some who consult me are uneasy, however, and they are not wrong. They may be experts on their own opinion, but they are novices in the context within which it is being sought. The lecturer in this Anthropology subject is sincere in his invitation, but it is risky for students who think that they must *substitute* their “own angle” for the ones they encounter in the reading. As Bartholomae

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remarks in “Inventing the university”, the “right to speak is seldom conferred on us – on any of us, teachers or students – by virtue of [the] fact that we have invented or discovered an original idea. Leading students to believe that they are responsible for something new or original, unless they understand what those words mean with regard to writing, is a dangerous and counterproductive practice” (1985, p. 143).

An unintended consequence of asking students to write as experts is that it can create an impression that there are no conventional expectations to be met; that any approach could be successful, as long as it conveys what one sincerely thinks; that there are “no right answers”, as tutors frequently insist, implying quite misleadingly that there are no wrong answers either. It sometimes seems that tutors underestimate the disciplinary constraints within which they themselves are working. Certainly, they see independence – intellectual as well as personal – as a salient difference between university and school. Tutors complain that their students have been ‘spoonfed’ at VCE (the Victorian Certificate of Education, taken over Years 11 and 12), where each assignment came with a list of criteria specifying what had to be in it, so that students expect a formula for writing essays. This is poor preparation, it is felt, for university, where we do not want them to write to a formula; we want original, independent, critical thought.

### **Standing Out *in* the Crowd**

Students who interpret this expectation of originality as a demand for “your view, not other people’s” find, however, when their work is returned, that it was really a demand for “your view ON other people’s”. Academics see originality as a kind of engagement with other people’s work, not in isolation from it. This needs to be said explicitly, however, for it is not obvious. Students who consult me are often worried that they’ve “used too many references – with all those footnotes, it looks like I didn’t have any ideas of my own”. Others who did not consult me find out the hard way, but do not know how to interpret the comments on their work. “Why did he ask me for my opinion, if he didn’t want it?” asked one; and another exploded, “How can my opinion be wrong?” (cf. Preus 1999, pp. 78-80).

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It is not that they have been told to ignore the reading, of course; the problem is more that they have not made sense of the idea of writing originally about other people's ideas. Students who showed me the essay instruction to "find your own angle on the subject" were puzzled as the instructions continued:

Unlike the previous essay, this one does not require you to be reflexive...You simply have to describe and analyse an ethnographic situation. That ethnographic situation is recounted in the following paper, which should be the basis of the ethnographic part of your essay.

What exactly could be meant by originality in this context? Looking it up in the marking criteria, they found this definition: "Are the ideas in the essay truly your own, even if you originally gained them through listening to or reading what someone else said or wrote?" Similarly puzzling is the advice given in a subject at Monash University, that "It is not sufficient merely to repeat the opinions of other writers in a particular topic area....Where opinions of other writers are relied upon to support a student's argument, they should be acknowledged by way of a footnote" (Searcy & Price 2001, p. 299). This seems to be saying, don't do it, but when you do it, give a footnote! The key, here, is the word "merely", but students are not yet in a position to understand why it is crucial. It is not *sufficient* to repeat the views of others, but it is necessary to do so – and then to comment on them somehow.

To make sense of this, we must take a closer look at the trope of the academic writer as a sort of Lone Ranger (and in case this legend is one that has not survived my generation, the Lone Ranger was a cowboy who appeared from nowhere when outlaws threatened, sorted them out, and then rode away into the sunset leaving the battlers to ask each other, in tones of awe, "Who WAS that masked man?" (Largent 2001). There are two things we need to recognise about the Lone Ranger. In the first place, he was never alone: he had his faithful Indian companion, Tonto, by his side, listening and responding to his every utterance. In the second place, he was a ranger: he was not a maverick but a representative and defender of the social order. It was not his difference *from* conventional society that made him a hero, but his difference *within* it.

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So it is with academic discourse. What is truly original is unlikely to be of much interest, because it is not what we were already talking about. What appeals to us as original is likely to be a slightly different way of looking at whatever we *were* talking about. This is a salient characteristic of the successful academic discourse that Bartholomae discusses in “Inventing the university”. The more successful students, in his view, “claim their authority... by placing themselves both within and against a discourse, or within and against competing discourses, and working self-consciously to claim an interpretive project of their own, one that grants them their privilege to speak” (1985, p. 158).

### **Criticism as Conformity**


But are academics necessarily thinking for themselves when they adopt a critical approach, if this approach is, itself, the convention to which our system requires them to conform? Bartholomae tells a story of his own teacher who “once told us that whenever we were stuck for something to say, we should use the following as a ‘machine’ for producing a paper: ‘While most readers of \_\_\_\_\_ have said \_\_\_\_\_, a close and careful reading shows that \_\_\_\_\_’” (1985, p. 153).

“Writing against the grain” (Kramer-Dahl 1995, p. 21) is not, or not necessarily, the approach of an independent thinker taking up his or her “own” individual stance; it is the patterned behaviour generated by the convention that we should always be critical. Viewed in this light, it is not a self that is speaking, in the usual (pre-postmodern, and persistent) sense of the term (my ‘real’ self), but a writer performing a role. And here, perhaps, we should remember that the Lone Ranger wears a mask. If he has a “real self”, it is not on display; what we see is the role of the Ranger, doing what a Ranger’s gotta do.

### **Writing in Role**

It is this idea of role, in fact, that Christine Jessup employed to rally a group of students who were outraged by their tutors’ rejection of their essays, which they took as a rejection of themselves (Jessup 2001). They had written from experience or

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“common sense”, and had been rebuked for neglecting to anchor their statements in references to the work of the disciplinary community. Their resentment is echoed in the literature (cf. Ivanic 1998, pp. 220-221), and, for many of us, in one-to-one tutorials with older students who bring expertise that tutors do not accept as authoritative. For students who come to us from the professions, in particular, and write as practitioners, this is a common and alienating experience. They are abruptly displaced from the in-group they thought they would belong to, into an out-group of students who are not-yet-one-of-us (e.g., Chan 1997).


Although we might not see the tutors’ feedback to Jessup’s students quite as they did – and Jessup undertook to interpret the comments in ways that would enable her students to revise successfully – we *can* see in them a lurch from having constructed the writer, in advance, as an expert, to reconstructing him/her, in the event, as a novice. The language suggests a disappointed expectation, and it certainly is not the way we address a colleague:

- That really does render this sentence incomprehensible!
- You simply can not make this kind of categorical claim! You must learn to be more tentative.
- Who says so?
- This is a very strange statement?
- ...you have made no effort to develop these points into a coherent argument (Jessup 2001, p. 202).

This last rebuke -- “you have made no effort”—is particularly indicative of the lecturer’s position of power over the novice. Lecturers cannot know what effort was expended, but they are allowed to attribute the student’s failure to causes of this kind. As Jessup says, “Ultimately [feedback] defines the nature of the relationship between tertiary teachers and their students” (2001, p. 200).

Jessup’s response to this was to get the students to focus on their role as writers, rather than on their relationship to the lecturer. What are the obligations of writers to readers? What did these writers want the reader to know, and how could they

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construct their text in such a way as to organise and facilitate the reader's reception of it? How could they share (and acknowledge) the sources of their knowledge? The re-written essays were a good deal better received, and Jessup believes -- because time constraints precluded the students from doing more research, and because she offered little advice on changing the original texts themselves -- that "the main improvement came from students developing a better understanding of their role as writers" (2001, p. 202).


There are conventional expectations surrounding the performance of any role, and students are not wrong to want to know what these are. This is not a failure to grow up and take responsibility for themselves; it is a way of taking responsibility. Nonetheless, it is dispiriting to be confronted with advice as formulaic as Bartholomae's "machine". It is understandable that tutors are reluctant to offer guidance that could be used formulaically. Moreover, formulae, in themselves, are not likely to be much help. It has been found that writers who fixate on rules are liable to become blocked rather than enabled (Rose 1980; Daly 1985); and if they do manage to produce essays, these are disappointing.

It is not that criteria are a bad thing, however; the problems arise only when the rationale for the criteria is "because I say so". Regularities of form, structure, voice, evidence, etc, are generated by the purposes of the discipline, and it is here that we must focus if we are to help students take on the role of student writers. For example, the reason why Bartholomae's machine can work to generate essays in literature is that the purpose of critical commentary is to show another reader of a particular literary text more than has yet been seen in it. If the writer has nothing of this kind to show, the "machine" is not going to help.

When we want to teach students what their texts should be like, then, we have to go beyond the common features of the artifact to ask about their purpose, and this purpose is both intellectual and social: to embody an argument of a particular kind, in response to a question generated by a discipline community. There is no formula for this, as it depends on the purpose of the question and the nature of the material; but similar forms will be generated by the particular kinds of questions a discipline asks, the kinds of materials it goes to for evidence, and the kinds of uses it makes of these materials. If students can answer questions in their -- as yet fictitious -- role as a



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member of that community, their answers will not all be the same, but they will be conventional.

## **Individuation as Socialisation**

It is once people feel confident in the conventions, moreover, that they can do original things within them. For all their complaints about students who will not think for themselves, lecturers who find themselves on unfamiliar ground behave in much the same way. In a professional development seminar I attended recently, participants were asked to think about a subject they had taught more than once, and to tell the group how their teaching of it changed after the first time. “The first time,” said a Psychology tutor, “I just used the textbook, because I wasn’t an expert in the subject yet.” This is echoed by staff who participated in a teaching experiment with Cartwright and Noone (2001). Reflecting on their adjustment to the methods they were being asked to try, a social science lecturer said:


At first, you follow each of the steps, then as you get more confident you make adjustments until the recipe is really your own.... I don’t have the confidence yet to deviate in any way. It’s providing me with a sense of security to know that I have the steps that I can follow (p. 51).

An environmental science lecturer concurred:

I get worried if I don’t do quite what you say, because I feel I’m not doing it right. Generally, I feel I’m groping my way with the strategies, and so I have a tendency to stick to the steps formulated, no matter what. Though, I do imagine that as I get more familiar with the structures, and with incorporating them into my tutorials, I’ll learn to move away from the steps a bit (p. 51).

This sounds like the stereotype of the student who does not think for himself, who expects to be told what to do – and who is, for this reason, marked out as not yet

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belonging to the intellectual culture of critical, independent thinkers to which these lecturers securely belong! When one is on unfamiliar ground, understanding precedes criticism, whether one is a student or a lecturer. The difference is that lecturers are less often on unfamiliar ground.


When they are, it becomes clear that individuation, in this context, is a function of socialisation, not of maturation. If we do not see it that way, it is because we are heavily invested in the idea of individuation. But if we regard it as the culmination of a natural process of maturation, the unfortunate result is to construct anyone who does not demonstrate it as somehow childlike. This process of “othering”-- that is, defining and privileging our own identity by contrast with what it supposedly is not – is masked, to some degree, when high school students are the designated “other” against which the academic community defines itself. It is quite plausible to think that they are immature. It becomes more obvious, however, if we broaden our perspective to consider how similar has been the “othering” of mature intellectual cultures that are not the same as ours.

### **Originality and ‘Othering’**

Members of western academic communities often congratulate themselves on their practice of challenging received wisdom. It is this, they say, that distinguishes our academic culture from the “reproductive” intellectual culture of the East, which produces (and sends us) students who cannot “think for themselves” (for a critical survey of this idea, see Chen 2001; also Fox 1994, pp. xiv-xv; Ramburuth 2000; Yew & Farrell 2001. Pennycook (1998) traces it as far back as 1865, with disturbing quotations from European commentators on education in China). “Alongside the tradition of emphasising the creativity of the West”, as Pennycook says, “there has been a tradition of deriding other cultures for their supposedly stagnant or imitative cultural practices” (1998, p. 281).

In this regard, our discourse community is like any other described by Benedict Anderson as “imagined communities” (1983). “Communities are distinguished”, he says, “not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 15). And, as Pratt observes, “This style of imagining...is strongly utopian,

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embodying values...which the societies often profess but systematically fail to realise" (1998, p. 180). Just as there is plenty of evidence that overseas students are critical (Yew & Farrell 2001; Fox 1994, p. xv) – and anybody who lives with Australian adolescents knows that they are critical as well! – there is evidence, too, that Western academics can be formulaic and authoritarian (Zamel 1998a, p. 193, Pennycook 1998). Indeed, it is overseas students who have made this complaint to Zamel (1998b, pp. 255-257). Nonetheless, the Western academic community persists in imagining itself as a community of critical thinkers.

If critical thinking is mandated, however, what is critical about it? Interestingly enough, some of the most critical thinking that takes place in universities occurs when students, from both local and international backgrounds, criticise the critical thrust of subjects they are studying. They do not often do it in their essays, because they expect to lose marks if they do; but they do it in one-to-one sessions when they discuss their work with me. They do not talk like rigid thinkers resisting attempts to open their minds, but like thoughtful people annoyed at attempts to channel their learning in particular directions that they see as faddish. If they express this view it may only confirm their tutors in the idea that the students are resistant to critical perspectives and cling childishly to conventional wisdom. But when we think that our teaching is boldly challenging received ideas, we might ask ourselves why, if this is so radical, our institution is paying us to do it. It is because challenging convention is the conventional activity of Western scholarship, and each academic generation that dismantles the previous set of ideas follows this up by establishing its own.

To say that the critical impulse functions as a mechanism of generational replacement within the profession is not to say that it is of no intellectual worth. Critical enquiry is one good way of pursuing knowledge, and I am happy to show students where it can lead. But I think it must be seen as a method of enquiry, rather than as a marker of identity with the power to include and exclude people from the academic community.

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## Where LAS Advisers Come In


What, then, can LAS advisers do to address this mystification? I think that, like Jessup, we can help students to think in terms of roles, with which they can choose to identify or not (or partly so and partly not), even as they carry them out. Useful questions then are

- Who are you writing as?
- To whom does a person in this role write?
- Why does a person in this role address the problem you're addressing?
- How does s/he communicate this work, and why?

For example, I had an interesting time earlier this year with an Honours class in Archaeology, analysing the texts they were reading in terms of accommodations to the imagined community of readers rather than in terms of any generic notions of good writing. We compared texts written by archaeologists for an academic journal (Bird, Frankel & Van Waarden 1998), a client group (Bird & Frankel 1998), and a popular audience (Keyser 2000), and considered how various features in each one established membership of a common community. For example, in the journal article, the references performed the same function as the use of “we” in the popular magazine: to group writer and readers together in the project at hand. For students just entering the professional community, this was a more compelling reason for referencing than the prohibition on plagiarism. As we picked each text to pieces, they could see how the structure, the voice, the evidence, and the language of each one followed from the adoption of a role and the assumption of a particular audience.

Comparing the research report in the academic journal with the booklet written by the same authors for the Aboriginal custodians of the sites they were investigating, we found systematic differences in each of these areas. In the context of the discipline community, the authors were addressing the problem of checking the accuracy of previously established dates for the sites – a problem of method – as

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well as the implications of their findings for the work of other archaeologists in this field (the much earlier dates they obtained challenged prevailing assumptions about the chronological depth of human settlement and cultural continuity in the region). They used (with slight adaptations) the conventional structure of a research report, the objective voice, and the highly technical language of the discipline to communicate with this audience, focussing on the presentation of evidence in a tabular form and represented by abbreviations that are standard within the discipline but incomprehensible outside of it. When addressing the Aboriginal stakeholders in the project, by contrast, the authors described the artistic styles that were found at the sites, explained the lifeways that could be inferred from the artefacts they found, and highlighted the significance of the dates in showing the great time span of Aboriginal occupation of the area. They wrote in “plain English”, with a minimum of technical language, and they included a kit of slides that could be used to share this knowledge with others in the indigenous community, as well as to instruct them on how to manage the sites to preserve them from damage.

While this text was comparatively simply written, there were interesting contrasts again when we looked at the other text written for a non-specialist audience. This one, dealing with new hominid discoveries in Southern Africa, and published in *National Geographic*, was a personal, dramatic narrative of discovery, designed to take armchair travellers, in their imaginations, to the site of the discovery, and even into the long-vanished experience of the creature whose jawbone it described as “not just a pretty face” (Keyser 2000, p. 76). The many linguistic and visual devices by which this was done are beyond the scope of this paper; but in the Honours class, we were able to see how they created a tone and a story that contrasted markedly with the unadorned sharing of scientific information in the booklet for the client group.

Many LAS advisers focus on the sorts of questions I have outlined, and more ideas can be found in the literature. Ann Johns, for example, has tried training her students “in the principles of ethnography” and asking them to keep journals on their activities in the courses they were studying in the disciplines. The goal was for students to explore the roles that they and the professor play in this particular academic context” (1990, pp. 214-16). Ivanic, similarly, recommends that students

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conduct their own ethnographies of the academic discourse communities they are newly members of ...[to discover] what the possibilities for self-hood are in these specific social contexts, and what positions they ...are expected to occupy in their academic writing (1998, p. 342).

They should examine the instructions they are given, the feedback they get, and the ways that “social relations are conducted in their department” (Ivanic 1998, p. 342). It does not follow, for Ivanic, that students will be happy to embrace the “possibilities for selfhood” they discover; but they will have a clearer view of what the choices, and their consequences, are.

Elsewhere, Blanton advocates that instead of getting students to use academic texts as models, we should figure out “what academic readers and writers do” and get them to do that – and she offers a list of these “literate behaviors” (1998, p. 226) Unlike Blanton, I think that analysing texts is one good way of exploring such behaviors, but I think her emphasis on the role behavior of “interact[ing] with texts” in particular ways is useful for us.

As well as focusing on role in our adjunct activities, we may be able to introduce such a focus into the mainstream curriculum too. Tutors often start the year with just such a discussion, in order to clarify what they and their students expect to do in lectures, in tutorials, and with regard to assignments. Here, however, the focus is on their role as students in a subject; this needs to be connected with the idea that the subject itself is an activity within a discipline, and that its literate practices have the discipline community as their reference group. This idea is central to the materials I have introduced into first-year subjects in a range of disciplines across my Faculty (described in some detail in Chanock 1998 & 2000). The materials include a brief reading for students, for each of the first few weeks. These introduce the idea of a discourse and then focus on particular aspects of the discourse in which they are being trained: primary evidence, secondary argument, intertextuality, and critical debate. For the tutors, there are suggestions on how to discuss and practise these ideas in the context of the week’s work for that particular subject. The questions asked in each subject are discussed in terms of the kinds of enquiry that go on in the discipline as a whole. The sequence of work with primary and secondary sources,

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the focus on arguments and evidence, the use of sources and referencing practices, and the efforts to engage students in debate, are all explained in terms of the knowledge-making activities of the discipline community. When students are having this staged discussion, over the first few weeks, in each discipline they study, they are able to see what the disciplines have in common; but because the discussion is contextualised, each time, in the week's work for that particular subject, they also get a sense of how they differ between one disciplinary subculture and the next.


## **Role-Playing and Engagement**

Once students can see critical enquiry of a particular kind as a cultural preference, not a measure of personal maturity and worth, they can try it out without damage to their own identity. However, in advocating this emphasis on writing in a role, I am conscious of the possibility that writing in a role creates a distance between the writer and the project s/he is working on, and thus diminishes her engagement with it, and perhaps her responsibility towards it (Sansevere 1999, p. 258; Ivanic 1998, p. 307). Students do sometimes complain of alienation even when they are writing successfully, if they are not writing "as themselves", in their "real voice". "Why did I write that stuff?" wonders Peterson. "Where the hell was I when all of those silly words were issuing forth?" (1999, p. 262). Another laments that her "persona became that of academic worker bee" (Schambelan 1999, p. 196). Still another, reflecting on the distance between her original voice, that of a rural Southerner in the United States, and her academic voice, writes

Learn the formula, listen to whatever the teacher wants, and do it  
.... That has worked for me a lot, but this semester especially, I've  
come back to asking myself where am I in all this mumbo jumbo?  
And I realized that I have learned to make some of it fit me, that I  
talk through it, and not the other way around, most of the time. I do  
believe there is a difference. But....What price did I really pay?  
(Pryor 1999, p. 226).

Her answer is that it was worth the price, and some other writers who have experienced similar anxieties and conflicts in adding to their repertoire of voices

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concur with this (e.g. Mellix 1998; Rodriguez 1982). Fan Shen, reflecting on her success in learning to write well in English as well as in Chinese, says

I feel that I am writing through, with, and because of a new identity. I welcome the change, for it has added a new dimension to me and to my view of the world.... Any time I write in Chinese, I resume my old identity....in order to write authentic Chinese.... But when I write in English, I imagine myself slipping into a new 'skin', and I let the 'I' behave much more aggressively and knock the topic right on the head (1998, p. 132).


Others, however, dispute that it is possible to have a repertoire of identities. There is evidence that learning to write in a different way profoundly changes who you are, a risk that is particularly acute for overseas students and some others from culturally diverse backgrounds (Fox 1994). Some students resist such changes for this reason, and others who have undergone the transformation give painful testimony of the loss they feel. Blanton believes that "powerlessness results from being cut off from one's self and one's own ideas and life experience" (1998, p. 231). If membership of a particular discourse community is not a role that can be added to one's repertoire – if it requires transformation of a disempowering kind – we must question our own role in mediating this transformation.

Fan Shen, however, suggests that it is mediation that can make the difference. "Being conscious of these different identities has helped me to reconcile different systems of values and logic, and has played a pivotal role in my learning to compose in English" (1998, p. 132). What seems crucial here is "being conscious", and for that reason, Fan Shen tells us that "the process of learning English composition would have been easier if I had realized this earlier and consciously sought to compare the two different identities required by the two writing systems from two different cultures" (1998, p. 132). This is why I think it is safer to approach writing in any particular context as the performance of a role.

I do not think, moreover, that acting in a role necessarily diminishes engagement



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with the task at hand. People can be aware that doctor, mother, lawyer, counselor, etc, are roles, without feeling that it does not matter how they perform in these roles, or disengaging themselves from what they are doing. But the concept of role allows people a choice of how closely to engage, and enables people to see successes and setbacks in terms of their skill in carrying out a role, rather than as a measure of their own fundamental adequacy.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that mastery of a role is not a matter of maturing as an individual, but a matter of understanding the social expectations embodied in that role. For university students, the problem of accommodating these expectations is not helped by presenting it as a matter of maturity. A more effective approach is one that assumes all students are, to some extent, on unfamiliar ground and undertakes to map it with them so they can proceed with confidence.

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