

# CONSTRUCTION OF STUDENT IDENTITY


**Steve Price**

Monash University

[steve.price@CeLTS.monash.edu.au](mailto:steve.price@CeLTS.monash.edu.au)

This paper offers tentative remarks on the possible role certain acts may have in the process of student identity formation and discourse acquisition. These acts will be referred to as *performative* acts, even though they are not identical with Austin's (1975) definition of a performative. (For Austin, a performative is an utterance that is characterised by what it does, not by what it says. I am concerned with the force an utterance achieves as a consequence of the social conditions that 'authorise' it rather than as a consequence of its cognitive content. In both cases 'performative' refers to ways in which an utterance intervenes in the world, rather than with how it represents the world.) This paper attempts to show some limitations of approaches that focus on the ways in which social and ideological structures and concomitant distributions of power embedded in discourse content and form position learners as they engage with a particular discourse (eg Ivanic 1998, Clark 1992). Such approaches focus on the subjective effects of such positioning, and therefore argue that an awareness of those effects can empower the individual to free themselves from such subjective effects and take up identity positions more to their choosing. By identifying the identity positions a text implicitly confers on reader and writers (and others) by the

---




selection and organisation of its content, a reader enabled to resist that positioning. Understanding and awareness thus bring emancipatory potential (eg see Clark 1992 p118). However, the position advanced in this paper is that performative acts do not find representation in the content and form of a discourse. They are acts that operate at an intersubjective level and enable the response to the discourse itself, and as such, precede and are not mediated by the discourse content or form itself. Such positioning then is not identified through the process of awareness usually involved, for instance, in the writings on critical language awareness (see Fairclough [ed] 1992) that focus on the way in which identities and social positioning is embedded in discourse content and form. This paper first of all considers weaknesses in the focus on 'awareness', and then looks at instances from students writing from which the importance of performative acts can be inferred.

*Keywords: Identity, disclosure acquisition and 'awareness'.*

The role of identity in the acquisition and use of discourse has been considered from a number of perspectives. For example, to explain what makes a good language learner Norton and Toohey (2001) argue that the focus needs to be on "[the learners] access to a variety of conversations in their communities rather than on [the learners] control of a wider variety of linguistic forms or meanings than their peers or their speed of acquisition of linguistic forms and meanings" (p310). In attempting to look at the "fundamentally social nature of learning and cognition" (p311) they argue that it is important to look at the social contexts of learning rather than the abilities and motives an individual may bring to the learning situation. Identity represents the position a student occupies within social networks, and is significant in that it facilitates or inhibits access to different discourses, and therefore enables or limits a learner's opportunity to engage with that discourse, practice and eventually acquire it. However, they point out that in the social contexts of the learners they treat as exemplary, "even though attempts were made to subordinate or isolate the learners, both made effective use of a variety of resources to gain access to their peer networks" (p317). Striking here is the theoretical appeal to individual capacities that


---



wisely used seem able to transcend the social practices that otherwise are determining. Ivanic (1998) looks at the role of identity in the context of academic writing by mature-age tertiary students working in their first language (English). Her focus is on how students construct an identity in their writing. Because identity is a construct, she argues it is always possible to construct identity differently. By enabling students to understand how their writing is shaped by the 'subjectivities' they bring to it and the constraints imposed by the discourses they are subjected to, they can actively make choices about who they want to be in their writing. This concern with choice and empowerment is linked to the wider concerns of critical language awareness (see Fairclough (ed) 1992). Awareness is empowering in that the understanding it provides enables students to recognise how discourses they are subject to position them, and provides the means of resisting them and constructing for themselves an identity they prefer.

There are a number of difficulties with the critical language awareness approach as employed by Ivanic and others. Ivanic (1998) suggests discourse is acquired through "successive encounters with it and a desire to identify with the ideas it conveys" (p207). She notes her students 'expressed a desire to identify with the person from whom they acquired a discourse characteristic' (p186). She later suggests that discourse acquisition is in many respects a matter of imitation, to the point that "it is hard to draw the lines between plagiarism, imitation and acquisition of a new discourse" (p195). While identification may play an important part in discourse acquisition (see for instance Urwin 1984, p283) a number of difficulties arise from this understanding of discourse acquisition. First of all the desire to identify and imitate derive from other discourses that shape one's desire in such a way. Thus the discourse acquired is already infiltrated by other discourses, and therefore precisely what is acquired remains problematic. More significantly, in the academic context there is much in the lecturers or the texts a student is exposed to that is inappropriate for imitation. Differences in intended audience, purpose and so on mean that choices of genre and register found in the texts students are exposed to would not necessarily be appropriate for the student to imitate. Imitation therefore can only succeed when a student already has the means to judge what is or is not worthy of imitation. That is, the student must *already* in a fundamentally important respect occupy a pertinent discourse position. The occupation of this position, and


---



the acquisition of a discourse relevant to the construction of it, is not therefore the consequence of imitation, but rather the precondition for it. It is therefore arguable that performative acts may be necessary to inaugurate such judgments and also therefore discourse acquisition and identity construction. Such acts would therefore precede and shape the cognitive-based decisions that CLA approaches give their attention to. Although CLA is concerned with a focus on the social dimensions of discourse and its practices, in this respect they appear to return at last resort to an emphasis on subject capacities. The social is effective only in so far as it is mediated by the individual. I am trying here to point to a possible way in which the social dimension acts on the individual in a way that is not mediated by him/her, and which therefore is not manageable simply through acts of awareness and consequent choice.

The focus on awareness alone as the basis for individual acts that further a person's own interests is limited in other respects too. Janks and Ivanic (1992) suggest that "consciousness raising is part of a process in which we learn to emancipate ourselves and others" and on which basis "we can decide to act so as to contest subjection . . . of ourselves or others" (p307). The concern with the power of discourse to subject an individual and to construct their world brings into question what awareness might consist of. Any act of awareness will draw on alternative discourses which in turn one might suppose *constructs* according to its own interests the discourse it seeks to provide awareness about. That is, the constructive power of discourse seems to pre-empt the capacity of one discourse to disclose the objective properties of another. Thus it is difficult to understand precisely what one becomes aware of, and in what sense such awareness can guarantee effective intervention. It is arguable then that such an emancipatory approach to identity and engagement with discourse remains bound up with the 'will to power'. "Educators find it hard to accept that their emancipatory intentions, their desire to enlighten, may be implicated with the will to power and may therefore have oppressive consequences" (Usher and Edwards 1994, cited in Pennycook 2001). In the following discussion of student writing, I shall try to show how a student may be 'propelled' into a discourse and a particular identity position within it by a performative act, the force of which depends upon the prevailing social practices and accompanying power relations that support them. (Austin (1975) speaks of the felicity conditions that must be met for a

---



performative to have effect, and the distribution of power in social relations may be seen as one aspect of this.) One aspect of this 'will to power' may be evident in the paradoxical role the performative act often has in emancipatory discourse. While emancipatory discourse may be directed against the institutions and conventions that the learner is subjected to (see for example Clark 1992), it is precisely the authority of the educator given by such institutions and the social practices supporting them that gives the discourse its force for the learner. That is, such a discourse will only have force for the learner if s/he has submitted to the authority of the institutions and the social practices supporting them which authorises such discourse. While at the cognitive level the emancipatory discourse resists such practices, at the performative level it reaffirms and further entrenches them.

### **Comment on student texts**


An international postgraduate student from Vietnam (student A) enrolled in an LLM had been set a task that had been presented as follows:

Choose a particular civil liberty which interests you and answer the following questions:

1. How does the law of Victoria and the Commonwealth protect it?
2. Do you consider this protection as adequate? Why?
3. Can you find a better model for its protection in another State or Territory in Australia or overseas?

In answering these questions you will need to carefully identify the nature of the civil liberty you have chosen, consider both statutes and the common law and the published views of others.


---



The student chose to write about euthanasia, and proceeded to provide a description of the protection Victorian and Commonwealth law offered before going on to discuss the adequacy of this protection and an account of an alternative model that in her view presented a better model. Of interest here is the way in which the student presented the first section. We might normally suppose that on recognising that the purpose for presenting a description of existing protection is in order to evaluate it, which the student certainly did recognise, that the protection would be presented in such a way that it pointed towards the evaluation that would be made. That is the purpose of the description would shape the description itself. This was not the case in this instance. One possible reason for this could be that the student felt unable to evaluate it. However, this student had very clear views on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the legal protection offered and the evaluation she intended to make. When asked why she gave no indication of the direction her evaluation would take in the description she replied that she was merely answering the question as set out in the task.

Several points can be made here. There appear to be two student identities, or two aspects of student identity influencing the student's work. These could perhaps be described as 'student subject to institutional authority' (identity A) and 'student as producer of knowledge' (identity B). There is then a failure at this point to integrate the two in a way that would usually be considered desirable. The reason for this failure of integration clearly does not arise from the absence of identity B. The student was not assuming the identity of 'submissive student' because she had not learnt to be otherwise (this argument is still sometimes heard with respect to Asian students!). The question here is not one of ability or capacity or of valid alternatives available to the student but of identity. The student's ability to think for herself and develop a position of her own was clearly demonstrated elsewhere in the essay. However, it appears the student identity A assumed priority. That is, she could enact identity B only at the point she believed she was authorised to do so by the assignment task. The capacity to choose whether to respond to the task in this way or to respond in the way I have suggested was not limited by student abilities. Nor did they appear to derive from habitual practices of a cultural nature, since there was no suggestion by the student that this seemed simply to be the 'natural' way to do things. (cf comments by San Miguel (1996) who accounts for her Sri Lankan


---



student's choices in terms of cultural practices p41.) Rather, I am arguing there is a lack of a mediating discourse that positions the student in a way that authorises her to act differently. It is not simply an act of awareness that is called for here (that one can in fact present the legal protection in a way that anticipates the evaluation the writer will make) but the assumption of a position by the student in which she feels empowered to do so. This empowerment is not simply a function of awareness. A new position is made available to the student only because s/he has been vested with it by an authorised other (the lecturer, the language and academic skills adviser) who, by drawing on the institutional power invested in them, performatively propels the student into a certain position. While choice may follow from this, such a performative act is a necessary prerequisite. A new identity position has been 'granted' to the student which opens up other possibilities for him or her. However, assuming an identity position from which certain choices can be made is not a function of cognitive acts of awareness, but of an articulation with the distribution of power structured by the social and discourse practices one is engaging with and which propel one into a certain position. I am suggesting this is achieved through a performative act.

In another example, an Indonesian LLM student was referred for language and academic skills advice because of plagiarism. He had submitted his final research assignment, and it was returned to him with the request that he re-submit it in his own words. The lecturer/examiner stated that while the essay was well-structured and the student had dealt with the relevant issues, much of the text was a cobbling together of extracts from his source texts, and the student's own position was quite poorly developed. The student himself stated that he had not done this in any of his previous assignments. He had actually been quite a successful student, obtaining mostly distinctions for his assignments. He stated that in this instance, he had resorted to using extracts from texts because he had not understood the *lectures* very well! He stated that he had had no difficulty understanding the texts from which he drew. He continued to explain that because he had not understood the lectures (because the lecturer spoke too quickly) he could not be sure whether or in what ways the research topic he had to select would be relevant. He had therefore chosen a very broad topic, which had been approved. He was clearly fearful that he might somehow transgress a boundary the precise location of which he was unsure. While

---




a broad topic increased the chance that what he proposed would fall within the limits he imagined existed, it obviously did nothing to clarify them for him either. Although he had demonstrated in previous assignments an ability to use source materials to clearly create his own position, in this instance he failed to do so. However, when told by the lecturer/ examiner that his topic and what he appeared to be trying to do with it was in fact quite acceptable, the student was then able to do what before he had previously felt unable to do in this assignment – develop a clear position of his own and draw on source materials to support it, in the process making them in some way his own.

The student's reliance on source materials reflected his own sense of lack of any authority from which he could speak, and in a sense was driven back onto the authority vested in these source materials. Empowerment in this case did not depend upon being made aware of what possibilities were open to him, or of what in the normal course of events was expected from him. He already knew these things and had already demonstrated that he possessed the necessary skills. It does seem therefore that the utterance by the lecturer/examiner positioned the student in a way that now freed him to draw on the sources that were already available to him. But this was not an act of positioning he could carry out by himself, by his own volition. It was not a choice he could make as such. It was only by a certain articulation with the power structure of the institution that he was enabled to make the move he desired. In this case it was only the lecturer (or an equivalent) who occupied a quite specific place in that power structure who could provide the articulation, through a certain act.

While the student's situation as described here is in many respects very common place, the point I am making is that awareness and volition appear not to be sufficient conditions for a person to act. The person must also be articulated in an enabling way with the power relations that characterise the institutions and social practices one is engaging with, and this I have suggested is achieved through a performative act. It was the authority with which the lecturer spoke that was enabling, rather than the content of his utterance, and it was this act which propelled the student into a position from which he could make use of relevant discourses [those that determine what essays should be like] already available to him. (The same



---



utterance spoken by someone who did not represent the power relations in the same way, such as a friend, would not have had the same enabling effect.)

## Conclusion

I have suggested that an important aspect of discourse acquisition has to do with the ways in which learners are simply propelled into identity positions, through an act that we might describe as performative. I have looked very narrowly at two instances, and tried to show how such an approach might help overcome some of the difficulties that arise with the predominant approaches to identity and discourse acquisition, which focus on awareness and the resources an individual as 'agent' can make use of. The implications of this preliminary study are that it might be worth exploring the numerous kinds of acts that in fact occur, and the ways in which they facilitate, impede or otherwise affect the process of discourse acquisition. The critical dimension to such an approach lies in attempting to clarify the kinds of social *acts* that are entailed in discourse acquisition and identity construction, in addition to or rather than the identity positions and power relationships that are embedded in the cognitive content of discourses we engage with. If discourse is supported by an amalgam of such acts, it is not sufficient to focus on identifying and teaching typical cognitive, textual and linguistic features that typify a given discourse. Mastery or employment of such characteristic features would depend upon such acts, and would not be achieved simply through an exercise of understanding. It might thus be of interest to track the ways in which students are articulated with power through such acts and their impact on student writing. This would complement critical discourse analysis that looks at the ways in which power relations find representation in a text itself. It would look at aspects of authorisation of student writing and implications of this for the ways in which construction of knowledge by students is enacted.

---



## Bibliography

Austin, J. L. (1975) *How to do things with words* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Clark, R. (1992) "Principles and practice of CLA in the classroom", in N. Fairclough (Ed), *Critical language awareness*, London, Longman.

Ivanic, R. (1998) *Writing and Identity*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Janks, H. and Ivanic, R. (1992) "Critical language awareness and emancipatory discourse", in N. Fairclough (Ed), *Critical language awareness*, London, Longman.

Norton, B. and Toohey, K. (2001) Changing perspectives on good language learners, *TESOL Quarterly* 35, 307-322.

Pennycook, A. (2001) *Critical Applied Linguistics: a critical introduction*. New Jersey. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Urwin, C. (1984) Power relations and the emergence of language' in J. Henriques, W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Venn and V. Walkerdine (eds) *Changing the subject*. London, Methuen.

San Miguel, C. (1996) Cultural influences on academic literacy: A case study. *Open Letter: Australian journal for adult literacy research and practice*, Vol 6.