Reflective writing, reflecting on identities: The construction of writer identity in student teachers' reflections

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A B S T R A C T

The study focuses on student teachers' reflective writing as an academic literacies practice. Data are drawn from a combined ethnographic approach to student teachers' reflective writing on their practicum experience in a Primary Education Department of a Greek University. Ivanič' (1998) framework on the construction of writer identity is employed in order to explore the resources and the discourses which student teachers deploy to position themselves with or against academic and professional discourses available in the socio-culturally bounded context of Teacher Education in Greece. The discourses under negotiation resonate socially circulating discourses that underpin the formation of student teachers' professional identity. Given the specifications of the genre and the specifications of the context, reflective writing could possibly call for a transformative approach to academic writing practices.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical premises of reflection are often traced back to the works of Dewey and Schön. Although critics have pointed to the ways in which both approaches "bifurcate knowledge and experience, privileging the former at the expense of the latter" (Hébert, 2015: 362, see also Akbari, 2007), the mediating role between knowledge and experience or "theory in practice" is exactly what makes reflection so appealing. As a result, reflective writing has been integrated into a wide range of Higher Education Curricula, whether pure or applied (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000; Ryan, 2011a; Ryan & Ryan, 2013; Spiro, 2011; Wharton, 2012). In academic settings, reflection is commonly associated with the transformation of practice, whether it refers to "the practice of learning or the practice of the discipline or the profession" (Ryan, 2011a: 103). Thus, reflective writing dominates vocational oriented disciplines such as teaching, nursing, social work and management (Beauchamp, 2015; Hoadley-Maidment, 2000; Nesi, 2008; Spiro, 2011). In the Teacher Education context, in particular, reflective writing features as a crucial aspect in student teachers' professional development and the formation of their identity as prospective teachers (Beauchamp, 2015; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Thus, student teachers' reflective writing in Teacher Education Programmes can

be explored under a double perspective, as an academic genre and as a professional development practice.

The paper presents results from a research study on student teachers' reflective writing as an academic literacy practice which directly relates to their teacher identity formation. It adopts an academic literacies perspective (Lea, 2008; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Lillis, 2003; Lillis & Scott, 2007), under which written texts produced and consumed in the academy are theorised as *socially situated practices* and issues of identity, power and authority embedded in institutional and disciplinary discourses are foregrounded. Data are drawn from a "textography" study (Swales, 1998, see also Paltridge, 2004, 2008) on student teachers' writing during their practicum in a four-year Bachelor of Education programme of a Greek University. The analysis employs Ivanič' (1998) framework on the construction of the *writer identity* in order to explore the discourses that are contested and negotiated in student teachers' reflective writing and the ways in which these discourses, in turn, relate to aspects of student teachers' transitional identities as students and as teachers. It is assumed that the recognition of the multiple forces and discourses that come into play in student teachers' reflective writing can support student teachers to actively engage with their academic and professional identity development and further help teacher educators to efficiently support their students in their developmental trajectories.

The study is structured as follows: In Section 1.1, research on reflective writing practices in academic settings is reviewed and issues related to the hybrid nature of reflective writing are discussed. Although identity construction is a prominent issue

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in reflective writing, writer identity in student teachers' reflective writing is rather under-explored (Section 1.2.2). Thus, Ivanič' (1998) framework, briefly outlined in Section 1.2.1, is adopted as a methodological tool in the analysis. Section 2 provides a description of the research context and the data on which the paper draws. The analysis of student teachers' interviews around their reflective texts (Section 3) highlights the multiple discourses that student teachers deploy in the construction of a discoursal self that seeks to harmonise academic, professional and personal aspects of their sense of self as students and as teachers. Findings (Section 4) point to the situated nature of academic writing practices: they delineate the strong essayist tradition in Teacher Higher Education in Greece and the matching or contesting discourses of the academy and the profession which circulate the field. Findings further call for a transformative pedagogical approach to reflective writing in Teacher Education. Towards this direction, some tentative suggestions for pedagogy are briefly sketched.

1.1. Reflection in academic writing: a disciplinary genre?

Wharton (2012: 490) defines assessed reflective writing

as writing which is produced for formal evaluation in an educational course and which requires the writer to: narrate personal experience; comment on associated feelings; appraise their performance; discuss what they have learned; and relate the learning to some aspect of future action.

The multiplicity of purposes assigned to reflective writing results in the hybridisation of a number of "text types", namely the text types of recount, description, explanation and discussion (Ryan, 2011a: 103). In Nesi and Gardner's (2012) study of students' writing in Higher Education, reflective writing falls within the Narrative Recount genre family. Although such writings are "comparatively more involved, situation-dependent-concrete and persuasive than other BAWE [British Academic Written English] genre families, they still exhibit many of the features of formal academic prose when compared to genres such as conversation" (Nesi & Gardner, 2012: 237).

Luk has also signalled "the emergence of an embryonic form of disciplinary discourse of reflections" (2008: 637). In her study of the discourse features (i.e. the schematic structures and the rhetorical and linguistic resources employed) of six student teachers' reflective reports on their teaching practicum, Luk points to a "potential tripartite relationship between reflective genre awareness, reflective writing and reflective abilities" (2008: 637). Enhanced student teachers' genre awareness of professional reflective writing could possibly facilitate ideas construction, transformation and representation which may lead to higher quality reflections. In a similar vein, Ryan proposes a model for teaching academic reflection on the presumption that familiarising students with the key text types and the linguistic resources through which they are realised in contextually appropriate ways in the disciplines, may improve the reflective writing skills of higher education students (Ryan, 2011a; Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

The argument that if students are provided with the resources to formulate contextually appropriate reflections, they can produce higher quality writing, may indeed sound convincing. It should be noted, though, that if one accepts that there is an element of learning how to reflect and an element of learning how to write contextually appropriate reflections, it cannot be taken for granted that the successful writer has mastered reflective thinking as a higher order thinking skill.

Moreover, in order to define disciplinary appropriate genres, the different ways of conceptualising the "disciplinary" or the "professional" should be considered. What is understood as "professional" may be inscribed in either the discourses of the professional culture

of the academy, i.e. Teacher Education Institutes, or the discourses of the professional culture of the vocation, i.e. school teachers, in the case under discussion (Stierer, 2000a).

Closely linked to the hybrid nature of reflective writing, another important issue relates to the incompatibility of reflection with assessment purposes, especially in high stakes university contexts (Creme, 2005; Tummons, 2011; Wharton, 2012). Such purposes run the risk to lead to "a measure of pragmatism on the exercise" (Stierer, 2000b: 218), or "routinisation [. . .] that undermines the notion of reflection as deep thinking" (Beauchamp, 2015: 127), and "unreflective reflection" (Alsup, 2006: 109). The specifications of the genre (i.e. personal involvement, questioning, self criticism) run in sharp contrast to the dominant essayist practices of the academy (Creme, 2005; Wharton, 2012). Students may resist such personal writing either as a discourse or as a genre (Tummons, 2011), i.e. they may be unwilling to expose themselves and honestly reveal their inner thoughts and their weaknesses, or they may feel uncomfortable with the writing conventions of foregrounding the "I" (Wharton, 2012) and unease to operate "outside an exacting but familiar academic context" (Nesi & Gardner, 2012: 250). Moreover, both students and tutors may hold different and often conflicting conceptualisations of what constitutes a 'high quality' reflective piece of writing (Tummons, 2011). Thus, reflective writing may result in a pragmatic approach to writing in a way that would possibly satisfy the assessor of the assignment (Stierer, 2000b). In this case, formative assessment (Creme, 2005) or, as Tummons (2011: 481) puts it, the employment of "[a]ssessment tools that allow students more time and space within which slowly and carefully to develop their identity as reflective writers" may provide some solution. However, the question of how alternate assessment forms can be integrated in the high performance seeking university curricula still remains open.

The idea of reflection as a "safe learning space" is thoroughly explored in Creme (2008). Her study focuses on learning journals in which students reflect on course material as a means to explore their own learning. Although such journal writing does not straightforwardly relate with practice, there are clearly similarities between these types of writing (Creme, 2005), as they both invite students to "take on a 'discoursal' [writing] self (Ivanič, 1998) that is different from the objective writing self of essayist prose" (Creme, 2008: 59). Creme documents the hybrid nature of reflective writing between life narrative and the essay and further draws on Winnicott's (1971) "transitional space" to suggest that reflective writing may be employed as a way of mobilising a transitional space in students' writing. In this safe learning space, students "may forge new relationships with different ways of knowing and different writing identities" (Creme, 2008: 62) and may be encouraged "to re-make course ideas, and re-make themselves". The issue of the construction of the writer identity in such forms of writing should be then more thoroughly explored.

1.2. Writer identity

1.2.1. Ivanič' framework on writer identity
Matsuda (2015: 141) underlines that

[i]dentity in written discourse is a complex phenomenon that involves both empirical reality that can be described and measured (e.g., demographics and textual features) and phenomenological reality that exists in people's perceptions (e.g., social constructs).

Ivanič' (1998) seminal work on writer identity in academic discourse offers a framework of analysis that can successfully account for both empirical and phenomenological aspects in exploring it. Within a social-constructivist view, it acknowledges "how individuality and social conventions are both mutually constitutive