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Analysing the development of professional identity in blogging discourse

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1 Abstract

Trainee teachers enrolled on education courses arrive as students, but leave as qualified professional teachers. During the course trainees have to develop their identity as a professional teacher, moving away from an identity as a university student. This research seeks to better understand the process by which trainee teachers develop their professional identity as a teacher through examination of the use of a community blog in a teacher training course, the Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) Initial Teacher Training Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) at Nottingham Trent University in England. The community blog served as the primary course-sponsored communication method for the trainees during their placement periods. As such, it can be studied as a representative sample of whole class peer-led course communication throughout the year.

Through an analysis of the discourse in the course community blog, we attempt to reach understandings about how the trainees present and develop their situated identities, the identities an individual presents to others in a given situation (Gee, 2005), throughout the year by positioning themselves as students, teachers or a combination of the two. It is hoped that greater understanding of the way students create a professional identity can be reached through studying trainees' online communication.

This research follows some previous research on expressions of teacher trainee identities in online discussion boards by Skulstad (2005) and currently unpublished work on discussion board communication at Sheffield Hallam University (Irwin and Hramiak, in review). This paper provides further evidence and insights into identity creation online, as well as specifically focusing on blogging communication.

The methodology used is a discourse analysis, consisting of three approaches to analysing patterns of identity present in the trainees' communication: an analysis of blog communication genres developed and used by the trainees, the lexis chosen by them, and the pronouns used for themselves and others. The use of language in online educational communication, particularly in new forms of online communication such as blogs, has not been researched as fully as the written and spoken word for the obvious reason that they are recent phenomenon. Herring (2007) among others has suggested that online communication has different properties than either written or spoken discourse and needs to be classified and studied differently. As such, part of this research is also exploring and testing what discourse analysis methods make sense to apply to online blogging communication, particularly in relation to examining the role of language in expressing identity.

Keywords:

discourse analysis; professional identity; teacher training; education; blogging; discourse

2 Introduction

Trainees on teacher education courses arrive as post-graduate university students and leave as qualified professional teachers. Through the year they need to undergo a transformation so by the end of the year they identify with being a teacher, and less with being a student. To avoid possible confusion in the paper's use of terms, trainee teachers will be referred to as trainees and secondary/high school students as pupils, with the term 'student' being used to refer to a university student identity.

This research looks at this process of identity transformation as expressed through a series of messages posted to a community blog, a shared online space for posting and commenting on messages. Through a discourse analysis of the blog text, we hoped to better understand the process by which a group of trainees present and develop their identities. We analysed the messages genres, use of pronouns, and the lexis used by the trainee community in their blog postings. Finally we discuss the meaning of the analysis and conclusions that can be drawn from the research.

3 Background

1 Literature review

It is important to have a shared understanding of some of the key terms used in this research. For instance, 'discourse' has two main meanings, the first being "language in use" (Cutting, 2002, p. 2). So referring to the trainees' discourse can refer to the language they used. The second is defined by Gee (2005) as the way a group of people act and interact (including the use of language) to identify with and be identified with that group. For instance, university academics may write, talk, dress, and behave in particular ways so that others know they are academics and so they feel more like academics – what they do could be considered the university academic discourse. Though Gee (2005) points out that discourse analysis could be extended beyond just the use of language to include actions, symbols, etc, in this research we have focused solely on the use of language to identify with a particular discourse.

We should also define what an identity is, since we are seeking to examine them. Gee (2005) provides some insight into this, suggesting that we employ different identities for different social situations, such as office worker, parent or child, which he refers to as a 'situated identity' – an identity for a particular situation. Skulstad (2005) calls these identities 'roles' that we adopt, and suggests there is disagreement across researchers about what is the most appropriate term to use. For the purposes of this paper we will refer to identity or situated identity, as suggested by Gee (2005). Gee (2005) further suggests that the discourses you call upon when using language are based upon your situated identity – therefore analysis of the discourses used in text can help with understanding the identities that are being called upon.

There is a significant amount of published research (eg, McCarthy, 1991; Olshtain and Celce-Murcia, 2001; Cots, 2006) on the integration of discourse analysis into teaching, specifically around teaching language such as ESL/EFL., but that research focuses on

the pedagogical benefits rather than actually doing a discourse analysis of learner communication as our research focuses on. Skulstad (2005 and 2007) are the only published discourse analyses of trainee teachers' online communication we could find in our literature review. Skulstad's (2005) research focused on a group of trainee EFL teachers and examined their expressions of identity (called roles by Skulstad) and group cohesion in online discussion boards where they had to critically analyse each other's work. Skulstad (2005) primarily looked at the conflict between the identities of supporting peer and critical analyst which was due to the assessment task design. However, such conflict was not expected to play a role in our analysis due to a different purpose for the online communication. Skulstad (2007) further looks at genres employed by trainee teachers in online discussion, specifically focusing on genres employed in response to face-threatening acts. There is generally a lack of research into discourse analysis of online communication, especially around student, teacher and trainee communication online.

2 Course background

The course being investigated in this research was the 2007/8 cohort of the Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) Initial Teacher Training Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) at Nottingham Trent University. This PGCE has two long placement periods where trainees work in the schools away from the university. To facilitate communication between trainees during these placement periods, the tutor encouraged the trainees to use a shared blog which they could all post messages to, though posting on the blog was not a requirement for assessment purposes. The trainee community communicated with each other during the year using other methods besides the blog, such as speech, SMS texts and email. However, these communication methods are outside of the possible scope of this research, which focused solely on the blog postings as the course-recommended method of whole group communication when at a distance.

The blog was originally hosted on an external site, LiveJournal.com. However, in the second semester the blog was moved to a blog tool in the university's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Desire2Learn. In both instances the blog contents were only available to the trainees and the tutor. The tutor herself did not actively post on the blog, contributing only one post (explaining the move to the new blog) and one comment, so the blog and its style were shaped primarily by the trainees.

A total of 211 blog posts were made (41 first semester and 170 second semester). There were 52 comments first semester and 286 comments second semester. Unfortunately, due to a clerical error, the text of the comments from semester two are unavailable for analysis, so the texts analysed were all 211 blog posts and the 52 first semester comments. Participants gave permission for their posts to be analysed for this research and any identifying text has been anonymised.

4 Methodology

A discourse analysis was identified as an appropriate methodology for investigating

trainee identity: discourses we call upon in our use of language are based upon the situated identities we want to express (Gee, 2005). Through an analysis of the discourses called upon in the trainee blog posts, we hoped to better understand the construction of the trainee identity and its expression through the specific medium of blogging. Discourse analysis has many methods which can be applied, however many of them are based upon traditional speech and writing patterns. For instance, the Initiation-Response-Feedback method of organising conversation (Cutting, 2002) does not work well for blogging where many responses may come simultaneously and in an asynchronous fashion, days after the initial message. Online communication has been called a hybrid of traditional speech and writing in its characteristics, and new ways of classifying and analysing it may be required (Herring, 2007). As such, methods have been chosen which seem appropriate to the specific communication of the trainees. The specific methods used included analysis of the genres of blog posts, the boundaries of the community as expressed through pronouns and the vocabulary used by the trainees.

Genre is familiar to most people in terms of classifying films and literature, but Swales argues that genre should be viewed in a wider sense as “a class of communicative events... which share some set of communicative purposes” (1990, p. 58). Swales (1990) argues that genre analysis is useful as one method for making sense of written discourse. For example, genre analysis has been used to differentiate the types of blogs and their uses (Herring et al, 2004). For the purposes of this research, we wanted to classify the types of messages inside this specific use of a blog, mapping out the sub-genres of message type rather than attempting to understand the genres of all blogs on the Internet. As such we looked at each of the original blog posts written in the blog (considering comments as an associated part of the original blog post) and attempted to categorise them based upon the purpose of the communication and its linguistic features, rather than the content. For instance, long descriptive messages about teaching issues at school had the same features and purpose as those about how a job interview went, though the content of the two are distinct. Through this reading we were able to identify the genres used by the trainees on their blog.

Through their discourse, the trainees distinguish who is a part of their community and who is not. Pronoun use can be indicative of this (Holmes & Marra, 2002), as use of 'we' and 'us' show if a trainee is in a group while 'they' and 'them' identify others outside the group. Specifically we looked at the use of person deixis, where a pronoun has been used to substitute for a person, as we were interested in who was included as part of the community. Where pronouns were used to represent an object (such as 'they' when referring to a group of assignments), they were excluded from the analysis. Each use of 'we', 'us', 'they' and 'them' were identified in the blog posts and categorised based on who they referred to.

Swales (1990) comments that discourse communities have their own identifiable lexis, the words and language patterns that they use. The trainees created their own language patterns, combining lexis from both teacher discourse and student discourse. Analysis of the trainee community's lexis over time, as expressed through the blog postings, helped to show the formation of the trainee's situated identities.

5 Results

1 Community message genres

The genre analysis identified nine different message types which were adopted and used by the trainees. We have labeled them Introduction, Re-introduction, Messages of Encouragement, Requests for Help, Emotional Catharsis, Resource Sharing, Detailed Report, Solicitation of Experiences, and Short Status Report. 20 of the 211 messages did not fit into specific categories, though 5 of them were polls soliciting brief answers from others. However, these did not fit any particular pattern besides asking for a brief response.

There were 11 Introduction messages, all in semester one, which consisted of a phatic greeting (eg "hello"), the trainee's name, a personal history comment, and the trainee's desires for the year, often an exclamatory phrase. The personal history which was called upon in all but one of the messages was their prior undergraduate educational experience, a sign the trainees were calling upon their shared identity as students during the beginning of the course. Trainees did not comment on each other's introductory posts in all but one case, which runs contrary to the expectations expressed by Clark (2001) in using online discussion boards. This could be a result of the perception of comments as being different to a reply in a discussion board or as a result of the trainees already meeting each other face-to-face.

Re-introduction messages occurred in semester two after the transition to the new blog, totaling 16 in number. Re-introduction messages were short, normally one to two sentences and were composed of a phatic greeting and another comment. Trainees seemed to use them to establish a presence on the new blog rather than actually reintroduce themselves. It seems reasonable to assume that this genre would not have existed if the trainees had not moved to a new blog tool.

There were 7 Messages of Encouragement, short one to two sentence messages. Notably they do not contain offers of assistance, but instead wishes and positive desires for other trainees, such as "good luck to everyone on their placements." Messages of Encouragement were always about teaching practices rather than focusing on upcoming student work, particularly focusing on the unknown (eg new placements).

Requests for Help were the second most common genre of message, with 49 being posted. The original request was composed of a brief story or explanation of a situation, followed by a request or question eliciting help. These received more comments than other messages, normally statements of personal experience with the problem, coupled with a positive desire for the original trainee. These reply comments were directed at the original poster in all cases except one, where comments became more of a dialogue.

Emotional Catharsis messages, of which there were 15, involved I-statements expressing emotions. Other text included brief descriptive statements explaining a particular experience. Enhanced punctuation was present in most of the statements, with exclamation marks ending each sentence, often including multiple exclamation or

question marks (eg “!!!!!!”). Glazer (2002) found that use of punctuation helps convey emotion and bring attention to online communication. Many of the messages focused on personal experiences and feelings about negative teaching situations. However, in the second semester there was a change towards messages of relief at having been offered a teaching job for the coming year. Comments on the teaching issue messages tended to focus on descriptions of similar experiences and commands on how to deal with the situation.

There were 9 Resource Sharing messages which offered a resource for the group to use, normally including explanatory statements about the resource being provided. In most cases there were commands to make use of the resource after the explanation. These messages rarely received any comments.

Detailed Report was the most used genre, with 53 instances of its use. The Detailed Report was a longer, narrative style of writing. It consisted of at least three paragraphs, sometimes up to multiple pages depending upon the author. The messages focused on a detailed description of a particular experience, either teaching or job interview related. These messages did not solicit responses or help and were more factual than Emotional Catharsis messages. There were only two instances of this message genre in semester one. It became more widely used in semester two when one trainee posted his longer private blog messages to the community blog. This led to other trainees following this style of message. In two cases trainees came back to a brief version of the report to add more details and satisfy the criteria set by the community. In one of those cases, other trainees actually requested more information using comments; however comments were infrequently used for Detailed Reports.

The 10 Solicitation of Experiences messages focused on finding out what other trainees had done. They were not about finding answers for the poster’s dilemma as seen in the Request for Help messages, but rather trying to gather a broad spectrum of experiences. The questions asked tended to be W-questions addressing the group, such as “What has everyone else’s experience been like” or “How’s everybody else coming along?”. The message topics varied from teaching experiences to questions about approaches to assignments. These messages normally received one to two comments.

There were 21 Short Status Reports, brief messages of one to seven sentences which commented briefly on the trainee’s emotional status and included a brief description of events. Normally these messages ended with a brief statement of encouragement or wish for the other trainees such as “I hope everyone else is ok”. The Short Status Report was more widely used in the second semester, perhaps an indication of how busy trainees were during the end of the course, meaning shorter messages became more efficient for communicating with the group.

2 Community *pronoun use*

Results of the analysis of pronoun use by the community have been set into tables split by semester one and two to aid in understanding the use over time. See tables 1 and 2

below.

Table 1 – Person deixis for 'we' and 'us'

	Trainees	Teachers	Class	School	Candidates	Pupils	Other trainees	Other
Sem 1	14	2	6	0	0	0	0	0
Sem 2	53	17	10	5	9	0	3	8
Total	67	19	16	5	9	0	3	8

Examining the use of 'we' and 'us' by the trainees shows us that, unsurprisingly, they strongly refer to their group of trainees as 'we' or 'us', showing they consider themselves part of their trainee community. Interestingly, there is some evidence that they identify with trainees from other universities, suggesting the trainees identify with a more universal trainee discourse, despite having different university experiences. This is further extended in semester two to other candidates at job interviews, other potential teachers. Trainees make some references to being part of teachers as a wider group, as well as the school they work at. Most of these are in semester two, suggesting that the trainees became more comfortable in the second half of the course with seeing themselves as teachers and part of the schools they undertake placements at. They use 'we' and 'us' to refer to the class they teach quite frequently, while never referring to the pupils alone in this way. It is important to the trainees to feel a sense of ownership and inclusion with the classes they teach, but this is separate from feeling like a student learning in the classroom themselves.

Table 2 – Person deixis for 'they' and 'them'

	Trainees	Teachers	Class	School	Candidates	Pupils	Other trainees	Other
Sem 1	0	1	0	1	0	86	0	4
Sem 2	0	6	2	51	2	219	0	24
Total	0	7	2	52	2	305	0	28

One of the most obvious results of the analysis of the use of 'they' and 'them' is that pupils are overwhelmingly the most used group for this category, suggesting strongly that they are seen as completely outside of the trainee identity. School comes second, but it is important to note the context with which the trainees referred to school. In all but three of the cases, the school being referred to was either a new placement the trainee had not arrived at yet, or a school they were interviewing at. In these forty-nine cases it is logical that the students would not feel a part of the school as it was not their school yet, or in the case of an unsuccessful interview never would be. There was a similar pattern with the use of 'they' and 'them' to represent teachers – five of the seven uses referred to teachers at schools the trainees did not work at. There were twenty-eight examples of referring to other people outside of the educational context we are examining, such as a

trainee's family or a cultural group as a whole. These examples include four references to the university tutors as 'they', implying the tutors are seen as different than the trainees, perhaps due to the power dynamic between them or the lack of participation by university tutors in the blog community.

Overall, looking at both sets of pronoun use together some patterns emerge. Trainees never see themselves as part of the group of pupils, despite being students themselves. This is probably due to the nature of the teaching relationship and power dynamics in the classroom, as well as suggesting that different discourses exist between 'high school student' and 'postgraduate student'. This does not preclude the trainees from considering themselves as part of the class as a whole which they see themselves as an integral part of, despite the temporary nature of their role. The group of trainees always see themselves as part of the community, with no references to 'they' and 'them' but many for 'we' and 'us'. Teachers and schools which the trainees do not have a relationship with yet are seen as separate, while those that the trainees work with become something the trainees identify themselves with, particularly in the second semester.

3 Community *lexis*

The community's lexis comes from a variety of discourses – education in general, their subject (ICT), their role as students and their role as teachers on placement. Some of the first blog posts, as early as October 9 call on their shared, pre-existing discourses of education and their subject. For instance, references are made in message 10 to "interaction design" and "accessibility as part of web design," phrases from ICT. Most of the trainees make reference in their introductory messages to university abbreviations such as NTU, OU, PGCE and BSc, showing a reference to a shared university education discourse. Early posts about teaching (starting October 29) refer to a high school education discourse such as 'y9' and 'BTEC', terms which would be familiar for the pupils at school as well as teachers, but this shows a shift in the trainees' discourse towards a more high school education discourse as they begin teaching.

On November 10, one trainee begins discussing the teacher concept of evaluation. However, the context of the discussion is about what is required for the university course in terms of assessment, rather than discussing evaluation as an integrated part of being a teacher. In the same message, the trainee refers to "SAS 1 assignment", pulling on the university student discourse. Responses to this message also referred to the student discourse and what was required in terms of templates by the university tutors. This shows the trainees are not thinking as teachers in this conversation, but rather as students.

Comments to message 23 on November 14 show some trainees have begun to incorporate teacher discourse into their conversations. Trainees make reference to "behaviour management policies" and "C1, C2 and C3" levels (discipline escalation levels for their school). Through the rest of semester one, trainees incorporate some of the teacher terms into their messages, including "behaviour strategies" and "starter activities". In the second semester, this type of discourse becomes common, especially

in the longer descriptive accounts of teaching practices. However in the second semester, close to assignment deadlines the trainees switch back to student discourses, referring to tutor expectations and assignment terms. This happens in both late February and late April/early May.

Throughout the year, the trainees gradually adopted the teacher vocabulary into their messages, with a student vocabulary coming into use at the start of the year and around assignment deadlines.

6 Discussion

The results of the analyses show that the trainees began the year detached from the teacher discourse: they did not use teacher vocabulary, nor did they include themselves in references to teachers. However, after a little more than a month on placement, this changed and the trainees began to adopt the teacher discourse, starting to see themselves more as teachers. This developed further in semester two when they fully began to identify themselves as part of the community of teachers. Many of the trainees secured employment as a teacher during the second semester, which may have helped further cement their identities as teachers.

The later assignments in the year were somewhat disruptive to the process of transitioning to a teacher identity, as the trainee conversations switched from teacher discourse back to student discourse whenever assignments happened, despite many having secured permanent positions as teachers for the coming year. One solution for this could be to front-load more of the assignments for the year, which would help avoid transitions back to student discourse at the end of the year when trainees should be thinking of themselves as teachers. Another strategy could be to ensure that the later assignments are more authentic: they should be closely linked to actual teacher practices. This could help ensure that the conversations are less about what the tutor is looking for in terms of templates and requirements, and more about conveying teaching practices that trainees are already doing. This could involve decreasing the use of templates and tutor-specific formats as the year progresses, recognising the diversity of styles that actual teachers use.

The genre analysis was revealing about the way the trainees formed communicative patterns and agreed upon conventions for messages. For instance, longer descriptive accounts were appreciated to understand other trainees' experiences and learn from them, especially where the information could be easily applied to other trainees, shown by a post about a job interview where trainees left comments to request additional details. In addition to serving as a tool for reflection on events that happened, the blog also served as a support network for the trainees. The genres of Messages of Encouragement, Emotional Catharsis, Requests for Help and Resource Sharing show that the blog was utilised to both seek and provide support to the trainee community in a variety of ways.

Unfortunately the message genre analysis was less useful for determining the identities the trainees called upon. There has been little research into the message genres used in

any form of online communication by students or teachers. Additional research into student and teacher genres would be needed to understand if the trainees were using types of communication more similar to the student discourse or the teacher discourse. It is also unclear what, if any, differences exist between message genres present in different methods of online communication than blogs, such as discussion boards or synchronous chat. However, this research lays a foundation for future research and these types of comparisons.

7 Conclusion

Throughout the year, this cohort of trainee teachers developed a sense of themselves as teachers, which was revealed through an analysis in their choice of lexis and pronoun use in their community blog. This development began to appear principally in the second month of placement, and became progressively stronger throughout the year. However, the trainees' role as university students meant they switched back to a student discourse when assignment due dates approached, looking for information about what the tutors desired.

If university tutors want to help trainees develop in a more continuous fashion, it would be useful to think of the trainees as learning teachers rather than students during the latter part of the course. This may seem a subtle difference, but it would mean assessments and requirements for the trainees in the second half of the course would more closely mirror the types of requirements that real teachers have. For instance, rather than observations following a university template, each trainee could use the observation format of their school or district. Another example is that teaching portfolio requirements could mirror those that newly qualified teachers have to prepare. In this way, less of a disconnect would take place between the trainee's identities and the focus would be on what they do in their teacher role. This would also help with preparing them for the coming year when they are newly qualified teachers.

We do not mean to downplay the importance of the university student discourse, nor the value of academic research by trainees into education. However, tutors need to consider at what points they want trainees to identify with the student discourse and at what points with the teacher discourse. Perhaps the student discourse would better serve trainees in the first half of the training course, while they are more firmly engaged in student activities and using that as the primary shared community discourse. One possibility is for assessments in the earlier part of the course to focus more on pedagogical theory and academic research, while latter ones focus on teaching practices. In this way, a balance could be achieved between the academic aims of the course and the induction of trainees into the teacher discourse.

The message genre analysis was helpful in determining the communicative purposes of the trainee blog messages, and showing that the blog was primarily a support mechanism for them to learn from each other and keep in touch during placement periods. However, further research about teacher and student message types on blogs and other online communication would be needed to evaluate what discourses, if any, the message genres called upon. Further research would also be needed to see if there

are differences in communication genres between similar online communication tools, such as blogs and discussion boards. This research did show that a community blog worked well for creating a support environment, similar to use of discussion boards, and showed that a blog was effective as a recording device for analysis of discourse, given that all the text could be captured for analysis.

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