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## Stance and voice in academic discourse across channels

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## Stance and voice in academic discourse across channels

Ann Hewings

### **Introduction: Developing digital voices**

Developments in technology are opening up new channels for written academic discourse, using electronic devices to supplement paper-based media. These interactive technologies become part of evolving academic literacy practices and affect both what writers and readers expect and is expected of them in high stakes genres like essays and reports. The influence of electronic environments is reflected in overall generic structure, authorial voice and individual knowledge claims, as well as in how writers construct themselves and their arguments and create and disseminate their work (Lea and Jones 2011). While traditionally crafted assignments—whether on paper or screen—are likely to maintain a strong status hierarchy between tutor (i.e. anyone with a teaching role) and student, interactive communication allows the flattening of such hierarchies through collaboration and the creation of different writer voices.

In this paper I focus on channels using screen-based media that foster interactivity, communicating with readers who can write back and contribute to either the construction of a single text or to the thinking of one or more interactants. The ‘voices’ constructed in screen-based interactions are not necessarily similar to those usually valued in formally published or assessed genres and only a limited number of studies examine how the two interact. I examine research studies into academic discourse in a variety of discussion forums, blogs, and wikis, occasionally comparing them to more traditional writing. Much of the research cited is located within a social constructionist approach to learning which foregrounds the dialogic and emphasises the use of language to understand and build knowledge. This results in consideration of the interaction as a window into the intellectual development of individuals as inscribed by their ‘voice’.

While there is much overlap in the use of the terms stance and voice, for the purposes of this chapter I refer to research which both focuses on the textual characteristics of writing involved in persuasion, evaluation, and judgements, more often grouped under the heading of *stance*, and to *voice*, research which takes a wider perspective and in which the construction of writer identity is foregrounded.

In the context of academic writing ‘voice’ has had many different interpretations (Elbow 2007, Sperling and Appleman 2011). Some views define it as personal and expressive but do not reject the role of socially determined or constructed discourse norms: for example, according to Hirvela and Belcher (2001: 85) it helps to flesh out ‘the person behind the written word’, and for Ivanič and Camps (2001) it provides a means for ‘self-representation’. Prior (2001) argues that both conceptions of voice are simultaneously possible, a view endorsed by Sperling and Appleman’s recent review of research. They locate voice within a Bakhtinian perspective in which it is imbued with social, cultural, historical and political significance and metaphorically

encompasses identity or agency. Elbow (2007: 177) uses glosses such as ‘*ethos*, or implied author or persona’ and contrasts approaches to teaching and analysing writing which focus on voice (i.e. on identity or persona) with those centred on ‘text’ in Biber et al’s (1999), Hunston & Thompson’s (2000) and even Hyland’s (2000) sense—that is, on the analysis of the grammar of style. Despite these difficulties, or possibly because of the all-embracingness of the term, voice is a concept that has maintained its popularity in descriptions of writing and its effect on the reader.

Through screen-based technologies, students are encouraged to interact not just with their tutor but also with peers, and sometimes with those outside academia through synchronous (real time) or asynchronous communication. They may draw on sources beyond the academic and their interactions may be traditional written text or multimodal. Whatever combination is selected, writers must consider their readership, advance knowledge claims, acknowledge those of others and use generic structures, all factors that are integral to successful academic communication and indicative of the understanding of knowledge construction and dissemination practices within a discipline. Advances in across-platform working on the web have promoted social and collaborative forms of interaction such as the wiki, which can be a tool for drawing on the maximum number of people to help construct and disseminate knowledge such as in *Wikipedia*, or a more confined collaborative writing space where students craft a text and where their tutor can see and crucially *assess* the final product and the individual contributions. In these recent knowledge-making and displaying spaces academic discourse is evolving and voice is open to greater variation.

### **Discussion forums and email**

Discussion forums or e-conferences have been used in academic settings since the 1990s and much research took place at the beginning of this century into their pedagogic value. They have been used as a supplement to face-to-face discussions and in distance learning institutions where they may be the only context for student interaction. Discussion topics are usually initiated by tutors inviting students to explore issues in more depth or facilitating language practice for L2 learners.

The abundant research into this genre has been carried out along three major strands: a) *the quantity and quality of student interaction*, b) *the reactions generated by tutor strategies*, and c) *the level and nature of interactivity through analyses of argumentation and authorial voice*. All three contribute to our understanding of the expression of stance and voice in this type of electronic communication.

#### a) Studies on students’ interaction

Early studies on student interaction in forums counted the number of messages as an indication of their pedagogic usefulness and later started to investigate why some forums were more interactive than others (Tolmie and Boyle 2000, Andriessen 2006). While forums can allow greater reflection time than is available in face-to-face conversation, they can also be an interaction of the unwilling where real engagement with issues and other students is not clearly observable. In particular, students may be reluctant to participate, in the knowledge that their posts are relatively permanent and available for scrutiny, leading to anxiety over the message and the style (Hewings and Coffin 2007). To counter student reserve, Hammond (2000: 259-60) advocates a

‘communicative approach’ to promote a more personal tone than that associated with more formal channels of academic discourse.

In contrast to findings on students’ unwillingness to participate, Warschaur (2002: 56) concluded that technology enabled some reluctant students to have a voice, to write about and discuss their own experiences and concerns and to take the time to reflect on those of others. In an ESL academic writing context, he found that forums were a ‘powerful tool for assisting students in invention and reinvention, discovery and exploration, reflection and negotiation – enhancing students’ opportunities to think critically about the academy and their role in it’.

Students’ willingness to interact may also depend on their familiarity with screen-based technologies. Today’s ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001), the generation that has grown up with the Internet, have had greater exposure than the students tracked by Warschaur or Hewings and Coffin. The students in Example 1 appear comfortable with screen technologies and exhibit sophisticated skills in handling forum interactions to maintain a constructive dialogue and in putting forward their views. However, *they had to be encouraged to participate* by making their contributions count towards assessment. The data come from a case study by Gills (2010: 28-9) not on voice or stance, but on the use of forums in teaching English literature to undergraduates in a UK university. The brief extracts below are from a series of posts in which students engaged in a critical dialogue on *Postmortem*, a crime novel by Patricia Cornwell.

#### Example 1

- Student A

Was anyone else disappointed with the end of *Postmortem*, or felt a little cheated by the fact that the killer turned out to be “just a pasty-faced boy with kinky dirty-blond hair...”? I’m not sure why, but I was expecting something more, something better, something more interesting.

Knox’s rules tell us the criminal should be someone we’ve met early in the story, but whose thoughts we haven’t followed. S.S. Van Dine’s rules (quoted by Todorov) say the criminal should be a main character...

- Student B

Disappointing? Well I must say I wasn’t disappointed at all but I can see why one would be. The expectation with detective fiction is that the reader already knows the killer (a convention identified by the two gentlemen you quoted)...

If you apply ‘Post Mortem’ to the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction then it is undoubtedly disappointing (although potentially subversive as I intend to point out) but ‘Post Mortem’ fails to conform to genre conventions in a number of ways...

While Gills does not address the issue of stance or voice, analysis of the data demonstrate how students’ personal voice (*I was expecting something more, something better, something more interesting.*) interweaves with elements of academic style (*‘Post Mortem’ fails to conform to genre conventions in a number of ways...*): they address other students directly, use first person pronouns and colloquial expressions, and refer to their own emotions. Their particular stance on the novel is clearly expressed with attention to grammar, spelling and expression and supported by reference to the text and to the literature, but it is also rooted in their own personal response.

## b) Reactions to tutors' strategies

Warschaur's 2002 study concentrated on the different strategies and theoretical orientations to learning that tutors brought to the use of screen technologies. Painter et al (2003) also investigated tutor strategies, concluding that students benefitted from a degree of modelling to enable them to take a role in the interaction, to find a voice. Groups in which the tutor questioned what students had said and thereby opened up spaces for responses and other probing questions had more student involvement than those where a tutor was only a welcoming presence promoting interpersonal engagement but leaving the discussion space to the students. This study suggested that asymmetrical power structures, where tutors show more control of the tasks and model the discourse are more academically successful in encouraging students to put forward viewpoints and take a stance.

Archer (2005: 80) used synchronous forums and email exchanges with a group of educationally disadvantaged students on an engineering foundation programme in South Africa. They were paired with experts with whom they discussed their work via email, while in class they interacted with other students online. The asymmetrical power relations between mentor and learner illustrate how students can construct new or different identities. Archer highlights two students with very different voices (Examples 2 and 3). The first, Tracy, takes ownership of her work through the pronoun *My* but shows uncertainty and deference in her final question to her expert mentor. She does not craft her writing to the extent of correcting repeated words or putting in spaces after full stops, but does write in full sentences and use technical vocabulary:

### Example 2

- Tracy  
My report also also proposes a better way of tele-communication, which is cost-effective and at the same time suitable for the village. The recommendation this time being solar-energy operating system for tele-communication. Does this strike you as realistic in the context of SA rural development?

Her mentor questions her on the precise usage of some of these technical words such as 'telecommunication' and prompts her to be more precise. Archer argues that this gives her a chance to try out academic discourse and start to use grammatical constructions often associated with academic writing which influence the interpersonal tenor of the text by 'creating authorial distance between the author and the subject matter' (2005: 81). The extent to which Tracy is constructing a particular voice within academic discourse becomes apparent when compared with one of her peers, Catherine (Example 3).

### Example 3

- Catherine  
My report proposes the following: It proposes some way of improvement of housing situation in rural area. But from what I got from the Expert's reply... I think I gonna just start my report all over AGAIN... (and we got test this week,,, and tha next week,,, yeah we got tha whole time in the world, all right?)

Anyway, I'll go get some info. from what Tha X-pert suggested...  
Ciao

Archer claims that this type of *hip-hop dialect* is used by many of her students, but here Catherine is being deliberately subversive in both the form and the substance of what she says. This contrasts with her classroom behaviour, which is very shy and quiet. Archer suggests that the overall form of the text is influenced by conventions used within SMS text messaging; a writing technology characterised by spelling conventions that fuse historical and contemporary writing practices and the creativity typical of conversation (Tagg: 2011). In a later message, Catherine, while still using the same code, discloses feelings about the work she is doing, directly addresses her expert and uses her own name as opposed to a pseudonym used previously. A level of *intimacy* is thereby constructed within the discourse. It would appear that Catherine's initial subversive voice, while seemingly creating a barrier to interaction, mellows as a degree of trust is built up across the course of the exchanges.

### c) Interactivity in terms of argumentation and authorial voice

Analysis of argumentation and authorial voice in forums has been undertaken by Coffin, Hewings and associates (e.g.; Coffin and Hewings 2005, Coffin, Painter, and Hewings 2005, Hewings, Coffin and North 2006). Argumentation requires taking a stance, the putting forward of views together with supporting evidence and being prepared to interact with others to defend them. However, for asynchronous discussion forums to be successful, interpersonal aspects of the interaction cannot be neglected. Forum interactions enable students to rehearse and co-construct academic arguments and to construct themselves within a limited academic community of peers. Hewings and Coffin (2007) analysed three forums used by different student groups and their tutors on a distance programme leading to a Master's in Applied Linguistics and observed a threefold voice strategy: the adoption by students of a hedging 'I as thinker' identity; that of *we* + '*teachers/educators*', which marks a more authoritative role and establishes a shared identity validating anecdotal experience; and an assertive fusion of the personal (*I* pronoun) with impersonality (*it*-clauses).

The 'I as thinker' voice (e.g. *Aptitude is, I believe, a factor to be considered...*) was less face threatening to peers as it acknowledged the personal nature of an opinion and therefore left it open to dispute, and also served, in academic discourse terms, to hedge a proposition, acknowledging the student as a novice, a non-expert, in the discipline. Simultaneously, this strategy also helped to maintain a constructive, non-adversarial tenor. The '*we*' + '*teachers/educators*' voice served to either co-opt the reader into the unfolding argument or to strengthen a claim by linking it to a wider group such as teachers, thus giving greater authority to anecdotal evidence. The use of anecdotes indicated the personal and professional teacher voice that students were bringing into the discussions - building a shared identity which was used to validate experience as support for arguments. This was transferred to their single authored assignments where the '*we* as teachers' voice was used to make stronger assertions and 'I as thinker' was used where greater circumspection was needed. The combination of impersonal *it*-clauses with the personal pronoun *I* (e.g. *I feel that it is not really academically sound to...*) conveyed a strong authorial voice through

assertion in the impersonal clauses, while the use of 'I' acknowledged the personal in relation to the jointly constructed forum texts. This construction may also indicate a reluctance to take on the purely impersonal voice associated with academic texts. Interviews with students (Example 4, from Coffin et al 2005: 477) indicated a range of views on the use of forums:

#### Example 4

- Student A: ...I feel it helped me reflect more and think about ideas more deeply and consider other people's opinions in relation to my own...it also helps to see your ideas and thoughts in writing sometimes, and to have other people's ideas there to refer to later.
- Student B: Talking is more spontaneous, I can use my arms and hands to talk, I can see if the others follow me, I can rephrase, and change my form of expression, as I am talking, and clarify more. It's a different genre. For me, the Internet was always only for informal emails, and writing academically was a very different style; these conferences are somewhere in between, and I still haven't 'found myself' in that style.

Student A clearly felt positively about the experience and the opportunities the forums gave for reflection but student B was uncomfortable in the in-between styles common in forum discussions. Such examples are a useful reminder that it is the individual's response to the technology that is central and generalisations about pedagogic value are contingent on a variety of factors. Joiner and Jones (2003) concluded that the quality of argument in face-to-face discussions was higher than that in forum discussions, possibly because at the time of their research, students and tutors needed more practice in using online forums.

More recently, Chandrasegaren (2008) looked at high school students who could be considered 'digital natives' but who were novices in academic writing. She compared stance taking and supporting moves in unassessed forum interactions and in assessed academic essays. In partial contrast to Joiner and Jones, her students showed competence in argumentation strategies in informal forum contexts, but did not apply that within traditional academic discourse. Monitoring forum discussions allowed Chandrasegaren (2008: 251) to gauge her students' overall argumentation skills and to realise that it was adopting 'the attitudinal posturing of "arguer"' in academic discourse where difficulties were arising. The use of the word 'posturing' implies adopting an identity which is not the student's own in order to argue effectively in an academic setting. Although she does not use the word 'voice', I would argue that Chandrasegaren is helping her students to find a new voice for academic argumentation, one that perhaps needs to blend institutional expectations of taking a stance on issues with the identity of the novice just moving into higher academic discourses.

In a very different context, a paper by Cheng-Wen and Archer (2008) illustrates the use of forums in South African medical education. Drawing on academic literacies approaches to student identities, the authors investigated the interaction between medical students in an unassessed course-based forum. Using Clark and Ivanič's (1997) conception of the construction of identity or the self in discourse, they discussed the 'discoursal self' constructed through discourse; the 'autobiographical self' which draws on people's personal histories and affiliations; and the 'self as author' or the 'authorial voice' which portrays the degree of authority and personal

presence an author invests in a text. With respect to self-as-author they note the use of personal pronouns, particularly *I* and *we*, and coincide with Hewings and Coffin (2007) in their perception of a student using *we* and rhetorical questions as expressing more authority, since she draws her readers into the assertions she is making and presents generalised facts. In contrast, a fellow student who uses strong modality to assert his beliefs, uses *I* which acknowledges that the opinions put forward are his own and may not be shared. Cheng-Wen and Archer note that the selves constructed *are not stable*, often changing within postings, and that the forum acts as a site to make meanings through social interaction and construction. The forums brought together medical students, who in the context of South Africa were likely to have very different social and cultural backgrounds, and enabled them to interact and together build their identities and knowledge as future doctors. By providing a lively space for interaction, student medics could express a stance on particular topics without academic consequences, thereby enabling interaction which had the potential to transform and deepen understandings.

The studies discussed in this section indicate that a variety of activities are being carried out on forums with aims from supporting the learning of argumentation skills relevant to academic discourse, to helping students take on the voice and persona of their chosen disciplines or careers. The textual nature of the interaction may aid reflection on ideas and scaffold students' critical thinking as well as provide a space for the exploration and validation of thoughts and experience from beyond academia.

### **Blogs, wikis and m-learning**

In many societies the generations growing up in the 1990s and beyond, have become accustomed to using the affordances of what O'Reilly (2005) called Web 2.0. These include use of sites where content creation, sharing and interaction are facilitated. Despite the potential of wikis and blogs where collaborative creation of content and discussion of ideas for your own and others' use is a key feature, there has been little direct research on voice. Blogs are used as spaces to give opinions and make links to other content, as a channel for personal expression, and by academics as a means of disseminating ideas and engaging in interaction. Blogs of the personal expression type are also sometimes called e-journals and it is these that are emerging more specifically as a pedagogic genre. Studies focus on their use as both a personal space for exploring ideas and as a public space where these thoughts are open to scrutiny. Both these aspects have been significant in the use of blogs by English as an additional language (EAL) students (Bloch 2007, Gebhard et al 2011, Yang 2011). In a study in the US, Bloch (2007) had learners use a blog to present a more personal image of themselves to their fellow students and discuss the problems of plagiarism. A number of the students had come from war zones where their education had been disrupted, and as a result there was distance between them and their classmates. The blog writing did not require an initial focus on grammatical form so they were able to draw on their own vernacular literacy, that is, they did not need to conform to standard academic discourse norms. Bloch suggests that this 'can give a writer a sense of authority and authorship' (2007: 132) which traditional academic writing does not. The blogs meshed vernacular literacy practices with learning to take a stance on issues in ways expected of university students. Students were subsequently expected to incorporate ideas from their blog interactions into traditional academic



assignments. They were constructing and refining their voices within the new context of a blog and rehearsing their ideas for assessed work (cf. Hewings and Coffin 2007).

A further Web 2.0 space for academic writing is the wiki, which promotes collaborative construction of a text and provides an additional space for comment or feedback. Diverging views have been expressed about the type of writing and the voice of the writers in wikis. Myers (2010) views wikis as the opposite of blogs in that they are impersonal and focused on consensus while blogs are personal in style and viewpoint. Some support for this view comes from Hemmi et al's (2009) study of Master's students who reported wikis to be an environment characterised by formality and discipline which some found lonely and isolating. There were also concerns about interpersonal aspects relating to peer-editing.

Research by Kuteeva (2010:3), on the other hand, emphasises the constructive potential of wikis in knowledge building to help students integrate into a community as learners of English. In an examination of the role of the wiki in changing reader-writer relationships, she characterises writing as both an interaction and a construction in which 'writers simultaneously shape their discourse to involve the reader and are influenced by the readers' expectations'. Drawing on Hyland's study of metadiscourse as a way of describing how writers engage with readers and express a position vis-à-vis the content, she distinguishes interactional versus interactive resources. Using this framework she analysed two student wiki-based tasks – a collaborative writing task by one group for another, and the writing of individual argumentative texts which were available for peer comment via a wiki. Students reported that posting their work publically made them pay particular attention to formal features such as grammar and spelling. Analysis of the history of the wiki's construction also demonstrated this concern, so unlike some of the previous studies examined, these students did not see an electronically mediated space as less formal in terms of these aspects of text production. However, taking the reader into account in the writing process, a feature associated with many analyses of stance, was a feature of both the collaborative texts and the argumentative writing subject to peer review. The argumentative texts specifically showed a high use of engagement markers (personal pronouns, questions and commands) implying a greater awareness of audience in ways reminiscent of those found by Hewings and Coffin, and Huang and Archer in their analyses of forums. This suggests that wikis are not just impersonal spaces; their use may contribute not only to collaborative text production, but also to an awareness of the need to take the reader and the co-writer into account. What is not yet clear is whether the voice created within the wiki is a collaborative composite construction or a mix of voices.

The final aspect of screen-based technologies and academic discourse that I want to touch on is that related to mobile learning (m-learning). By this I mean screen-based technologies that students can use in geographically non-traditional learning contexts and within which they can create new learning environments. The most obvious medium is the mobile phone, which is becoming a common learning device. Claims for m-learning are that it more spontaneous, encourages independence and collaboration, removes some of the formality from the learning experience, and helps in raising self-confidence and self-esteem. 'A mobile learning experience is an occasion to capture a moment of interest, for example through the action of

annotation, with the goal of continuing to build on that interest in another place, at a later date' (Kukulska-Hulme 2009: 162).

At present, the literature relating to m-learning has not focused on the texts created and the voices constructed by students. However, if the affordance outlined above are born out, then they would be apparent in the voice constructed by students. Comas-Quinn et al (2009) used what they refer to as 'mobile blogs' to facilitate active participation by university students learning Spanish. On a visit to Spain, students were set the task of taking photographs and uploading them to a map where they could then annotate them with audio or text. Other students were then encouraged to comment on the photographs or annotations. The site with the map, photos and annotations continued to be available following the visit to Spain and Comas Quinn et al noted that the type of posting changed. During the visit students were concerned about their interactions with the culture, but after the visit students' postings related more to the social aspects of the trip and the construction of knowledge and memories relating to the group experience. These mobile blog postings represent multimodal academic discourse of yet another type. Students did not focus particularly on form, they were more attentive to participating in the activity, capturing the moment and sharing it (Comas-Quinn, personal communication). From the description outlined it is clear that such a multimodal site for academic discourse creates opportunities for the construction of very different identities and voices. Students are the creators and deliverers of content for their peers. They are using a technology, usually the mobile phone camera, which is associated with informal settings. Their voice is likely to be affective, reflecting on the photograph or the experience and prioritising the interpersonal. Analysis of voice in such contexts would require the bringing together of analytical techniques that focused on text and image and sound.

## **Conclusion**

As newer channels of communication, screen-based technologies enable and promote different forms of interaction and genres of discourse. Research into the texts constructed suggests that they provide sites where students can experiment with their voices and rehearse arguments with peers. Some treat these sites as just a different form of academic writing, maintaining formality and status hierarchies, while others use them as more creative spaces where they can construct and try out identities (e.g. through *hip hop dialects* and other 'subversive' discourses) which differ from those employed in conventional learning situations.

The aspect of constructive argumentation within (asynchronous) forums draws on the notion that enabling reflection on the views of others can lead to a deeper engagement with concepts and points of view – expressed through the stance taken towards and within the forum discussion postings. Studies suggest that deeper engagement and argumentation do not automatically come about as a result of the change of channel. Rather, the careful structuring of tasks, the possible modelling of interaction, and often an element of assessment are conducive to productive forum engagement.

Extrapolating from the information available and the affordances of the technology, it seems that blogs and m-learning are likely to offer more informal writing spaces in which students are not so constrained by traditional genre practices. In forums and emails, however, the type of discourse produced is variable, neither carefully crafted academic prose nor purely personal anecdote, and sometimes even subversive. As a

half-way house it may allow students to begin to formulate ideas and responses to the ideas they are encountering in a context which is relatively free and unjudgemental. Tutors can help to construct learning activities using channels which draw on Web 2.0 technologies and multimodal affordances that enable learners to share experiences. Students are then at greater liberty to choose how they represent themselves and their positions. They may feel more comfortable maintaining the type of academic persona that is inculcated through traditional academic writing practices or they may use the space to construct themselves anew with multiple different voices. They can try out different positions in an argument to those they eventually choose to submit in a traditional assignment; they can assume the voice of a teacher in commenting on another's work, or of a manager in co-constructing a text on a wiki. How students take up these possibilities and whether or not such use of a variety of channels becomes common in academic discourse among learners partly depends on whether the potentially creative and subversive voices of students are perceived as worth nurturing in the growing number of contexts in which learning takes place. Tutors need to understand and use the technology at least as well as their students, and to help them realise the potential for varying their articulation of voice and stance.

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