Import genres in academia: the academic portfolio as a discourse technology

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This paper describes research that I am conducting into an emergent genre in Finnish academic communities, the academic portfolio. This genre is beginning to replace CVs as a form of documenting academic qualifications, for example when applying for university posts. While CVs are mainly information-oriented, portfolios also include reflective and promotional components. Recurring (and prescribed) content elements include the applicant’s teaching philosophy, self-evaluation and visions for self-development.

The genre originates in North America (see e.g. Seldin 1993; Knapper & Wright 2001) and thus illustrates one aspect of the globalisation of discourse practices (Coupland 2003; Fairclough 2006). My larger project focuses, in particular, on the practices through which the genre is localized in Finland: how and by whom portfolios are mediated to local sites, how portfolios are regulated and policed, how genre awareness emerges locally. The data include portfolio texts, interviews with writers and trainers, observations of teaching sessions and various types of normative material (e.g. published portfolio guidelines and manuals). The principal research sites are the universities of Helsinki and Tampere.

In this paper, I will focus on whether and how the academic portfolio functions as a “discourse technology” (Fairclough 1996). Of particular interest is whether one salient element of portfolios, reflective writing, constitutes such a technology in academic communities.

Discourse technologisation and the portfolio

The assumption underlying the notion of discourse technologisation is that discourse practices are increasingly becoming objects of systematic research, design and standardisation in institutional settings. Fairclough (1996: 73) lists a number of key characteristics of discourse technologies:

- the emergence of expert “discourse technologists”
- a shift in the “policing” of discourse practices
- the design and projection of context-free discourse techniques
- strategically motivated simulation in discourse
- pressure towards standardisation of discourse practices

Academic portfolios as they are used in Finland illustrate most of these tendencies. In particular, there has been a drive towards standardisation, for example in the form of portfolio guidelines, training courses and the emergence of local portfolio experts. One characteristic in Fairclough’s description does not, however, seem to hold: there is little policing of the portfolio genre.

Fairclough argues that technologisation involves a shift in the policing of discourse practices from a local institutional level to a trans-institutional level. On the basis of my data, it appears that there is little if any central policing of the portfolio genre in Finnish universities; the evaluation of portfolios takes place in local panels of academics. There is no self-evident locus of control as far as genre conventions are concerned; criteria of acceptability and success are local and temporary, and therefore unpredictable from the writer’s point of view. This creates ambivalence in the community as to the status of the genre: it is not only difficult to judge local standards of acceptability, but also whether the genre itself is to be taken seriously.

Reflective writing

My data suggests that the ambivalence as to criteria of acceptability and genre status centres in particular on the appropriateness of reflective writing in portfolios, and more broadly, in academic genre systems. Reflective writing is demanded, in particular, in accounts of teaching philosophy and visions for personal development.

In normative materials, both in Finland and internationally, reflective writing is established as a discourse technology in Fairclough’s sense: it has been designed and established as a systematic technique by a set of experts, and there are attempts to standardise and police this form of writing. Normative materials emphasise, for example, that reflective writing is not just free association or brainstorming. In addition, they provide exercises and guidance on how to assess reflective writing. (See e.g. Schönwetter et al. 2002; Levander 2002; Moon 2004).

The precarious position of reflective writing within Finnish academic genre systems is evident both in portfolio guidelines and in data from writer interviews. First, there is little explicit guidance available on reflective writing. At the University of Helsinki, the only advice to writers of teaching philosophy sections is provided in the form of a set of questions which are supposed to trigger reflection:

What is my view of learning, teaching, competence, teaching methods and work methods suitable for myself, teaching in my own discipline, the significance of teaching, my role in the scientific community, the role of the student, knowledge, etc.? What are the objectives of my teaching? How is my teaching philosophy reflected in practice? How do I treat students? (University of Helsinki website on portfolio writing)

Second, the guidelines appear to be unclear about the status of reflection as an element in portfolios. On the
Helsinki website, there are several references to the importance of reflective practice for professional development. However, it is also stated that

Academic portfolios resemble scientific reports, with the authors documenting their core professional skills and examining their academic work as a whole.

Here, the “scientific report” is established as a genre model for portfolio writers, suggesting a very minor role for reflection in portfolios.

Two excerpts from my interview data show how this ambivalence affects writers:

you attend the [portfolio] course and they tell you to reflect and you think okay fine, then you look at the guidelines and they list stuff like how many dissertations you’ve supervised and how many articles you’ve written, the list sounds just like a CV (writer interview)

during pedagogical training we were told that we should write about our own thoughts and feelings and how we experience our work but in this case [in a job application] I think what the evaluation panel probably expected or what they would have thought mature would have been something more academic and impersonal (writer interview)

A third source of ambivalence is that reflective writing appears to demand the projection of identities which are in tension with traditional academic ideals (e.g. impersonality and an emphasis on expertise). Reflective writing is usually presented as a tool for learning, with writers being asked to adopt the identity of a learner, in contrast to the identity of an expert. Writers are encouraged to emphasise personal growth, development and future potential, instead of focusing on past achievements.

A final issue is that some of the normative materials construe reflective writing as an essentially private practice, creative, personal and even therapeutic in function; writing which is not necessarily assessed (see e.g. Walker 1985). Reflection as it has been appropriated into use in academic portfolios is public and assessed, an institutional technique of assessment used in a situation of fierce competition over jobs.

**Conclusions**

I have argued that the academic portfolio is an unstable and contested genre in Finnish academic communities: there is widespread ambivalence both about its overall value and acceptable forms. The portfolio model is being institutionally enforced even though the technologisation process appears incomplete and the technology “immature”; particularly due to the lack of central policing. It might even be argued that the portfolio is a “failed” technology given that what is being projected is a hybrid whose elements appear incompatible (promotion and reflection).

It remains to be seen whether the genre will be further technologised in the sense of being the object of increased standardisation and policing (e.g. by introducing academic managers or portfolio experts into evaluation panels) and whether the status of reflective writing remains as contested as it is today.

**References**


