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FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS WRITERS OF ACADEMIC TEXTS

Jonna Riikonen & Sofia Kotilainen

Learning to write academic texts and developing an academic writing identity can be challenging for students transitioning to university because they are not yet familiar with the norms and conventions of the academic and specific disciplinary discourse community. This article qualitatively examines how first-year university students define themselves as writers of academic texts, and how they perceive themselves as mastering the writing skills required in an academic context. For our study, we interviewed 11 first-year students who, before the interview, had participated in the first course as part of their mandatory language and communication studies. We analysed the interview data applying the three aspects of the writer identity model proposed by Clark and Ivanič (1997): the authorial, autobiographical, and discoursal self. We discuss how the challenges in writing experienced by students could be considered in the pedagogical development of these courses and how the transition from upper secondary schools to university could be better supported to prevent uncertainty and confusion associated with writing at the beginning of university studies and support the development of students' writing identity.

Keywords: Academic writing skills; higher education pedagogy; writing identity

Yliopistoon siirtyvien opiskelijoiden voi olla haastavaa oppia kirjoittamaan akateemisia tekstejä ja kehittää akateemista kirjoittajaidentiteettiään, koska he eivät vielä tunne akateemisen ja tieteenalakohtaisen diskurssiyhteisön normeja ja konventioita. Tässä artikkelissa tarkastellaan, miten ensimmäisen vuoden yliopisto-opiskelijat määrittelevät itseään akateemisten tekstien kirjoittajina ja miten he kokevat hallitsevansa akateemisessa kontekstissa vaadittavat kirjoitustaidot. Laadullista tutkimustamme varten haastattelimme 11 ensimmäisen vuoden opiskelijaa, jotka olivat ennen haastattelua osallistuneet pakollisten kieli- ja viestintäopintojensa ensimmäiselle kurssille. Analysoimme haastatteluaineistoa soveltaen Clarkin ja Ivaničin (1997) luoman kirjoittajaidentiteettimallin kolmea näkökulmaa: kirjoittajaminä, omaelämäkerrallinen ja diskursiivinen minä. Pohdimme sitä, miten opiskelijoiden kokemat kirjoittamisen haasteet voitaisiin ottaa huomioon kieli- ja viestintäopintojen pedagogisessa kehittämisessä ja miten siirtymää lukiosta yliopistoon voitaisiin tukea paremmin. Tällä tavoin voitaisiin ehkäistä kirjoittamiseen liittyvää epävarmuutta ja hämmennystä yliopisto-opintojen alussa ja tukea opiskelijoiden kirjoittajaidentiteetin vahvistumista.

Asiasanat: Akateemisen kirjoittamisen taidot, korkeakoulupedagogiikka, kirjoittajaidentiteetti

Introduction

Academic writing is an essential part of the activities of academic communities. For students, success at university requires high-level writing skills (Bailey, 2018; Li & Mak, 2022). Teachers use writing as a fundamental assessment tool to determine whether a student has successfully completed a course (Lillis, 2001). Scholars and researchers participate in scientific discussion through a range of texts, which contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge and understanding. Academic writing can itself be seen as a crucial way of contributing to the development of different disciplines and the solution of various societal problems through research (Kniivilä et al., 2017).

Writing is also strongly connected to learning, as students acquire, extend, and deepen their knowledge through the process of reading and writing (Bailey, 2018; Lea & Street, 2006). According to Hocking and Fieldhouse (2011, p. 44), "the learning and production of disciplinary knowledge cannot be separated from the learning and production of writing". To learn writing, students must first engage with and critically think about the ideas they have read, before learning how to express their own ideas and perspectives clearly instead of merely repeating or summarising information from existing literature (Palonen et al., 2017; Tynjälä, 2001). This process of becoming a fluent and successful academic writer is, therefore, a long one.

Since academic writing can also be seen as a social practice (Lillis, 2001; Murray 2015) rather than as a detached and mechanical skill to be mastered, developing academic writing skills also includes internalising certain ways of thinking and communicating (Khumalo & Reddy, 2021). But this socialisation requires time and effort (Torvelainen et al., 2021), especially for new university students transitioning from secondary school to universities, who often perceive academic writing norms and conventions to be confusing (Lillis & Turner, 2001) and see the expectations and requirements regarding academic writing as challenging (Roald et al., 2021; Silva, 2017; van Schalkwyk et al., 2010). As the requirements are different from those of their previous studies, students are forced to rethink both their writing and their writing identity. Examining writing identity is important not just because writing is a vital part of participating in an academic community (Li & Mak, 2022), but also because a strong writing identity has a positive impact on students' attitudes towards writing (Kallionpää, 2017).

Thus, when students start university studies, they become gradually socialised into the norms and practices of academic communication, which are often different from what students are used to in their previous studies (e.g., Jalkanen & Taalas, 2015; Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Some scholars argue that upper secondary school often seems to be unable to adequately prepare students for university when it comes to writing (Li & Mak, 2022; Bailey, 2018). Such challenges can affect identity, when, for example, a previous view of oneself as a good writer no longer applies and students need to rethink their writing identity.

Academic writing skills have been widely studied in various contexts, focusing on different aspects (e.g., Bailey, 2018; Lea & Street, 2006; Morton et al., 2015), including students' writing identities in academic contexts (e.g., Read, 2011; Vassilaki, 2017). However, research on writing identity in the Finnish context is limited. Some exceptions are Erra (2020) and Kallionpää (2017), who focused on the writing identities of upper secondary school students, while Vanhatalo (2008) examined the writing identities of Finnish university students. Since students' perceptions of their academic writing are affected by a multitude of factors, including

the sociocultural context, it has been emphasised that more research is needed (e.g., Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

In the present study, we explore through interviews how first-year university students at a Finnish university identify themselves as writers of academic texts. According to the broad concept of text, texts can be both spoken and written. In this study, however, texts refer specifically to written texts. Our study has a phenomenological orientation and a qualitative research design, and it aims to explore, make visible, and understand personal experiences, perspectives, and meanings that individuals give to certain phenomena (e.g., Fraser & Taylor, 2022). We are specifically interested in how novice academic writing students see themselves as writers in an academic context and also in relation to their previous writing experiences and studies. We draw on the concept of writing identity (Clark & Ivanič, 1997), which is strongly tied to the sociocultural context, and we aim to find out about students' experiences of writing at university, which is an unfamiliar learning environment for them.

The context of our research is the early phase of the restructured, integrated, multilingual, and discipline-specific language and communication studies at the University of Jyväskylä (for more on these studies, see the Introduction of this book by Károly et al., 2024). The goal of these studies is to support students' socialisation into the academic community and their growth as academic experts (see Jalkanen & Taalas, 2015). The first course they need to take focuses on academic literacy, where the learning objectives encompass the acquisition of basic skills in academic communication.

We will begin with a review of our key concept, writing identity, after which we present our research methods and findings.

Writing identity

Writers' identities are socially constructed (Clark & Ivanič, 1997), shaped by previous experiences and the way writers position themselves in the act of writing (Ivanič, 1998). Ivanič (1998) emphasises the importance of the sociocultural context in the creation of identity. Highlighting the interactive nature of writing, she also points out that identity can be seen as the readers' impression of the writer. Similarly, Burgess and Ivanič (2010) claim that writing identity is constructed discursively, and it changes over time in the interaction between a person, others, and their sociocultural context (see also Erra, 2020).

According to Clark and Ivanič (1997), writing identity comprises three interrelated elements: the authorial self, the autobiographical self, and the discoursal self. The authors remind us that these three dimensions are inseparable and that acts of writing are "an ongoing struggle over possible identities" (p. 158).

The authorial self is the writer's perception of their own agency and position in relation to other scholars, conveying a sense of authorship and the author's presence in the text (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). An author's perceptions of their skills and their ability to make choices as a writer influence their experience of their authorial self (see Erra, 2020). Perceptions of oneself and one's skills also influence whether the writer considers themselves an author whose words have significance (Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Ivanič, 1998). If the author feels in control of their writing, their writing identity is positive, but often in the context of academic writing, the author (especially novice students) may feel that they have very little to say and that they would need deeper and broader knowledge to express their thoughts on what they read (Clark & Ivanič, 1997).

The autobiographical self is present in all writing (Clark & Ivanič, 1997), implying that an individual's personal history, experiences and beliefs influence their writing (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). Typically, the autobiographical self is directly influenced by feedback from the environment, for example from parents or teachers, and by different writing experiences (in and outside of school). In addition, sociocultural factors also have an effect on the autobiographical self (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Clark & Ivanič, 1997). Students' social background affects not just their language use but also their values, beliefs, and thinking, and their access to educational opportunities and resources (Clark & Ivanič, 1997). On the other hand, the role of agency is crucial, and what matters is how an individual allows their experiences to affect them (Ivanič, 1998).

The discoursal self refers to the writer's discourse practices and is thus reflected in the text, for example, in lexical or stylistic choices (Clark & Ivanič, 1997). It is shaped by the author's values and beliefs (Ivanič, 1998) as well as the social environment. According to Clark and Ivanič (1997), the writer consciously or unconsciously evaluates the characteristics of the social context, including the goal of writing, and the nature of the relationship between the writer and the reader. During the writing process, the writer anticipates what characteristics the reader will value, and at the same time, tries to create an image of themselves as a writer who fulfils the expectations (see also Ivanič, 1998). In an educational context, the goal of writing is determined by the specific task at hand and is influenced by the teacher's expectations outlined in the assessment criteria.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Setting, participants and data collection methods

For the present study, we interviewed first-year university students at the University of Jyväskylä who, before the interview, had participated in a course as part of the restructured, multilingual, and discipline-specific language and communication studies organised by the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication. At the time of the interview, the participants were studying in their first year at either the Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics (5 students) or the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (6 students). All interviewees had completed upper secondary school and passed the matriculation examination. In addition, some of the students had graduated from a university of applied sciences, a university abroad or a vocational school.

Before the interview, the participants had taken part in the first course (Academic Literacies), the primary objective of which is to introduce students to fundamental academic literacy skills and textual practices at the university. The central themes in the course are process-oriented writing of academic texts, including the use of scientific sources, reasoning and argumentation, learning discipline-specific referencing and other textual conventions (see e.g. Gimenez, 2017) and applying them through practice, as well as peer group work. We, the authors of this study, have acted as teachers in these courses. However, we have not taught all the participants ourselves.

Those interested in participating in the research registered with the researchers by email. They had the option to stop participating at any time. The participants were given written information about the study and a privacy notice. They gave their consent to the study using an online Webropol form.

All but one of the interviews were group interviews. One was carried out as an individual interview due to scheduling challenges. All interviews were conducted in Finnish via Zoom. We recorded these focus group interviews online in Zoom (video and audio recording). The risk of interviewing as a data collection method (regardless of its format) is that the participants might present ideas they think the interviewer will value (Pietilä, 2010). To minimise this risk, we reminded the interviewees there were no right or wrong answers to our questions, and that we were interested in their personal experiences, views, and perspectives.

Face-to-face interviews have traditionally been considered better than other interview methods because they can give researchers a strong sense of presence (Fraser & Taylor, 2022). However, according to Hokka et al. (2022), it is also possible to achieve an experience of coherent interaction when using online technology, which can contribute to dispelling power relations in an interview situation. Inevitably, what is essential is not the instrument itself but the quality of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees (Fraser & Taylor, 2022). An additional advantage of an online interview is that participation does not require physical travel and can be more efficient in terms of time management for everybody involved.

Some additional challenges of online interviews are that they make it more difficult to establish trust and personal connection (because of limited nonverbal communication). They have potential distractions and there may be unexpected technical issues. Thus, we determined that both individual and group interviews would produce similar answers and the interview format would not greatly affect the content of the answers.

A semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection method. All participants were asked the same interview questions, but the order of the questions varied slightly. The main questions were addressed to the whole group. The questions were related to writing identity and its development, the distinctive features of academic writing, the process of academic writing in practice, writing as a leisure time activity, collaborative writing, and students' social background (for the original Finnish questions, see Appendix A).

There were four interviews in total, one individual interview and three group interviews (one with four and two with three students). The interviews lasted between 60 and 115 minutes and resulted in a total of 55 pages of transcribed material (font size 10, line spacing 1). In the article we include the English translations of the data extracts, which were translated by a professional translator. The original Finnish versions of the interview extracts can be found in Appendix B (with their English translation).

The individual interview format may be seen as more suitable than a group interview for eliciting personal opinions and perceptions (Pietilä, 2010), which was precisely what we aimed for. However, group interviews are also well suited for data collection because a joint discussion may bring up ideas that the participants would not have thought about otherwise. Furthermore, since the participants are in their own environment, often in a familiar setting, they may feel more comfortable, focused, and engaged. According to Eskola and Suoranta (1998), a group interview may actually provide more information than an individual interview.

However, in group interviews, some individuals may not feel comfortable to express different viewpoints or share personal experiences. Thus, moderation is crucial to ensure that everyone in the group has an opportunity to contribute and share their views and perspectives and that the discussion is not dominated by the more assertive or outspoken participants. The interviewer also needs to keep the discussion focused on the research topic. In addition, data analysis is more challenging because it is more difficult to identify individual voices, especially

when there are overlapping dialogues, as well as to distinguish between shared and different individual experiences.

Data analysis

We used only gender-neutral Finnish-language first names as the pseudonyms of the students interviewed. The interviews were transcribed, but as we were interested in capturing the essence of the participants' responses, we opted for less detailed transcription, which did not include pauses and corrections, for example (see Ruusuvuori, 2010). The transcribed data was examined by means of theory-based, deductive content analysis (see Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Content analysis (both deductive and inductive) involves three main stages: preparation, organisation and reporting of results (Elo et al., 2014). In the organisation phase, we constructed a categorisation matrix (Elo et al., 2014) based on Clark and Ivanič's (1997) framework of writer identity, which served as the initial coding scheme in the data analysis. It contained the main categories (authorial self, autobiographical self, and discoursal self), as well as the related subcategories to be used in the coding process (see Table 1).

Table 1 Our initial coding scheme derived from theory (Clark & Ivanič, 1997)

Authorial self	Autobiographical self	Discoursal self
The writer's sense of personal power in relation to writing Authorship Own voice Presence	Previous experiences Writer's life-history Previous studies Socioeconomic background	Social context of writing Participation in discussions in the field of science How the writer represents themselves in the text

After the first cycle of coding, we needed to review and modify the predetermined categories in our initial categorisation matrix by merging some of the subcategories, as well as deleting or adding new subcategories under the predetermined themes, which we deemed more relevant in the actual context of our study. The result of this phase was a refined coding scheme, presented in Table 2. In the next coding cycle, we applied this refined codebook to the data.

Table 2 Our refined coding scheme

Authorial self	Autobiographical self	Discoursal self
Feelings about writing and about oneself as a writer Own voice Controlling the writing process	Previous perceptions of oneself as a writer including study history Own and others' attitudes towards writing	University as a social environment for writing Other people (teachers, peers) as part of the social environment

As Clark and Ivanič (1997) point out, the different aspects of writing identity are not separate from each other, and therefore it was necessary to make choices about somewhat overlapping experiences and to consider which category an expression primarily belongs to.

Results and discussion

Authorial self

The authorial self was examined by looking for the interviewees' characterisations of their own writing and expertise, as well as their attitude to writing. The authorial self is also connected to one's own voice and the writing process.

Firstly, students defined themselves as writers in different ways. Typically, interviewees characterised themselves as writers in positive terms. They felt they were able to write and were "skilled" or at least "quite good" at it, and they also stated they felt mostly positive about writing. However, the interviewees had also experienced challenges in writing: It had been difficult, and writing could be associated with the thought of oneself as an unskilled writer.

Typically, interviewees felt that at university the experience of authorship became more negative than before. They identified challenges for themselves in the new academic environment, saying they were "unaccustomed", "timid" or "slow". Academic writing was seen as "difficult" as well as "distressing". The interviewees felt it was difficult to start writing because they did not know if they were doing it right (see also, Blair, 2017) and if they were using the correct vocabulary (see Nallaya et al., 2022). They were also unsure about reading the academic articles before writing (see also Nallaya et al., 2022):

> I was worried about how I would be able to write and how I could ever come up with anything to say about the articles. (Silmu)

Compared to previous studies, students have been confused by new text genres at the beginning of their university studies (see also Nallaya, Hobson & Ulpen, 2022). In addition, they have had difficulty adopting different referencing techniques compared to the practices used in upper secondary school, while the fear of plagiarism has also increased uncertainty:

> Well, it's completely different from what was taught during lower and upper secondary school, and when you are used to making references in a certain way and then the whole formula changes, and there are so many different options on how you can do it. So, it's still kind of a new thing. (Pouta)

Yet, amidst the challenges, the students were confident about the future and their ability to learn academic writing. They were sure that it is possible to learn to write by writing and that skills accumulate during one's studies:

> But maybe that's the kind of thing, that if you want to learn it, you have to just do it. (Ruska)

After all, they seemed to have a positive orientation towards development (see also Rantala-Lehtola & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022). The interviewees found it important to have an experience of success in writing:

> Maybe that certainty only comes when you have experiences of success and then in a way you trust that it's OK, that it's going pretty well now. (Lumi)

The second aspect of the authorial self was the author's own voice. Interviewees acknowledged how little room there is in university studies to write texts using one's own voice or based on, for example, personal experiences or observations. Moreover, they felt that producing

academic texts in the university context is more limited than previous writing situations, a feeling which has an impact on the meaningfulness of writing and also on the opportunities to demonstrate creativity (see also Roald et al., 2021):

> It depends a lot on the subject and maybe also on the type of text you're writing, I think it's nicer to write, for example, something like an opinion piece versus something like a really academic and precise text which is maybe a little – not so much fun in my opinion. (Pouta)

The interviewees said that they were surprised by how little the author could express their own opinions when writing an academic text. This is a significant difference compared to upper secondary school, where one could write opinion pieces based on one's own ideas. In fact, the interviewees reflected not only on the importance of and room for their own voice, but also on the impact of their own authority on the meaningfulness of their writing:

> The more freedom you have, the more creative it is and the more meaningful it is to write, because you can get your own voice heard more. (Valo)

The interviewees recognised there are differing degrees of room for personal reflection in different types of tasks. For example, a learning diary, where students explore their own learning experiences and record their reflections and thoughts (see Rautiainen, 2023), was considered a meaningful genre of text because it enables more personal writing. Producing texts that allow for reflection and personal voice was seen as more interesting than, for example, writing traditional exam answers. The production of reflective texts was also thought to encourage a more process-based approach to learning:

> And you can perhaps bring out more of your own thoughts and maybe learn better if you use a process approach in which you start at the beginning and then in the middle you can work on the course content the whole time and not just aim for the exam. (Ruska)

The third theme of the authorial self was writing process. Writing at university is more about producing new knowledge and a student needs to take the time to actually work on their thoughts. Planning the process enough beforehand is also crucial:

> Of course at university you have to write in a different style and of course it's also much longer. When it was one page, it was usually the maximum you had to write, but now it can be [several pages], so it's a bit of a different process, you can no longer do it in a day, but you have to set aside a week for it. I'm still searching for a good process for it. How I structure the schedule and everything else for it. (Naava)

The interviewees recognised they were used to writing texts using the so-called one-off approach. In the past, they may not have written in a process-based way and as a result they have not learned how to edit text (see also Erra, 2017). They noted that the inherently short texts written in upper secondary school do not encourage process-based writing, and neither does the assessment, which usually focuses on the finished text:

> It was always just the end result, which is perhaps related to the matriculation examination. (Paju)

The lack of familiarity with writing academic texts was reflected, for example, in difficulties in editing one's own texts. The challenge was to identify where the text needed editing or how to improve it. Editing was often reduced to correcting typos. Another challenge may have been

that they did not have the energy to refine a "finished" text, even it would be an important stage of the writing process.

> I usually write the text based on the assignment in one or two sittings, a kind of almost finished text. Then, maybe the next day or two days later, I'll come back and have a quick look at it, to see if there's anything to change, and then I'll return it. But once the text has been written, I don't really go back to it or do edits. (Pyry)

The interviewees understood the importance of process-like writing and said they were trying to unlearn their upper secondary school writing habits and adopt a process-based way of working. At the same time, however, they stated that their writing is often not very planned. However, writing in a group was felt to encourage process-like working more than writing alone:

> When we had to write in a group, we made a pretty precise schedule as to when we would meet and work on the text and take the work forward. (Ruska)

Thus, it seems that the participants have different feelings about writing and their ability to control their writing. The beginning of university studies includes uncertainty and a lack of confidence in one's own skills. They also saw that at university there were fewer opportunities to produce a text in their own voice. However, it seems that both the experiences of success and getting to know the textual world of the university are important elements so that uncertainty dissipates, and students can experience authorship in relation to their writing. They also gain confidence in the development of their own.

Autobiographical self

The autobiographical self is built on past experiences and the writer's self-history. The category includes the following themes: previous perceptions of oneself as a writer, and one's own and others' attitudes towards writing in the past.

The students we interviewed reflected on themselves as writers primarily through their previous study experiences. Upper secondary school in particular seemed to shape perceptions of writing and authorship:

> Well, based on upper secondary school I'd consider myself a pretty good writer. It (writing) is quite easy. (Sumu)

The interviewees' entire school history could also define their perception of themselves as writers:

> Well, I've always done pretty well in school, so I consider myself to be pretty good. (Lumi)

The interviewees' experience of developing their writing skills is linked to the autobiographical self. Several interviewees looked back at their previous writing and found they had learned more about writing during their studies. They might compare their current skills with their past skills:

> I think I can write quite coherently nowadays. (Sumu)

The observations also included identifying shortcomings or a lack of prior skills:

> In lower secondary school I had a problem that I didn't really know – I didn't understand how to structure paragraphs, for example. (Sumu)

Students also defined their skills on a more abstract level:

> I was a bit bad (at writing) for the longest time. (Naava)

During their first months of study, the interviewees had discovered that the university's requirements differed from those of upper secondary school in many ways (see also Elliott et al., 2019). Some concrete differences between upper secondary school and university practices were, for example, the ways to refer to sources. It was noted that these differences meant that some things had to be relearned and new practices required some getting used to.

> I remember at least that in upper secondary school metatextuality was a thing that wasn't allowed to appear anywhere and it was like a red flag in all writing, so it was funny that in the first writing task at university there had to be at least three instances of metatextuality. (Pouta)

The interviewees wished that acknowledging and documenting the sources of information and ideas that they used in a written work would already be used in upper secondary school as they are in university. Then the change would not be so radical. However, amid the changing requirements, the interviewees found that upper secondary school had strengthened writing skills that were also useful in the academic world. Firstly, the need for basic skills – writing texts, finding the essential information in the sources – remains. Secondly, upper secondary school was perceived to have strengthened students' confidence in their writing: With a reasonably large amount of writing required at the secondary school level, the amount of writing at the university level should not come as a surprise (see also Blair, 2017). One interviewee also noted that data were also used as part of their own texts in upper secondary school, although the texts read at university are more demanding.

It seems that the study background has an effect on the students' perceptions in the sense that they have an understanding of the challenge of studying in new ways. Study background and perceptions of oneself as a "good writer" can support the initial stages of university studies if the student is able to trust that uncertainty will dissipate over time:

> Even at the beginning of high school, I felt terrible when I had to present the source there and somehow it was all completely new, although now that I think about it afterwards, it was almost nothing. Yes, I do believe that in a way, after the university has progressed, when you look back, you can wonder what that little Lumi was afraid of for nothing. (Lumi)

The second theme of the autobiographical self category was one's own and others' attitudes towards writing. The interviewees thought that attitudes and recognising them play a role in writing as well as in learning it. Previous experiences may have had a negative effect on attitudes if there had been no positive feedback on writing:

> When you're always getting feedback about not being good enough, a similar attitude towards it starts to take hold. (Naava)

The reluctant attitude could also be due to difficulties in writing, such as undiagnosed dyslexia. The notion that some people are naturally good writers dominated thinking in the past, but the understanding of the possibilities of learning to write has later grown, perhaps because the students have found that they have learned. According to the interviewees, attitudes can also be influenced by the topic and the purpose of the text. If the topic is not interesting or the text is only completed as a mandatory part of one's studies, writing ceases to seem meaningful (see also Roald et al., 2021). Changes in attitudes were also observed:

> Well, perhaps above all, there has been a big change in my own attitude, somehow nowadays I have more patience to write and try to produce text that is good and that has some kind of… cohesion. (Utu)

Positive experiences were associated with attitudes and interest in writing. A sense of accomplishment fuels writing and interest in it:

> And it (accomplishment) increases confidence, it's like OK, I can manage and my texts are just fine. (Lumi).

In addition to one's own attitude, the way others approach writing also seems to have an effect. The interviewees brought up ideas about the need for support and, on the other hand, also about the lack of support (see Blair, 2017). For example, a student's family background can support university studies. Having an academic family background (e.g., parents or relatives with a doctoral degree or a career in academia or research) reinforced confidence in being able to cope at university and with extensive writing assignments. In contrast, the lack of an academic background could have the effect that even upper secondary school was not initially seen as a possibility, let alone university (cf. Käyhkö, 2013). Confidence in one's potential was seen as weak because of the lack of connection to the academic world in the childhood family. This background was also reflected in a lack of appreciation and support for studying.

> You can't really get a lot of support from people close to you because they don't know this world at all….There's the kind of idea in the family circle that you live by working and not by studying, so maybe…I'm really demanding towards myself, so then it's easy to think that even though you've done quite well, it's not such a big deal. (Lumi)

On the other hand, the academic background of close relations was not necessarily seen as a factor in increasing certainty, as studies were not "discussed in depth" with them. In general, university felt like an "alien world" to the interviewees and the transition to higher education could create doubts about both success in studies and writing. The interviewees did not so much need guidance on concrete practices as they needed mental support:

> Maybe it (support) is something more abstract. It's more like, in a way, someone sees your potential and is like, you'll learn these things. It's like somehow someone has to come and say that it's something that can be learned. (Utu)

In this category, the students' own study history seems to be important. When they realise that they have learned content that seemed difficult at first during their previous studies and that they have coped well, their confidence in the future grows at the same time. They understand that uncertainty at the beginning of new studies is natural and that the beginning of university studies means giving up old habits and adopting new ones.

Discoursal self

In the discoursal self category, the university as an institution is seen as the social environment of writing, and other people, such as teachers and other students, as part of the social environment. First of all, for students, the transition to university means moving to a new environment and social context of writing, where there may not be much familiar (e.g., Blair, 2017). The interviewees described how at the beginning of their studies they did not know

what went on and what to expect at university. They also felt that it was difficult to picture the university environment before starting.

As previously stated, academic writing has evoked negative feelings and uncertainty in the interviewees. One factor that increases uncertainty is the change in writing practices. When the ways of working learned in upper secondary school are no longer desired at university, a student has to unlearn the old ways and adopt new ones. In addition, the first year at university involves writing different types of academic texts. These genres may not have been familiar to the students previously (in line with Torvelainen et al., 2021), and it can take time to get used to them:

> Depending on what you have to write, because you need to write a lot of different things here too. Now, the first year has included reflective assignments, a learning diary and also concept analysis, so there is always the feeling of whether I'm doing this right, that it has to be like this. So yes, there's always a sense of tension there. (Runo)

The students were wondering about the university's expectations of them. They were unsure what was expected of them and, on the other hand, the expectations seemed high in their uncertainty:

> It is still a bit of a scary subject, somehow it seems that it (academic writing) can only be done by the smartest and most talented people. But somehow I have the feeling that I'm not good enough for this, that I don't have enough skills. I would have to have super-advanced skills to be a scientific writer. (Silmu)

The interviews showed that unclear expectations were also related to reading academic texts. The interviewees were not sure if they were reading the so-called right things. Also, they were worried they would misunderstand what they read or that they would not be able to express themselves clearly enough and would be misunderstood in their community.

> Then it always scares me that somehow the content of the message changes too much when I have to say in my own words that even a certain verb choice can be decisive in terms of its meaning, so you always have to think about it so that you don't somehow misunderstand what the other person is saying. (Lumi)

At the beginning of their studies, students have identified the ideals of the academic community to which they should strive. One of the characteristics of the academic community is the scientific language that students would like to master better. Language may also be a distancing factor that makes one doubt their own possibilities to be part of the academic community:

> Some lectures use such strange words that I've never heard, so then I'm just like OK, I don't know if anything will come of this, and at the same time I'm reading some really academic articles, and I don't know the words, so then I question a little whether I should know them. (Lumi)

Another theme in the discoursal self category is other people as part of the social environment. To some extent, the students aim to write in the way they assume the teacher would expect them to write. More generally, the expected reader or readers influence how an author presents themselves in their writing (Clark & Ivanič, 1997). Often it is confusing for a student to decide what the teacher of a particular course might expect them of them when the instructions are not explicitly expressed:

> The course [at the department] was like, we had to do those essays…and we haven't had anything like that before. Well, I don't know if it was proper academic writing, but they were my first essays at university and none of the referencing and such was familiar to me yet, so there was a little bit of stress there, whether the texts would be accepted by the teacher, because I didn't have any reference point for the type of text that was required. (Paju)

The interviews revealed that the students would have needed more support at the beginning of their studies than they received (see also Blair, 2017). For example, they felt that the teachers assumed the students knew more than they did and the instructions have not always been clear. For example, the expected genre has remained unclear and they had to find out about study practices themselves. On the other hand, however, they thought that as adults they must be more responsible for their studies than before.

> Because the beginning was so confusing and there were so many new things, I would have liked for someone to have come and shown me in practice. But then on the other hand it is university and an adult has to be a functioning adult and independent and all that. But somehow I felt like I was completely lost and couldn't really get a grasp on anything. (Silmu)

In addition to teachers, support can also be provided by peers, and they were considered to be an important part of familiarising students with the new operating environment. The use of peer group work in first-year students' writing assignments has helped students acquire the practices of academic writing and offered peer support. In addition, working in a group may reduce insecurity as it allows people to share similar reflections and experiences while working on a shared assignment:

> I liked it quite a lot when we did the writing in a group…there was the group of people with whom you could think about the things together, and then you can also get the reassurance that you're not the only one who finds it difficult, and you can support each other and go through the things together. (Ruska)

An essential part of the Academic Literacies course is writing a course assignment in a group, which supports students in different phases of the academic writing process and provides feedback. Students find that writing together produces a text that takes several different perspectives into account:

> Well, I think it might be a bit more diverse. Of course, the more people, the more ideas. I'm sure it can be seen in the end result. And then there are many different viewpoints. Even if the aim is to have just one voice in the writing itself, the diversity can be seen in the text. (Paju)

Feedback is one part of social interaction in the academic community, and the students feel they have received little from both teachers and peers. Thus, they would like to have more feedback (see also Blair, 2017):

> I haven't really received any feedback from the teachers. Even in exams, nothing but the grade is visible. So, somehow, you might want to find out what was good and bad in your own answer, so that you could develop your own writing. (Ruska)

They had received peer feedback in at least one course and it was perceived as useful. To some extent, the students had asked for feedback from outside the academic community, such as their own parents. Positive feedback based on grades alone could also be doubted:

> Maybe it's just a matter of giving good feedback to everyone at the beginning, so that no one gives up and leaves. (Lumi)

In the Discoursal self category, it appears that the students are growing into an academic community and that its norms still need to be internalised. The identified ideals have not yet necessarily formed a part of their own activities, and on the other hand, the expectations of the university community are partly unclear to the students. For students, the social environment is an important part of strengthening their sense of belonging to the university, and they need more support and feedback, especially from teachers.

Conclusions

In this article, we have examined first-year university students' perceptions of themselves as writers of academic texts. Our goal was to understand how first-year university students identify themselves as authors of an academic text. Identity reflection essentially involves the student's own reflections, which are important in development and learning (see, e.g., Clark & Ivanič, 1997). We have been specifically interested in how students see themselves as writers in an academic context, which is new for them, and also in relation to their previous writing experiences and studies.

First of all, the interviews emphasised that the students' writing identity is reshaped at university, a new sociocultural context for them, and that reshaping identity involves significant uncertainty. This identity work includes reflection and sometimes even questioning one's previous identity as a good writer. These findings support prior research suggesting that writing at university is associated with affectivity (Torvelainen et al., 2021) and negative emotions (Gourlay, 2009).

Uncertainty and lack of confidence in one's skills can probably be explained by the demands associated with writing at university, which are different from those at the secondary level. At university, the texts one reads and writes are more extensive than those in upper secondary school. There are also differences related to text genres. An essay in upper secondary school refers to a different kind of text than at university, and in the university context students are confronted with completely new text genres.

In addition, students are concerned about the different referencing conventions compared to upper secondary school, as well as about different expectations regarding, for example, the use of metatextuality. At the beginning of one's university studies, it may seem easier to focus on technical questions, such as references to sources, than, for example, on reflecting on the development of thinking skills. It is also possible that the teachers' instructions place an unnecessary emphasis on the threat of plagiarism and thus on technical competence instead of knowledge-building skills (see Torvelainen et al., 2021).

In our view, the challenges experienced by the students are largely related to the need to rethink their writing identities. A positive definition of identity developed in previous studies is subject to re-examination in a new environment and with differing expectations (see, e.g., Gourlay, 2009), and this reflection on identity involves uncertainty and concerns about coping with studies, especially if no precise instructions are available. It would be important to ensure that students are made aware of the differences between secondary and higher education approaches to writing in the early stages of their studies, and it would also be important to build a bridge from upper secondary school to university (see also Jalkanen & Taalas, 2015).

At university, a bridge could perhaps be built by recognising the students' existing competence and remembering that the textual world of previous studies can be very different from that of the university. Perhaps at the beginning of one's studies, it could be possible to move into the academic world of texts gradually, through text genres that are not academic but already familiar to the students (see, e.g., Roald et al., 2021). It would be important to tell students about their competence, for example, that in upper secondary school they have practised writing skills which are useful at university as well. The national core curriculum for general upper secondary education, issued by the Finnish National Agency for Education (Opetushallitus, 2019), states that in upper secondary school, students develop their skills to acquire and apply knowledge as well as their problem-solving skills, and the same skills are used and honed further in university as well – it is just that the practices are slightly different. It is also good to keep in mind that technical skills are ultimately only one aspect of writing and that writing also includes scientific thinking, which should be practised from the beginning of one's studies (see also Torvelainen et al., 2021). A pedagogically important question is how teaching supports the development of students' thinking skills consistently and from the beginning (see, e.g., Nallaya et al., 2022). Although the initial phase of studies involves uncertainty, previous study experiences seem to strengthen confidence in one's own competence and ability to survive, and new habits become familiar over time.

Secondly, an important factor that reduces uncertainty is the social environment. The support of both teachers and peers is not only important for students, but also necessary. It is reasonable to further strengthen community activities with various pedagogical solutions because there are many benefits for students from peer-to-peer work. Peer work can be more widely useful in the early stages of one's studies, as peers can support each other in a wide range of problems and issues related to studying and thus also in integrating into the university community (see, e.g., Mickwitz & Suojala, 2020). Peer feedback can, at its best, help students to improve the quality of their texts (see, e.g., Huisman et al., 2019). However, it must be remembered that feedback skills must also be practised systematically during one's studies (Blair, 2017), and it is important to ensure a safe environment in a way that encourages new writing practices (see, e.g., Jusslin et al., 2021).

During their university studies, the students had already gained experience of producing collaborative texts in peer groups from the academic literacies course. Peer group work implemented in various ways can be useful, for example, in mastering the process of writing a text, but especially students in the early stages of their studies could also benefit from teacher feedback on their writing work in progress. This would allow them to see what kind of editing suggestions the teacher makes, and to better understand the variety of possible editing actions – as long as the feedback is sufficiently comprehensible (see, e.g., Lillis & Turner, 2001). In giving feedback, it would be important to take into account not only the form of the text, but also the development of the writer's scientific thinking and writing identity processes.

Thirdly, process-like working emerged as a phenomenon from the interviews. Writing requires thinking and a process-oriented way of working (e.g., Seow, 2002). The students pointed out that in their upper secondary school studies, working on relatively short texts in a process-oriented way did not seem very meaningful, and working on texts in stages was not something they had practised. However, the interviewees had understood that process-oriented work was considered the ideal to be pursued in the university context. For all of them, the ideal had not yet been actualised, although more extensive texts inevitably require process-oriented work, and the so-called night-before tactic no longer works. Therefore,

teaching could benefit from paying more attention to the process-oriented nature of the work and how to schedule it. In teaching and guidance, it would also be important to provide students with more tools for editing and evaluating the quality of their own texts.

Our findings suggest that it is inevitable that in a new environment students will have to reflect on their identity in many ways. It seems that students do not feel that academic writing is beyond their reach (see also Roald et al., 2021) and it can be expected that students' confidence in their own writing will increase as their studies progress (see Elliott et al., 2019). Still, they see that mastering the norms of writing is challenging and that it requires study. Therefore, it remains necessary to consider how to support students in their socialisation into the academic community and how to address the challenges of students from different backgrounds so that unnecessary accumulation of frustration and confusion could be avoided in the early stages of university studies (see also, e.g., Gourlay, 2009; Jalkanen & Taalas, 2015; Shapiro, 2022).

Pedagogically, it could be useful to pay more attention than before to how to support the strengthening of students' identity at the beginning of their university studies. Making students' previous study history and existing concepts of writing visible could help them recognise their own identity and the factors that affect it.

Limitations and future research

Although we have looked at identity through three aspects – authorial self, autobiographical self and discoursal self – it is clear that the different parts of identity cannot be separated from each other but also overlap. As Clark and Ivanič (1997) state, the three aspects are inseparable. For example, the sociocultural environment is present in all aspects of identity, although it is at its strongest when examining the discoursal self, and a writer's perception of their creativity is influenced by their previous experiences with writing, their own sense of control in relation to writing, as well as the sociocultural environment in which they are writing.

As we stated earlier, Clark and Ivanič's (1997) model of writer identity is intended primarily for the examination of written texts. Therefore, our research has not necessarily been able to reach the different aspects of identity in sufficient depth. However, our material supports the framework's idea that identity and writing are influenced by the sociocultural environment as well as by the writer's history. These aspects were strongly present in the reflections of the interviewees.

In addition, one challenge of the selected method was that the model was originally developed for written texts. For example, it was not possible to look at the aspect of presence from the interviews, because it is a feature specifically related to written texts. We still feel we were able to apply the model to the analysis of the interview material as well, because it was possible to group the participants' comments according to the three aspects.

The interview, in itself, is an effective method of data collection, as it allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of students' views. The interviews could have been complemented with an analysis of academic texts written by the students as well. Clark and Ivanič's (1997) framework helped us expand our understanding of identity and its different aspects, especially in relation to the sociocultural environment.

Participation in our study was voluntary and the group of interviewees was small. It is also possible that students who are primarily interested in writing applied for the study. Thus, our results cannot be considered generalisable, but on the other hand, our findings support previous research results well.

In the future, it could be interesting to study how students' writing identity, writing and scientific thinking take shape and develop during their university studies. Reflecting on one's writing identity in previous studies or working life could be fascinating. Moreover, it would be interesting to take an even deeper look at how the university as a sociocultural environment, with its own ideals and limits, is present in writing.

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