CHAPTER 10

Exploring the interplay of confidence, authenticity and risk through professional learning

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Abstract

As an academic literacies specialist working in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town, I critically reflect on how my aim of building students' confidence in their academic writing led me on a journey of authentic professional learning. On my journey, I encountered a values-based form of Action Research that aligned with my ideological positioning, and which motivated me to consciously focus on my own learning and development. But, with the advent of the pandemic and remote teaching, I experienced an acute sense of loss - a loss of connection to students, and a loss of my own identity within the teaching space. As I grappled with the concepts of 'connection' and 'self-representation', I discovered that I had a very superficial view of these notions. In contemplating how to connect more deeply and represent myself more fully, I realised that the value underpinning these challenges was authenticity; I wanted to foster authentic connections with students and bring an authentic representation of myself into my teaching. Seeking to learn more, I watched an insightful TED Talk by Eduardo Briceno entitled, 'How to get better at the things you care about', in which he describes an often-overlooked affordance of leading by example. I came to see that this simple and powerful practice could not only help me to connect with students and represent myself more authentically, but also create an enabling environment

within which students could increase their sense of confidence. As I have begun to actively practice authenticity, I have had to constantly challenging myself to speak truthfully and to interrogate my own sense of power. While acknowledging the limitations of my practice and context, I have begun to witness some poignant responses from students that validates this approach and motivates me to continue learning about ways to live the value of authenticity through my practice.

Keywords: authenticity, confidence, risk, identity, professional learning

Introduction

Authentic professional learning (Webster-Wright 2009) can be understood as the ongoing, self-directed, contextually, and socially situated learning practice of professionals, which foregrounds the role of lived experience in the learning process. Professional learning can occur through a variety of formal and informal activities and, where the goal of the learning is to enable change, reflection has been identified as a particularly valuable resource (Webster-Wright 2009). In this chapter I describe and critically reflect (Hatton and Smith 1995) on my own journey of authentic professional learning which started in 2019 when I first began exploring the notions of authorial identity development and authorial confidence, and methods to improve my teaching practices such as values-based Action Research (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). I thus begin with a review and discussion of this literature, highlighting how it informed my initial thinking. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit South Africa in 2020, the landscape of higher education shifted dramatically, and I experienced an extended period of disorientation and loss of identity. It was during this time, when I was desperately seeking ways to concretise my blurry virtual identity

within the digital space, that I returned to the concept of authorial confidence and began to see its associated ideas and practices in a new light. Most especially, the notion of practicing authentic self-representation and how this can be used to both define one's own identity and build confidence in others. I thus devote the latter half of this chapter to reflecting critically on how I applied this thinking to my practice, the impact it had on my own sense of professional identity, the response from students, and areas for further learning.

Contextualised review of the role of confidence in academic writing

Given the dominance of reading and writing within teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education, writing centres' play an important role in supporting and enabling student engagement with disciplinary discourses, literacy practices, and knowledge production (Avery and Bryan 2001; Daniels and Richards 2011; Graves 2016). At the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Health Sciences Writing Lab, which I coordinate, we are guided by a transformative ideology; firstly by recognising that literacies are contextually situated and socially negotiated (Lillis and Scott 2007), secondly by positioning diversity as a valuable resource, and thirdly by aiming to empower student writers (Pemberton 1994) to use their diverse knowledges and literacies to contest normative traditions, and contribute to new forms of thinking and representation in the academy (Muna, Goolam Hoosen, Moxley and Van Pletzen 2019). This contestation is particularly important in the South African context, where normative traditions, largely derived from a colonial system, continue to reproduce educational and social inequalities (Luckett and Shay 2020; Thesen 2013).

From this perspective, I have come to understand that I do not teach *writing*, because there are many ways to write. Instead, I teach *about*

writing; *about* the tools and practices available to writers, *about* the various considerations a writer may make, and *about* how these choices influence the meaning that is communicated. In this way, the autonomy of each writer is validated as writers are empowered to make thoughtful choices about literacy practices that enable them to write their 'truth' in a meaningful way. Prioritising writer development requires an understanding of the conceptual domains of authorial identity (Cheung, Elander, Strupple and Flay 2018; Ivanič and Camps 2001), and a pedagogical approach that explicitly considers each of these domains to enable authorial identity development.

While I was cognisant of authorial identity, it was only in 2019 that I began to explore the concept in earnest, primarily thinking (at that time) about how understanding thereof could be applied to shape the nature and focus of consultant training. One domain of authorial identity that I became especially interested in was authorial confidence, reasoning that the relational and supportive nature of writing centre consultations provided a fertile space within which to place concerted emphasis on building confidence. Across the literature, confidence has been found to influence embodying the role of 'author' (Pittam, Elander, Lusher, Fox and Payne 2009), critical thinking (Cheung, Stupple and Elander 2017), making rhetorical decisions (Pemberton 1994), avoiding plagiarism (Schuetze 2004), and becoming a more engaged learner (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune 2008). While I have yet to find a single substantive definition for authorial confidence, it can broadly be understood as having some level of faith/trust (confidence) in yourself as a writer and in the writing you produce. Research shows that both students (Cheung *et al.* 2017) and academics (Cheung *et al.* 2018) recognise confidence as an important factor in authorial

development, and my sense is that this is primarily because academic writing is a risk (Christie *et al.* 2008; Thesen 2013).

There are two major forms of risk in academic writing. Firstly, academic writing occurs within contexts that are governed by conventions, rules, and expectations (Christie *et al.* 2008; Gee 1989; Thesen 2013), and so there is risk in challenging these boundaries. Secondly, because meaning is contextually situated, while the form of our writing retains integrity as it travels into other contexts, we cannot control how our meaning will be interpreted (Blommaert 2005 in Thesen 2013), and so there is risk in being misunderstood. It is also important to acknowledge that this risk is not experienced equally. The greater the differences between the writer's Discourses[1] (Gee 1989) and the Discourse they are attempting to master, the greater the risks. In terms of academic writing, each disciplinary Discourse (E.g., medicine, engineering, physics, or law) shapes both *what* there is to write about and *how* it should be written. As such, the greater the differences between the literacy practices a writer has already acquired and those of the discipline they are attempting to master, the more challenging the process of acquisition becomes. In the South African context, this means that for the majority of students, who come from disadvantaged or resource-constrained contexts, the risks are greater than for the minority of (predominantly white) students who come from privileged contexts, which have been more heavily influenced by academic Discourses (Gee 1989), and which provide a robust social and economic safety-net in the event of failure.

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1 Gee (1989: 6) explains the idea of a Discourse (distinguished from 'discourse' (a connected length of language) by use of an uppercase 'D') as "ways of being in the world…which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities…".

Avoiding the risks of academic writing, however, also poses a serious risk: students may disregard their own life experiences and literacies in favour of replicating 'normative' practices and genres (Thesen 2013), thus essentially silencing aspects of their authentic identity. And, if we as educators explicitly or implicitly reinforce this type of risk avoidance among the collective majority through our teaching and assessment practices, we are undermining our diverse student potential before it can ever be realised.

As I have come to understand the cross-cutting influence of authorial confidence, most especially in overcoming the risks of academic writing, I have come to think of confidence with far more gravitas – as something fundamental to the process of authorial identity development and possibly the most important thing I need to enable through my practice. Increasing confidence has been found to enable other domains of authorial identity, such as authorial thinking (Cheung *et al.* 2018), and to promote a deeper approach to learning (Maguire, Reynolds, and Delahunt 2013). In other words, confidence can be thought of as the 'active ingredient', much like baking powder in a cake; all the other delicious and nutritious ingredients may be brought together, but without baking powder, the cake will not rise. Similarly with students, I can give them information, teach a variety of tools and approaches, and validate their ownership and voices, but unless students also have sufficient confidence to take the risks inherent in embodying the role of author, this leaning will hold limited value (Lundberg 2008). Furthermore, because there are many factors that influence confidence (Christie *et al.* 2008), it is not a static state of being, but rather something that fluctuates over the course of a students' academic career (Christie *et al.* 2008; Pittam *et al.* 2009; Thesen 2013). So, if we accept that confidence is always important, and

we recognise that confidence gained in one area may be lost, or may not transfer to other areas, then enabling confidence must be a value that always imbues our practice.

Action Research as a method for authentic professional learning

Initially, I was uncertain about how to approach developing student confidence. Given that I (like many others) play multiple roles with different groups of students, I wondered how I could enable development for all of my students? And, as my engagements with students are usually *ad hoc* or transitory (often the case for writing centre staff), how could I make the most of each opportunity? I began to feel overwhelmed by the array of spaces and activities across which I wanted to see improvement. And it was in seeking a way to initiate a research project in the Writing Lab, that I encountered the values-based form of Action Research (AR) championed by McNiff and Whitehead (2010), and where I found my answer. I would consolidate my focus on the one element common across these spaces and activities: me. I have found that this type of AR provides an aligned ideological perspective, an ongoing, active, contextualised, critically reflective, and authentic approach through which to enable professional learning, and a framework for theorising practice.

In its most basic form, AR is learning about what we do (action) and why we do it (research), in relation to the values we want to live through our practice. In alignment with the concept of authentic professional learning (Webster-Wright 2009), AR centralises the autonomy of individuals to take responsibility for their own development by explicitly recognising that, "…You cannot 'improve' someone, or 'educate' them, because people improve and educate themselves." (McNiff and Whitehead 2010: 36). In this way, AR is

transformative because it disrupts traditional hierarchies, such as between teacher and student, and challenges practitioners to focus on their own learning and development, rather than trying to exert their power over others, whose learning and development is in fact a function of how they choose to *respond* to us, and not what we do to them (Blackie, Case and Jawitz 2010; McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Webster-Wright 2009). As such, AR also recognises that learning is socially negotiated, and that we learn and develop in response to those around us. Therefore, as educators if we want to improve the response to our teaching, we need to focus on improving ourselves.

To enable authentic learning, AR employs a critically reflective cycle that begins with identifying specific areas for improvement, and actively developing relevant knowledge to better inform your practice. Next, you evaluate your new practices by critically reflecting on how well you are living your values through your practice and collecting evidence to this effect. Based on this evidence, you are then able to make valid knowledge claims and link new knowledge to existing knowledge. Through cyclically applying this process, in time, you may come to move beyond professional learning into the realm of knowledge production, as you generate living theory that explains and legitimises your practice, and which may hold value for others doing similar work (McNiff and Whitehead 2010).

Using a values-based, or conceptual approach to learning and development elevates our efforts by shifting our focus from individual practices to the factors that inform the variable application of *all* our practices across multiple contexts, roles, and engagements. However, it was not until the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, that the need to adopt a values-based approach and turn my focus inward became acutely apparent to me.

Critical reflections on my experiences of living the value of authenticity through my practice

Before the pandemic, the places and spaces I worked in remained 'fixed', and I physically moved between them, consciously switching my roles accordingly as I engaged directly with those around me. But during the pandemic, the requirement to physically isolate stripped away many of the contextual and social structures I had unconsciously come to depend on. I began to experience a severe sense of the loss of connection with students, and a loss of my own identity. Now I remained fixed, and the places and spaces I shifted between became virtual and blurred - I was no longer a teacher in a classroom, an academic presenting at a conference, or a Chair in a meeting room. I could no longer rely on being able to make eye contact or smile at someone, compliment an outfit, or even show off an outfit that felt like an expression of 'me'. I felt reduced to a set of slides and a disembodied voice, easily replaceable by someone else's disembodied voice. As my sense of loss grew, I kept asking myself, what can you bring to this engagement that is uniquely you? In time, I came to recognise that I was searching for authenticity, for a way to authentically represent myself and connect with students, though my disembodied voice.

Against this backdrop, in my ongoing journey of finding ways to enable students' authorial confidence, I watched a TED Talk by Eduardo Briceno, a speaker, developer, and trainer in the areas of growth mindsets, leadership, and innovation. In his talk, 'How to get better at the things you care about' (Briceno 2016) he describes the distinction between the 'performance zone' and 'the learning zone'. He explains that if we want to get better in the performance zone, we must spend

focused time in the learning zone. Yet, confoundingly, our systems are structured such that most of our schooling, especially in tertiary education, takes place in the performance zone; almost everything is assessed and graded in a continuous or summative manner, there are no 'do-overs', and the risks are extremely high. How then, he asks, can we "...create 'low stakes islands', in an otherwise 'high stakes sea'"?

One strategy he proposed really resonated with me: the notion of lowering the stakes for others, by leading through example. Briceno (2016) explains that "By sharing what we want to get better at, by asking questions about what we don't know, by soliciting feedback, and by sharing our mistakes and what we've learned from them, ...others can feel safe to do the same. Real confidence is about modelling ongoing learning." In other words, by giving students the opportunity to vicariously experience the challenges you have faced and to witness how you have overcome these, you give them an opportunity to gain confidence in themselves (Lundberg 2008).

At a time when I myself was experiencing a crisis of confidence in who I was and what I had to offer, this simple and elegant notion was something of a life raft. While acknowledging that I cannot build a student's confidence, I saw that I *could* lower the stakes and 'tip the odds in their favour', simply by bringing an *authentic* representation of myself to accompany the content I teach. As such, the focus of my professional learning has become how to live my value of authenticity through my practice to enable students to gain confidence.

Simple? Yes. Easy? No.

To bring an authentic representation of yourself to your teaching requires you to take risks which makes you vulnerable. You must be

willing to climb off your pedestal and dismantle power structures, and to be truthful about your own challenges and mistakes. You must be willing to be seen as just another student who happens to be further along in their journey. You must be willing to be humble, because it is not about giving your advice to students or presenting yourself as a model to follow, it is about normalising the often difficult and challenging process of 'becoming' in all its glorious, messy detail.

Sharing personal stories offers a powerful tool for practicing authenticity. Stories about ourselves allow us to express our identify and, in the telling of these stories, we can unpack our past experiences and explicate how these inform our current practice (Kadenge, Dison, Namakula and Kimani 2019). Although I was accustomed to occasionally sharing stories in the classroom, I had done so to encourage students or to simply to inject some humour into the room, but never to intentionally represent myself in an authentic way. When you put the goal of authenticity at the heart of the story however, the nature of the story changes as you challenge yourself to share aspects of your own learning that would have often remained hidden. Along with this, authentic stories also challenge you to take responsibility for validating yourself as someone with expert knowledge, rather than expecting students to simply accept this 'fact', as you relegated it to them to make assumptions about how you know what you know, in the hope that they can trust you.

While I primarily function as the coordinator of the FHS Writing, another of my roles is the convener of the Department of Health Science Education's MPhil programme. This has provided a fruitful space within which to practice authenticity through my engagement with students in this programme. In June 2021, I started an ongoing

email thread and challenged myself to write to the students weekly to establish and maintain a better connection with them. In my first email I wrote, "*I would like to establish this email thread as a line of open, ongoing, and collaborative engagement - a place where we can share resources with one another, ask questions, and discuss challenging issues or concerns.*" While this is still true, the way I am approaching this has changed. Here, I present some critical reflections on my actions in this space as evidence for the effect my changing practice is having on both me and the students I engage with. I cannot, for ethical reasons, share quotes from the students directly, however I can speak of their reactions to me in a general way.

In one of my first emails I wrote, "*As **you** will come to understand, research integrity is about more than just ethical considerations, and relates to **our** approach to research, and a commitment to conducting **ourselves** with integrity at all times.*" I have added the bolding to highlight my positionality as a teacher talking to her students, at best using words like 'our' and 'we' in these early exchanges to imply that what I was saying applied to both them and me. I also see now that I chose to start by addressing issues of conventions, rules, and expectations. And even though it was not until my 6th or 7th email that I became confident enough to talk about my own learning more specifically, students began responding to me directly (not to the whole group), telling me how much they needed this space and sense of community that I was establishing.

However, when all you are is a disembodied voice, the words you use become increasingly important as does what you chose to talk about. I realised that I had yet to truly turn the spotlight on myself and what I was learning, by explaining *why* I needed this learning (where I was

struggling, confused, or afraid), and how I have applied this learning to my own practice. I pushed myself to "own" these challenges and lessons more authentically as *my own* lessons, rather than those I was teaching to students. Later I wrote,

> *A few weeks ago, I mentioned I was feeling frustrated with **myself** by how little progress I have made on my research recently...Because I have experienced 'slumps' or periods of poor progress before, I was feeling really frustrated to find **myself** back here again...what is wrong with **me**? Why do I keep running into this problem? Why can't I maintain momentum? These questions circled in **my** mind until I came to a very simple realisation...This realisation was powerful because it freed **me** from **my own** 'deficit perspective' and helped **me** to stop self-flagellating for long enough to think constructively about principles and practices **I** can employ to get **myself** back on track, not just right now, but for any time **I** face this again in the future. Instead of floundering, I am now actively building **my** toolkit... One important principal **I** have identified for **myself** is to honour and respect the resources I have available.*

Again, the words in bold highlight how I was changing the way I presented myself, no longer as a teacher, but as another student, navigating my own ongoing learning journey. I started addressing issues of authorial development more directly and became more explicit about framing ideas and work that apply to all of us, positioning us as peers. For example, after the period of unrest and looting that erupted around South Africa in July 2021, I wrote,

> *Initially last week, I was overcome with feelings of helplessness and frustration, as I witnessed violence I couldn't stop, fear I couldn't allay, and hunger I couldn't feed...At times like these, I find it helpful*

> *to step back and remember what it is that I do, and the role that my work plays within our society.* ***And I want to invite you to do the same.***

Upon reflection, I recognise that I was shifting away from a didactic approach, towards a more student-centred approach of open sharing and an invitation to discuss ideas in a way that truly allows us to learn from one another. I also started to share more private emotions around feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. For example, after hearing a senior academic make a derisive comment about someone who had not published from their PhD, I wrote,

> *...**I felt ashamed**. It took me two years to publish from my PhD, and I only published one paper, when in truth there are two or three, more I could write...I felt as though he'd just pointed out that my Ferrari was actually a jalopy...I got to **thinking about how hard I found it to write my first paper** – no one to hold my hand, or show me the process, alert me to the hidden pitfalls – **I really was unprepared**.*

However, although I was improving my own practice of authentic self-representation, I remained ineffectual at motivating students to participate in the group context more actively. Eventually, I shared my frustration and sought the feedback of my own MPhil student, who is also a member of the group. They pointed out to me that although most of us had met in person, and we had all engaged together online, we did not really know one another, and so it was intimidating to share with a group of virtual (pun intended) strangers. I was really chastened by this feedback; in striving to be an excellent academic who represents themselves authentically, I had not even thought to properly introduce myself.

I immediately invested time in writing the long and personal story of my own postgraduate journey, sharing my experiences as a new mother, wife, part-time writing centre consultant, and PhD student. In this excerpt from my story, I wrote openly about something that it took me years to even admit to myself.

> *I won't lie – it was a tough year. I was often alone as [my husband] travelled frequently for work, the sleep deprivation, the complete change in lifestyle, the isolation (none of my friends had babies yet), the pressure to produce a proposal, the NEVER-ENDING LAUNDRY…it took its toll and I now recognise that I was probably suffering from post-partum depression.*

When I wrote that story I felt as if I was jumping off a cliff into the unknown - taking a real risk. I pressed send and held my breath. And as the students caught me, with their words of support and their willingness to share their own raw, difficult, triumphant, and complicated stories, I finally started to see how my changing practice was changing the space, and how others were changing their practices in response to what I was doing.

Despite these successes, there are still students who have yet to use their voices in the space, and engagement is still erratic. In reflecting on why this is so, I find I must acknowledge that I have shared here about practicing authenticity with students in a programme that I convened. Because I am in a position of relative power and experience, I cannot deny that I derive security from my achievements, making this a fairly low risk space for me. I am far less confident about practicing authenticity in those spaces I perceive to be high-risk. And indeed, what is low risk for me, may be high-risk for students. So, as much as I work to dismantle power structures, I acknowledge that a power differential

will always exist. But I also recognise that I can hold this power lightly, by consciously positioning myself as further along in the journey, rather than the authority, and by validating students' agency and inviting participation, rather than giving directives. And, as I continue my journey of developing authentic practices that enable students' confidence, I accept, with trepidation, that to really grow in this area, I will need to practice authenticity in those spaces that I find intimidating, so I may learn more about the things that enable me to do so.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects have proved to be a discomforting catalyst for my own learning and development. Indeed, as Webster-Wright (2009) points out, it is not so much change itself, but rather the uncertainty and complexity that accompanies change, which necessitates ongoing learning. My experiences of professional learning during the pandemic are a testament to that. Had I not felt stripped of all my social and structural crutches, I may never have taken the necessary and deep dive inwards. Committing to living my values through authentic self-representation has been influential in my practice, as I have become increasingly thoughtful about what I choose to say and how I choose to say it, and more sensitive to issues of positionality and power. I have challenged myself to take risks and seen those efforts rewarded by the responses from those who felt empowered by my example to take similar risks themselves. However, the most striking impact I have experienced is in terms of my own sense of identity. As I have continued to exercise authenticity, I have gained a renewed sense of self, and self-confidence as the framework of authentic self-representation has empowered me to reshape and

represent my identity, making whole and distinct what had previously felt reduced. Thus, through adopting an active and critically reflective disposition towards my ongoing learning, situated within the context of my practice, and shaped by my lived experiences, and in aligning my approach and practices to a transformative ideology, I myself am being transformed. My learning journey is of course ongoing and the notion of risk and reflecting on my own experiences of overcoming risk, remains a prominent focus area for me, as I continue to seek ways to empower students to gain confidence and overcome the academic risks that they face.

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