

# Genre, discourse and imagined communities: The learning gains of academic writing learners

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The purpose of this paper is to consider how first year, tertiary-level English as an Additional Language (EAL) academic writing programs for adult learners can use emerging understandings about the importance of discourse communities and imagined communities to guide and inform participation in an Academic Writing (AW) program. It asks what learning gains students have from an AW program using discourse-specific generic tasks to engage learners desiring a range of future destinations. More specifically, this paper considers links between academic genres and students' desired, future imagined communities (Anderson 1983; Kanno & Norton 2003). It does this by incorporating the literacy practices characteristic of those communities into the drafting/redrafting process. The study maintains that a focussed genre approach can impact learners' imaginings of themselves as members of future discourse communities through reproducing texts similar to the authentic artefacts of those discourse communities (Flowerdew 2000; Hyland 2003, 2005).

This paper outlines a situated pedagogical approach, where students report on their improvement across three drafts and assess their learning reflectively. This approach is compatible with research into the value of genre as a way of preparing learners for future discourse communities. A multicultural group of 41 learners enrolled in the degree-level course, Academic Writing, at a tertiary institution in New Zealand took part in a study reflecting on this approach to building awareness of one's own writing. Focus group interviews with a researcher at the first and final stages of the program, transcribed and analysed using textual analysis methods (Sandelowski, 1995) provided qualitative data. This core data was triangulated with written student reflections on their progress. Key benefits identified include the facts that the chance to produce texts perceived as useful to the students' immediate futures reflected the overall value of the AW program, and that the process of reproducing them engaged the learners largely because of their focus on their future, imagined communities.

**Key Words:** writing, portfolio assessment, literacy practices, discourse community, imagined community.

## 1. Introduction: Academic writing and generic literacy performances

This paper investigates how first year, tertiary-level Academic Writing (AW) programs in English as an Additional Language (EAL) for adult learners can engage students aiming at various destinations to invest in the course where they analyse and create text types characteristic of their destinations. The students' needs are both to achieve the outcomes of the

present course and to write for their future discourse (imagined) communities. The term “investment” is used since it references both identity and desire (Norton 2000), originates in Bourdieu’s (1986) metaphor of learning gains as “capital” and links current and potential learning and literacy performance to future identities. Pittaway (2004) describes the outcomes of an investment-focused pedagogy as acknowledging students “for the complexity underlying their motivations, desires, and hopes for the future” (p. 216). We use the term “discourse community” because its members share goals and use communication, specifically “written communication” (Borg, 2003, p. 398), to engage in the kinds of repertoire-sharing our AW students will need. Discourse communities employ genres, each with their own fields of language characteristic of the community (Swales, 1998). These genres comprise texts and practices (skills, strategies, conventions, ways of structuring, cultural understandings, ways of being), many of which can be identified and hence taught. Engaging students of AW programs in producing texts likely to be encountered in their future educational, workplace or professional destinations may mean opening the door for an enquiry into these communities. Since they are desired, not current, discourse communities, they can, then, be considered “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983; Norton & Gao, 2008).

The need to understand the adult learner in order to enhance instruction and to ultimately motivate them has been proven by research and well documented (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Importantly, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) argued for the importance of cultivating motivation in learners using the identity-focussed “L2 Motivational Self System”. However, there seems to be little or no evidence of research into the design of an AW program that would factor in the need to motivate and engage the learner.

This paper’s line of enquiry asks what key pedagogical features an AW program for adult EAL learners should have in order to engage a body of students setting diverse goals and to benefit their learning. This research question is a response to the need to investigate various pedagogies in a climate where higher education is expanding its intake of EAL speakers, and success and retention are major concerns as

universities are having to address major challenges around the English language competence of students entering higher education, many of whom lack the language skills they need to meet the demands of their degree courses and, subsequently, those of the workplace. ... the scale of those challenges today is greater than ever and institutions are under unprecedented pressure to ... ensure they are meeting their duty of care to the students concerned (Murray, 2010, p. 62).

In another study (Romova & Andrew, 2011), we demonstrated the benefits of portfolio-based pedagogy and assessment for impacting positively on learners’ written academic literacy while providing spaces for learners to negotiate their cross-cultural and individual voices within the conventions of the discourse. While we have responded to the acknowledgement that portfolios provide multiple opportunities for rehearsing a variety of text types, creating an “album of literacy performances” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 322), we return in this paper to a more general discussion of genre-focussed AW pedagogy. This paper reacts to Ferris and Hedgcock’s urge for empirical studies of academic writing to foreground “strategies and other cognitive operations involved in ... drafting a coherent, meaningful, piece of connected discourse” (pp. 4-5). This study contributes to this gap in research by asking how pedagogy for teaching AW that considers imagined discourse communities and the multiple possibilities of generic texts in portfolios can enhance student investment by having students create and recreate the types of constructed discourses they will encounter and engage with in their future destinations.

## **2. Context of study and participants**

The study occurred within Academic Writing, a 14-week course in the first year of a BA (EAL) program in an Auckland tertiary institute. There were three groups of learners on the course: first-year EAL major BA students; mainstream tertiary students majoring in a variety of non-language subjects and taking the course to develop their ability to write and succeed in their

major subjects; and Diploma in English (Advanced) students preparing to enter tertiary programmes in various fields – a total of 41 adult participants (14 male and 27 female, aged 17 to 39). They come from a variety of countries (China, Hong-Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Iran, Russia, Mexico, Germany, Somalia, Ethiopia and Kuwait) and aimed at a variety of degree level studies: in Nursing, Computer Science, Business Studies, Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Communication. Entry requirements are an IELTS Band 5.5 or equivalent.

### **2.1. The course: Academic Writing**

The aim of the AW course is to assist EAL learners to meet the academic demands of tertiary study in their chosen fields. The 14-week course is made up of six contact hours per week in three sessions.

The assessment includes a performance-based component in the form of regular weekly multi-draft formative written tasks presented as a portfolio to be graded summatively at the end of the semester. It can be said that the portfolio serves as a way of organising the content of the course. The portfolio tasks include seven text types: critique on a website, bibliography on a topic of students' choice, summary of readings on a chosen topic, expositions (compare-and-contrast, problem-solution, cause-and-effect), and an argumentative essay with a requirement to include direct and indirect paraphrasing in it, incorporating micro- and macro-level writing and learning. The structure of the course is such that the portfolio and the regular work on its tasks provide the development of a range of strategies for the final timed classroom essay assessment. For each generic item, students receive direct classroom instruction of text features so they "can better understand how to make a piece of writing more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose" (Reppen, 2002, p. 322).

There were two ways in which the portfolio work was tailored to the communicative purposes of their imagined and desired communities. One way was via the types of text that the learners had to include into the portfolio, which were those tertiary students in most subject areas are expected to write, such as the essay and the critique. Those were taught at both micro and macro levels, so learners might focus on one paragraph or section in one week, examining lexicogrammatical features, and on the larger discourse structure and rhetorical features in a subsequent week, considering the characteristics of genre belonging to defined discourse communities. This method follows Flowerdew (2000) and Hinkel (2002), borrowing process-based and social constructivist thinking from each. The other way was through the choice of topics for the texts and therefore the content of the writing. Here one of the tasks merits particular attention: that was reading articles in the field of the learners' career choices, summarising them and providing evidence of analysis of the discourse of those articles and also of the analysis and acquisition of language elements characteristic of various professional, academic or vocational fields. The focus on questions and topics, and the acquisition of discourse conventions of selected fields, was nearing the participants to the knowledge base that members of their imagined communities would either possess or be expected to possess.

As the AW course aims to prepare students to join the multiple activities of their future academic community (Borg, 2003; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000), the role of the chosen text types as the kinds of texts found in the learners' destination communities is emphasised.

### **2.2. Multidrafting and reflectivity**

The portfolio procedure is based on the principles of collection, reflection, selection, and ongoing peer and teacher feedback (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000), leading to redrafting and follow-up work in areas of language weaknesses identified by the students via feedback to their previous drafts and via their own analysis of their writing.

With Granville and Dison (2005), we consider how the processes of multi-drafting and reflectivity work within the context of the portfolios. With each first draft, students are required to submit a reflective commentary responding to prompts about (a) the purpose of the task, the requirements in terms of content, text organisation, discourse and language features for each of

the text types, and (b) what they have learnt from writing the text, what their difficulties have been and how they would work to improve the areas of difficulties themselves. With the second draft, the students submit another piece of reflective writing, answering the question of whether the teacher's feedback to the first draft and their own assessment of the writing and learning correlate. They identify areas of weaknesses and select those to work on urgently. Thus the AW portfolios comprise all drafts of work required by the curriculum plus reflections, ensuring that all AW portfolios are comparable. The students' reflections feed back into the teaching and point to a formative function (Lam & Lee, 2009). Such formative strategies, together with the pedagogical interventions of teacher monitoring, peer review and collaborative group work, give the course cohesion and balance the high-stakes summative focus. The criteria for assessing the portfolio are performance-based, achievement-focussed, and allow for a measure of progress, response to feedback and self-reflectivity (Lucas, 2008).

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Imagined communities and discourse communities

The concept of "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) can be applied to EAL AW since the students have in their minds idealised visions of themselves as members of future academic, local, national or professional communities using particular language in specific ways. Logically, this aligns with current research into learners' desired and future selves as pedagogical resources for motivating language learners (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Beyond the classroom our students have imagined communities. For instance, Ferenz (2005) has shown that learners' involvement in social networks provides them with additional investment in the classroom. Abasi, Akbari and Graves (2006) demonstrated student perception of the importance of imitation as a strategy for creating texts characteristic of postgraduate discourse communities, and imitation that can lead to what teachers might see as plagiarism. EAL learners also imagine communities they wish to belong to, but as yet do not. Their imaginings can become explicit when they are asked about the contexts in which they imagine themselves using writing in their futures. Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) demonstrated how EAL learners' language learning histories effectively project their investments in their future imagined communities, and Norton (2000) demonstrated how learner investments are captured in diaries narrating real-world learning experiences.

Future communities are conceptualised as imagined spaces and individuals idealise community and create a sense of self through these imaginings (Anderson, 1983). Kanno and Norton (2003) believe the analogy of nationhood and community helps those desirous of belonging feel a sense of community with people "not yet met" (p. 241). Norton and Gao (2008), summarizing literature on imagined communities in language education, point out that "the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner" (p. 114). "Imagined community", then, describes learners' investment: in our case in writing the texts characteristic of discourse communities of their imagined futures. Learner investments impact on future goals, ambitions, dream communities and desires for belonging and recognition. Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) analysed learner histories to conclude: "as learners want to belong to a community and construct their identities as members of the group, they invest energy and time into learning how to be like those members" (p. 85).

This framework allows, then, for learners' desires to *belong*, to be connected, and to *become*, to develop into the learner their future destinations require them to be. At the same time, it is compatible with existing studies of genre-based teaching as preparatory for entry into future discourse communities (Borg, 2003; Hyland, 2005; Woodward-Kron, 2004). As Silva (1990) explained, "learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community – finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it" (p. 17).

### 3.2. Learning generic and discursive features

A range of recent studies reveal the literacy practices generated during students' participation in AW programs that consider students' needs to gain skills that can impact their future destinations. The list of these by-products is headed by enhanced reflective capacity (Kathpalia & Heah, 2008), which leads to more self-reflective awareness of one's own generic texts and, as Johns showed in 1995, the academic literacies developing within them. The reflective learner may be more responsive to learning through peer feedback (Rollinson, 2005; Zhao, 2010), listenership during tutor monitoring (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) and open to written feedback at micro- and macro-levels (Hamp-Lyons, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Leki, 2006; Weigle, 2002). These strategic responses can extend into enhanced understanding of paraphrasing (Keck, 2005), self-editing (Ferris, 2005; Vickers & Ene, 2006) or brainstorming (Rao, 2007). The iterative, recursive nature of multi-drafting provides students with such aspects of academic writing literacy as self-editing and the insight to reorganise academic texts by applying target genre and discourse knowledge. To do this is to teach AW texts as embodying the linguistic and generic discourse community of particular academic genre (Clark, 2003; Hyland, 2003, 2005; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000; Swales, 1998).

Our AW pedagogy identifies a link between literacy performance-based pedagogy and future discourse communities. This it achieves by focussing on analysing, understanding and unpacking the generic features of authentic texts belonging to students' desired academic and professional futures and encouraging the emulation of such models (Reppen, 2002).

Many of these studies occur in the context of teaching and learning using portfolios, which we also claim have a range of benefits (Romova & Andrew, 2011). Primary among these is the development of learners' understandings of generic text types from likely target discourse communities (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). One of the advantages of our genre-focussed approach is that while the pedagogy applies collectively, students can analyse and create texts belonging to their own desired, future discourse communities: their imagined communities. They can also unpack the differences between the conventions of writing in a genre in their culture and in the Eurowestern models likely to characterise the discourse communities of their desired destinations. This flexibility encourages "safe houses" in the classroom where students negotiate identities with potentially positive outcomes for their literacy development (Canagarajah, 2004). These are crucial issues from exponents of critical writing pedagogy, but beyond the scope of this paper.

## 4. Methodology

Qualitative research approaches provide authentic, reflective, evaluative insights of real learner experience. Our data comes from transcriptions of open-ended focus group interviews (of four or five participants), recorded in weeks three (start) and 13 (end) and conducted by a researcher external to the teaching team. Interviewing was repeated over three intakes, with data collected from 41 students. The rationale of open-ended interviewing is described by Burns (2000): "the only person who understands the social reality in which they live is the person themselves" (p. 425). The data obtained from the interviews conducted by the researcher was triangulated against the data obtained from students' regular written reflections accompanying each submitted draft.

### 4.1. Focus group interviews

For the focus group interviews, students volunteered themselves into groups of four or five. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30 minutes. After the students completed AW, the interviews were transcribed. Students had the chance to check the transcriptions for accuracy. Two researchers, the interviewer-researcher and the teacher-researcher, used thematic analysis to identify threads in the transcriptions.

Our method aligns with Sandelowski's (1995) method of thematic analysis used with narratives produced in nursing training. She describes closely reading the material, identifying key

storylines in an attempt to understand everyday practices and underlining key phrases because they make “inchoate sense” (p. 373). The researchers used a holistic, instinctive, multiple-technique method to bring out “indigenous themes” (Patton, 1990).

In week 3, students were asked about their past experiences of academic writing, their reasons for enrolling in the course, their strengths and weaknesses in writing, and the future imagined communities where they hoped to use their improved academic writing.

In week 13, students were asked to respond freely to the question (given out on a card) about how the following aspects of the course had impacted on their understanding of AW:

- regular writing, feedback and follow-up in set genres;
- increased learning about structure and discourse;
- understanding about the features of academic writing;
- building literacies, e.g. editing, proofreading, following up corrections.

Groups were then guided to answer key questions:

- What are the main challenges for you in writing an academic text?
- How will AW be useful to you in your future life?

#### **4.2. Reflections on portfolio tasks**

The student portfolios provide rich data about learners’ attempts to produce accurate, authentic, generic text-types. Reflections, as Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) write, “describe, explain, or otherwise account for the samples included” (p. 4). The learners regularly wrote reflections of 250 words accompanying their first and second text drafts.

Analysis of our data using the coding methods mentioned above (Sandelowski, 1995) enables us to identify how students see multi-draft portfolios as useful for developing their AW strategies with particular focus on how their understandings of discourse and genre have evolved and the effectiveness of literacies they have adopted.

#### **4.3. Ethics**

All students formally agreed to participate and to their words to be used. All names cited here are pseudonyms.

### **5. Findings**

Our study identifies a number of themes from the focus group data triangulated with student reflections. Presenting such dense data concisely requires us to select typical yet astute observations, and to make general observations about trends in the data. Here, we describe and discuss three themes. The first of these is that the opportunity to write academic texts in genres the students regards as useful enables the students to feel invested in AW due to the texts’ connections with future discourse communities. Second, we consider how students respond positively to micro- and macro-level learning from the generic text types they might find in their imagined communities. Third, we present evidence that the literacies of planning and organisation inherent in the draft-focussed portfolio-based writing process are recognised as valuable for learners’ long-term futures. For the first theme, we present the data of weeks 3 and 13 separately so as to emphasise the progress, while the themes discussed in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 conflate data from all sources.

#### **5.1. The chance to write authentic text types enhances learner investment in AW**

*Week 3: Early observations about writing texts and imagined communities:* The week three interviews established that the learners’ major motivation to embark on the AW course is to gain improved job prospects, either in New Zealand or their home community, participate in higher education or go to a better university in a course of their choice. The students desired to

gain the AW practices required for future study in vocational subjects, namely Early Childhood Education (ECE), Nursing, Computer Science, Business and Communication. These practices comprise skills they had not gained from prior writing study, which had predominantly been IELTS-focussed and hence concerned with strategies that were instrumentally useful in achieving a desired score. “Expanding my academic vocabulary” is the most commonly cited wish followed by “improving my grammar” but there is also awareness that AW can offer learning opportunities beyond lexis and syntax. In a typical narrative, Mabel pointed out, for instance, that the literacy practices of AW – she uses the words “skills” and “conventions” – could be applied to a business context (her imagined community) and that her creation of a business-style paragraph made her feel she had worked “usefully”. Eleven others said they needed AW skills for vocational reasons, such as being able to practise medicine or to write reports for their future students. Five learners saw developing their AW as part of a longer English learning journey, resulting in more real and imagined professional and social interactions. “I think this type of writing [can help] my future study,” said Irma (ECE).

*Week 13: Reported gains in learning enabling better access to future discourse communities:* In week 13, the learners commented on returns on their “investments”. Specifically, two learners made reference to the usefulness of the micro- and macro- foci on tasks related to paragraph development (with its micro focus on cohesion, coherence and syntactic structures), essay writing, critiquing and evaluating, and writing a short researched report. William (Nursing) said: “What I am learning to do here is related to what I want to do. I am getting ready for further study – looking into the future”. Of the 41 interviewees, 20 mentioned “grammatical accuracy” and “sentence structure” as core gains, with eight speaking about the structuring of the types of academic texts they will “meet” in their future studies, five about turning research into writing and the remainder detailing such needs as the ability to write “selecting appropriate words”, “using formal vocabulary”, writing “in a web” or “in the western way” – all testifying to the students’ high levels of motivation and engagement.

## 5.2. Learning from generic text types helps to engage learners

This finding segues from the learner investment and motivation we considered in Section 5.1 to the possibility that AW pedagogy, informed by insights from genre-based, process-based, social constructivist and critical approaches to writing, can impact language socialisation.

Nine students commented that a genre-focussed approach with an emphasis on conventions can enhance their awareness of the texts of their target discourse communities. When Farat (Business) remarked that the convention of starting with the thesis and then writing topic-based sentences is useful for those who wish to write academically in other subjects, he is conscious that his understanding of generic conventions enables him to function more fruitfully in future imagined communities. For Emma (Computer Science), understanding that the “conventions of structure affect the coherence of an essay and give it its overall quality” suggests that a stronger focus on genre enabled her to create better academic texts. Further, becoming aware of the characteristic features of a genre can draw attention to the lexical, syntactical and discursive levels of writing that characterise the discourse communities the students may aspire to. Yulia (Communication) reflected: “Formal reports is what I need in my future, study and work, so writing in their style helps me with my goals.”

All students were focused on future imagined communities and on the discourses seen as characterising them. Irma (ECE) for example, was aware of “restructuring the writing to suit ‘academic writing’” and “finding the right words for the topic”, while Farah (Business) spoke of “developing the thinking skills needed to fit in with learning expectations of the genre”. Meanwhile, Sue (ECE) described “understanding the logic of the expected order – topic sentence and conclusion” and related it to essays her friend already enrolled in ECE writes. Ebba (Business) mentioned “writing with formality and having the vocabulary to sustain a longer text” such as those needed in business studies. Emma (Computer Sciences) referred to “thinking in a logical and chronological order while focussing on sentence structure too” as strategies she will require “next year” and Joo (Nursing), mindful of her future Nursing case-

study reports, noted “grammar worry ... prevents you from being able to be conscious of sentence structure”. Yuichi (his goal was to be admitted to the Royal New Zealand Police College) observed the expectations of academic writing genre that “brings its own stress, so you can’t merely focus on vocabulary.” Strength in remembering lexis won’t be enough for Yuichi’s future career in the Police Force. “I need more logic, as in academic reports”, he observed. Meanwhile Miwa (ECE) was aware that she, too, will need practice in a versatile range of text types: “for the future I want to learn not only this argumentative essay but also other different genre of writing”. Emily (Business) was positive about the progress she could make in AW by turning literacy practices into habits:

How to improve in the future: copy some good phrases while reading, rehearse and practise them, build up the vocab. Read more and be familiar with these pronouns. There is not a shortcut to improve my English in a sudden way, but at least I have got some strategies to make it look better.

Socialising into Eurowestern generic models may be an instrumental necessity, but not an ideal goal, and students show some resistance. Esther, writing an academic essay for commerce, observed: “[the] English style requires evidence to follow the thesis, but [the] Korean allows us to write in a more dramatic way, with different prioritisations”. On the other hand, focussing on discursive features within the genre approach provides learners with a scaffold that did not exist in their home cultures. Farina remarked that Kuwaiti students “have to write, but they don’t have to be very serious about that, students, they copy”, a comment supported by soon-to-be-Business student, Mabel: “students just choose a book and copy from the book. They don’t have to worry about discourse”.

### **5.3. Planning and organisational skills prove to be learning gains for future study**

The 41 participants see the literacy practices of the AW course as sources of capital that they will be able to use later on as they are embedded in the texts of the academic discourse communities the learners would like to see themselves operating in. Twenty-four learners specifically commented on planning and organisational skills, such as outlining and brainstorming, as learning gains. Vinna (Nursing) emphasised the value of prewriting and outlining: “they control my ideas when I write my essay – very central”. In saying this, she also gestured to a discourse feature that will enable her in future environments. For Jenny (Business), a chance to apply outlining also made an impact: “I have learnt many things through [AW] class. Above all, outlining is the best thing for me ... now, I have learnt how to write an outline, and I feel that if I prepare the outline well and in detail, then the time of writing an essay gets shorter.” Her words suggest that the time she will save by applying literacy practices unpacked and applied during AW will better equip her for future study.

For Emma (Computer Science), learning to save time is an investment; so is acquiring the literacy practices of planning and organising ideas, which characterise successful students in the disciplines: “The process of AW (pre-writing and outlining) helped me to organise ideas simply and start to write easily.” Kirma (ECE) views her insights into writing as a process of assisting her with textual organization, a skill she will reapply in her later career: “the process – pre-writing, outlining and so on – controls my ideas when I write my essay for Academic Writing and for Education”. For Ella, whose present investment in AW will enhance her prospects to enter a nursing program, “brainstorming ... is the cornerstone that makes your whole essay link well. AW for IELTS and TOEFL is different from AW for nursing. The idea of logical development of text is different”. For her, the kind of writing she does in AW is more purposeful and personalised than that she has studied in classes in writing for examination purposes. Helen (ECE) explicitly looks to her future community: “A good outline is guarantee of a good draft. I have learnt the writing process in Academic Writing and I will apply it in my studies in Education”.



## 6. Discussion

The snapshots of students' reflections presented in the findings show learners "in continual discussion, analysis and evaluation of their processes and progress as writers" (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2003, p. 15). The benefits of multi-draft writing, in our case comprising seven text types, are also evident. These findings reveal evidence of enhanced reflective capacity (Kathpalia & Heah, 2008); evolution of literacy practices embedded in academic writing (Adamson, 1992; Johns, 1995); increased awareness of macro-level, discourse-level, big picture thinking (Hyland, 2003, 2005); focussed attention on such literacy practices as outlining and paraphrasing (Keck, 2005), self-editing (Ferris, 2005) and brainstorming (Rao, 2007). Students demonstrate reflectivity in both written (accompanying their portfolio texts) and oral (in their week 13 interviews) forms. These reflections focus both formative and meta-cognitive learning (Katznelson, Perpignan, & Rubin, 2001; Lam & Lee, 2009). We believe that the acts of learning to write that we observe in the findings can be interpreted as the starting point of the process of becoming socialized to future, imagined communities, although we acknowledge that further research, with the use of other research methods and lines of enquiry, is needed to confirm this belief.

Our study considers how writing a range of genre-focussed discourses enables students for involvement in future communities. In the process, it appears the role played by the portfolio is that of a convenient tool that easily accommodates genre-based teaching and learning, which "enables learners to find out what is expected (in their future imagined communities) and then try to approximate it" (Silva, 1990, p. 17). The portfolio also seems to serve the central role of an organiser of literacy practices characteristic of the process approach to writing (pre-writing, outlining, editing, redrafting, proofreading) with the opportunity for multi-drafting, teacher feedback and learner reflections being part of an ongoing teacher-learner conversation about the learning going on. It can be argued that some of the above features can be present in AW courses that do not centre around a portfolio, and we acknowledge that this is true. However, we see the portfolio as being capable of bringing all these features together under the roof of one and the same course as we demonstrate elsewhere (Romova & Andrew, 2011).

As the findings emphasise, particularly finding 5.1, the needs students express at the start of the course are connected to being and becoming; specifically being and becoming members of future discourse communities, notably those of disciplines they aspire to join. The aspirations that students voice, and report on at the conclusion of the course, accord with contemporary understandings of imagined communities as places of the heart and mind that reference identity (Norton & Gao, 2008). Delivering an AW program that understands learner investment is valuable, and a portfolio-based pedagogy that builds in generic flexibility is capable of enabling learners to acquire literacy practices common to all academic disciplines while preparing individually for future goals. While a portfolio-focussed mode might not be the only writing pedagogy that can achieve this goal, its effectiveness as a way of linking the teaching of AW to future discourse communities through understanding learners' investments is supported by this study.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper reports on a small-scale empirical study identifying what features of an Academic Writing course for adult EAL learners engage such learners in the course. An aspect of the originality of this study comes, too, from recent thinking on imagined communities summarised by Norton and Gao (2008). Further, our study supports a theoretical link between the pedagogical use of portfolios as "albums" of genre-focussed texts and the learners' future, imagined, discourse communities (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). It produces evidence suggesting that teachers need to examine learners' investment in learning AW so as to provide a flexible curriculum that accommodates the critical reading skills, academic writing strategies and literacy practices characteristic of future discourse communities.

In answer to our research question on how an AW programme can engage adult EAL tertiary learners, our project concludes that first-year degree level adult learners report advantages of learning via multi-drafting of generic texts, one of which relates to the benefits of the production of text types characteristic of the students' imagined communities. In addition, learners report increased understanding of discursive and generic features of academic texts necessary for participating in their future discourse communities. They report developments in embedded literacy skills contributing to the process of socialising them into genres. Further, learners report on the role of, and their progress in, applying the situated literacy practices of planning and organising a text as a gain for achieving success in their future destinations.

This study contributes to researchers' and instructors' understanding of the usefulness of multi-draft genre-focussed instruction for teaching and learning AW in undergraduate EAL programs by instantiating those aspects of learning directly related to learners' desired future and imagined discourse communities. It foregrounds "strategies and other cognitive operations" used in learners' creation and recreation of connected discourse, making a contribution to a gap in research identified by Ferris and Hedgcock (2005, p. 4). To answer our research question on how academic writing programs can engage adult tertiary EAL learners, we emphasise the use of pedagogies incorporating emerging understandings of the importance of "discourse community" in its real and imagined forms to target participant needs and align with the desired selves Dörnyei and Ushioda, (2011) describe. In our case, this involved the genre approach to teaching AW in combination with the process one. We see future research opportunities in closely analysing the texts and artefacts students produce within their portfolios.

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