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Capturing the struggle: adult learners and academic writing

Introduction

In this article we explore the concept of struggle as an essential and normal part of learning in Higher Education (HE). It draws on the findings of a longitudinal qualitative study that investigated the challenges twelve adult (21–52 years of age) work-based learners experienced when undertaking written assignments as part of a Foundation Degree (FdA) at an English university. The understanding that struggle was a fundamental and necessary part of learning for the participants presents a challenge for the academy. We discuss how the path of learning is not smooth, frequently problematic, complicated and difficult. Work-based Foundation Degrees (FdA) were introduced in England and Wales by the Department for Education and Skills in 2000 (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015) and have an equivalence to the first two years of an undergraduate degree. FdAs were conceived to address perceived shortages of particular skills in the labour market by integrating academic and work-based learning hence equipping 'learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment' (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015, 2). The relationship between the academy and work was further highlighted in 2015 when the government published a Green Paper for HE, Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice that redefined the purpose of the academy. The stated core aims were to 'raise teaching standards, provide greater focus on graduate employability, widen participation in higher education, and open up the sectors to new high quality entrants' (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2015, 7). The aspiration for widening participation into HE is increasingly the focus of government with the requirement for all universities to have an Access and Participation Plan (Office for Students 2019). These aims widen the purposes of the university beyond a knowledge producing system (Greenwood and Levin 2008) and provide important considerations for this study, specifically in the notions of raising teaching standards, employability and widening participation. The conceptualisation of education as a direct means for 'employment' connects with a neoliberal agenda and establishes 'employability' as a concern of educational institutions where the term skills (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015) 'operationalises education as a conveyor belt for the production of a flexible, adaptable and 'skilled' workforce to make countries competitive in a globalised economy' (Duckworth and Smith 2018, 530). However, we argue that undertaking a programme of study at a university is more complex than 'upskilling' as part of a government agenda. Indeed, the struggle provides the opportunity for a transformation of self in personal, professional and academic domains. In many universities FdA learners make up a small but significant group and represents 1% of overall undergraduate numbers (Higher Education Statistics Agency (2018–2019). According to the UK Quality Assurance Agency, FdAs contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning through 'encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher level qualification or prefer a more applied curriculum' (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015, 2). The more applied nature of the FdA curriculum has an appeal for 'nontraditional' learners (Lillis 2001, 4); learners from 'social groups who have historically been largely excluded from HE' (ibid., 1). As such, the characteristics of an FdA may typically include classes populated by mature learners, particularly women for those programmes related to education, and those without academic qualifications although with significant practice experience in a relevant sector. The learners' professional practice experience forms a key part of the entry requirement for many FdA programmes and enables many work-based learners to be accepted on a programme of study without the normally expected academic heritage. The social and academic world of HE, the 'academy', represents the broad collective of places of study; universities and colleges. Places of study are tangible, although the academy represents more than buildings and physical spaces. Bourdieu used the term 'social space' to describe a way of being

that extends beyond a physical space and which 'tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of lifestyles and status groups characterised by different lifestyles' (1989, 19) who are systematically linked among themselves. The academy represents a distinct social space with its own body of knowledge, language, cultural position and communication tool of academic writing which systematically links the group. The transition into the academy's social space is often difficult for learners and particularly for those with more limited academic heritage (Lillis and Turner 2010; Christie et al. 2008; Gale and Parker 2014). Academic awards are evidence of the specific knowledge and cognition privileged by the academy and which ultimately hold status within it. A distinct characteristic of the academy is its use of academic writing as a means to create and establish the legitimacy of knowledge. Academic writing practices and conventions are one of the means by which the academy produces, defines and polices itself as a distinct and privileged social institution (French 2010, 20). The 'intellectual competencies of 'the academy' . . .: the construction of a coherent argument [sic]; appropriate uses of evidence; the privileging of analysis and criticism over description (Stierer 2000, 180) are evident in academic writing. Typically, academic writing also adopts a particular formal, objective authorial voice; dependent on the discipline with which the writing is concerned. Academic writing is, therefore, specific to the academy and represents a particular discourse which Lillis (2001, 14) states is an 'ideologically inscribed institutional practice of mystery' and one which is different from the learner's normal first person, personal, subjective, often truncated writing style. The relationship between academic writing and reward (grade points and ultimately status) reinforces and legitimises inequalities in voice. In this study the researchers were guided by two research questions which were shaped by the literature and the lived experiences of the researchers working with adult learners' engaging with academic writing and the academy for the first time:

(1) How do work-based learners perceive academic writing as part of their higher education programme of study?

(2) How does assessed academic writing affect work-based learners' academic identity?

Literature review

Current academic writing research frequently advocates an academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2001; Ganobcsik-Williams 2010) which challenges the previously held deficit model in which the learner needs to adapt to the academy, instead viewing the university as the active agent in supporting the increasingly diverse learner. It 'views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation' (Street 2004, 7). Academic writing is seen, therefore, as complex and intrinsically bound with social and emotional dimensions of the writer that influence its success beyond that of the cognitive. It is the learners' intellectual and emotional journey within the FdA to conform to the academy's prescribed writing style that manifests itself as an academic struggle for the learners reported in this study.

The notion of the struggle

In this study, the notion of 'struggle' is defined by a disequilibrium or sense of unease experienced by the learner and is associated with an emotional response . . . The use of the term 'struggle' depicts the strength of discomfort that surrounds the difficulties that learners face and that requires deliberation or renegotiation (Saccomanno 2017) from the learner that may impact on their sense of self and identities. The resolution of the struggle from disequilibrium to an equilibrium is the site of learning and mirror the process of transformational learning highlighted by Mezirow (1991). The concept of transformational learning is defined as learning that 'entails a qualitatively new structure

or capacity in the [adult] learner' (Illeris 2014, 5). Piaget (1980) describes the process of learning and uses the term disequilibrium to articulate where new learning, or knowledge, cannot yet be accommodated, made stable, or linked with what is already known. For FdA learners, the links between known (professional knowledge) with theoretical evidence (academic knowledge) is often challenging. The process of scrutinising practice through critical reflection may create a disequilibrium where discrepancy is created between current knowledge and new understandings. Piaget's theory of assimilation (1980) conceptualises how newly acquired learning is 'fitted', or accommodated with previous learning. The assimilation process requires the previous knowledge to evolve through the 'adaptation' (Piaget 1980, 77) and accommodation of new knowledge. This is an important stage for a transformation of knowledge, or new cognitive levels (Piaget 1980, 111) and for professional growth to occur. Disequilibrium is also associated with academic literacies; learning to read and write for the production of assignments. The sense of unease, disequilibrium, or struggle, reported in this article, is often located within the undertaking of academic writing and receiving grades from academic assignments. Learners are required to recognise and accommodate the socially situated conventions of academic writing. The impact of the feelings associated with the struggle and studying at university can affect learner identities, learning processes and well-being (Postareff, Mattsson, Lindblom-Vlänne & Hailikari, 2017).

Academic identity

Identity is socially constructed (Josselson 1996) and Jones et al. (2012, 702) draw on the concept of intersectionality '. . . as a framework that more completely and accurately captures the complexities of everyday life and identity by explicitly linking individual, interpersonal, and social structural domains of experience'. The concept of a 'framework' of intersecting identities foregrounds the following discussion on academic identity where different identities are viewed as interwoven.

In this article we use the term 'academic identity' to refer to a sense of self within the academy, where a learning identity encompasses the sense of self in the full range of learning experiences. An academic identity includes understandings and perceptions of self as an academic; someone who undertakes the activities of a scholar; academic reading and academic writing and all that this embraces e.g. critical analysis, evaluation, synthesis and argumentation. Therefore, academic writing identity is interwoven with academic identity and is often seen by learners as one of the defining markers of academic progress. An academic, and therefore writing, identity is shaped by all the activities, events and experiences, associated with formal and informal learning both past and present. Writing identity is described by Clark and Ivanič as 'the autobiographical self' (1997, 137) where the writer's life history affects the way that they write. For the participants in this study their autobiographical self, had been formed through formal learning at school, professional learning and learning within the academy where barriers to learning such as low self-belief, the social background of the individual encompassing aspects of social class, gender and attainment can all impact on their sense of self regarding their learning and their relationship to, and with the academy. A number of research projects have been undertaken to seek the views of undergraduate and postgraduate learners about academic writing and many report the negative emotions and struggles that learners experience (for example Caffarella and Barnett 2000; Wellington 2010; Wingate 2012; Murray et al. 2008; Young 2000; Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins 2009). However, there are more limited studies that specifically explore the views and experiences of work-based learners on an FdA programme (Nzekwe-Excel 2012; Taylor 2008). Emotions surrounding writing affect academic identity and self-efficacy both positively and negatively and these can be equally empowering or paralysing where 'fear and anxiety can cripple early writing endeavours' (Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins 2009, 270). Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins (2009) argue that much of the fear that learners feel towards their

writing is related to limited understandings about the processes of writing, particularly where writing is iterative, messy and recursive; academic 'common sense' (Gramsci 1971). In not knowing the nature of the academic writing process, the learner is often left to struggle to meet the expectations of the task with only the exemplars of published work as a frame of reference where the tussles of iteration and reiteration are hidden behind the final text. In writing, the learner has an 'intensely personal relationship with self' (Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins 2009, 272) where their academic identity is formed and re-formed. Emotional responses may be specifically visible in dealing with the grades the learner receives for their written assignments. Positive emotions such as a deep satisfaction and pride may be experienced for a perceived 'good' grade. Alternatively, powerful negative emotions of anxiety, fear and disappointment can be associated with a lower or failed grade. These experiences and emotions are closely linked to selfefficacy and belief about competencies in writing. Grades may induce the feeling of being exposed where writing can feel like an 'intellectual striptease' (Caffarella and Barnett 2000, 46). These feelings may be amplified when the learner is in a senior or management position within the workplace where the exposure is at odds with their perceived experiential competences. The introduction of FdA programmes as work-based courses to the academy in 2000, which require learners to directly draw on their own experiences and practice (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015), signified a potential change in positioning of the learner. Clark and Ivanič (1997, 142) refer to identity as the 'discoursal self' which is the writers' representation, or positioning, of themselves in the text. The discoursal self is represented by the workbased learner as an interconnection between the academic and the professional. It is within academic writing that these emerge and interact with each other in a dynamic, and often challenging way. An example of this is where an academic authorial voice can be constrained by the institutional context, or more specifically the reader of the text within that institution context. The reader, the academic gatekeeper, makes judgements on the learner's competence within the conventions of an assessment, but also on them as an academic. The inclusion of others' and the learner's viewpoints makes developing the writer's 'sense of self' (Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins 2009, 269) challenging as the activities of de-constructing (ideas from reading) and re-constructing (writing) that Badley (2009) refers to are not proficient, or indeed understood by the novice (sometimes reluctant) academic writer. Where learners reflect and re-construct their thinking through writing, Badley (2009, 215) suggests a re-shaping of the writer emerges where they become 'critical [sic] participants in both academic and social life'. A re-shaped or re-worked self-image as an academic writer requires the development of an academic identity. An emerging academic identity may be in tension or competition with other senses of self, or identities such as their professional or personal identities. The establishing of an academic identity is challenged by the different discourses and different linguistic features that may be quite alien to the work-based learner. The process of examining professional practices, linking this to theoretical concepts and wider reading, and in discussing the interrelationship through comparing and contrasting between these various sites of evidence potentially challenges both their professional identity in the first instance as well as the academic identity of FdA learners. This process often causes learners to question their own established practice (highly valued within the academy) risking making workplace relationships problematic or confrontational. The work-based learner may be no different from other learners in respect of their feelings associated with writing. However, the dynamic element for these particular writers is in the locating of their own practice experiences and examples in relation to the views of others which afford them an active role in the re-construction of ideas and concepts.

Methodology and methods

In this qualitative study we collected data from twelve adult, work-based learners using the method of feedforward tutorials over a two-year period (September 2013-July 2015). The FdA is a two-year programme and provided a natural start and end point for data collection. The research was conducted in a small university in the East Midlands area of England by academic tutors on the FdA programme. The sample size of twelve was modelled on other small scale research projects (Negretti 2012; Lillis 2001) which used similar methods when investigating the academic writing of learners in HE with a sample size of between 10 and 17 participants. Participants were self-selecting volunteers based on an initial discussion about the project and a call for participants. The data were captured at four points during the two years; once in each semester. The learners had experienced two cycles of submitting assignments and feedback prior to each of the tutorials as part of the normal assessment cycle of their FdA programme. Forty-eight feedforward tutorials were undertaken which were audiotaped, transcribed and then analysed to extract key themes for discussion from each participant learner as unique, individual case studies. Attention focused on the individual differences and peculiarities from each participant case which enabled the participants' histories and multiplicities to be foregrounded and allowed us to respond to the 'surprises' (Duckworth and Smith 2018, 536) evident in each narrative. The data from four of the participants has been selected for discussion as discreet vignettes each focusing on one particular aspect of the key struggles highlighted in the data. The narratives presented as vignettes were not selected because they are any more unique than the others, more their data allows for a rich discussion of how different learners can be challenged by undertaking academic writing and the struggles encounter. The need to establish clear ethical boundaries for all stakeholders was critical in relation to the power relationship that existed between the learners and the practitioner researcher, and was an ethical challenge. From the start of the study, the cohort of 40 students enrolled on the programme for 2013–2014 academic year was informed of the project and volunteers were requested. Informed, written consent was established and all data were confidentially gathered and stored. The right to withdraw from the project at any point without prejudice was stated. The researchers ensured that the participant learners continued to be comfortable with their inclusion in the research at the four tutorial points and the transcripts were corroborated by the learner to avoid misrepresentation or misinterpretation (Lichtman 2013). The demographics of the sample were representative of FdA learners on early years courses and overwhelmingly women. Learner profiles are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Research sample profile data

Name	Age in years at start of programme	Gender	Overall Experience in the sector	Average Grade
Tom	26	male	7 years	66
Zoe	24	female	8 years	66
Amber	52	female	19 years	63
Philippa	47	female	8 years	65
Mary	46	female	30 years	60
Lucy	34	female	13 years	59
Isobel	40	female	10 years	52
Mariea	28	female	2 years	51
Louise	21	female	1 year	53
Laura	27	female	10 years	61
Rose	38	female	11 years	61
Rachel	20	female	1 year	52

All the participants were white British which is reflective of the university where the research was conducted and of the surrounding county which is not typically ethnically diverse. All of the participants were working in the early years sector in a variety of roles as practitioners, room leaders, or managers. The anonymity of the participant learners was maintained throughout and the learners chose their own pseudonym or requested that the researcher selected one for them. The 'feedforward' tutorials were used to facilitate a narrative of the learner's experience of academic writing for assessments. The tutorials were modelled on the investigative tool used by Lillis (2001) also researching the writing experiences of non-traditional learners in HE. Feedforward tutorials provided a 'talking space' (Lillis 2001, 9) where participants could share their assignment texts and talk about the processes of writing. The tutorials also provided a 'talking space' for learners to unpick the assessor's commentary on their work and the summative feedback following the return of assignments. The assessor may, or may not, have been one of the researchers and all assignments were marked anonymously. As such all learners' identities (and each marker's identity) of submitted assignments remained undisclosed. The term 'feedforward' was carefully chosen to reflect the developmental intention of these tutorials within a supportive relationship between learner and tutor, and a person-centred learning approach. This close relationship may also have contributed to the twelve original volunteers continuing to provide data throughout the two-year project. Lillis (2001, 9) refers to her role as tutor in using this data collection tool as the 'powerful participant' within this context. The gatekeeper role, as previously discussed, was of relevance and the feedforward tutorial aimed to minimise the 'power' dynamic through the careful use of open ended questioning to allow the researchers to assume the less powerful role of listener. In not using a traditional interview format for the research tool, the space was open for dialogue that as already discussed was not dissimilar to a normal tutorial that would be undertake with learners and one that continued to acknowledge the relationship between the learner and researcher. The data were collected in a format that allowed the learners to lead the discussion and only when necessary did the researcher asked questions. The dialogue flowed easily with this approach. Lillis (2001, 132) outlines the 'mediating potential' in these talking spaces between learners and tutors for the development of a pedagogy that supports academic writing, and the individual learner's control over meaning making which has the potential to benefit the research process and the learner. The mediation potential supports consultation where it can be the space for discussing the challenges of writing, the emotions that surround the processes and strategies to support text production. A key purpose of using this one-to-one talking space was to capture the richness of the participants experiences over time in each tutorial and across the two years beyond one-off conversations. The practicalities of undertaking this research required the acknowledgement of the additional complexities and commitments that these adult learners have included in their academic lives. The researchers were unable to hide completely from the power dynamic of the academy and therefore, as argued earlier, this relationship was openly acknowledged for increased transparency and to mitigate against misrepresentation. However, strategies were adopted to minimise the power dynamic between the researchers and the participants in a number of ways. For example, in not using a traditional interview format for the research tool, this opened the space for dialogue that was not dissimilar to a normal tutorial that would be undertaken with learners and one that continued to acknowledge the relationship between the learner and the researchers. We perceive that the relationships formed with the learners both in and outside of the tutorials as part of the normal business of being their teacher were mutually respectful and beneficial, although not without some challenges as the open space for talking afforded the opportunity for some frank and transparent discussion. Primarily these challenges centred on the strong emotional responses that

the learners had at times where they cried or were distressed during the tutorials. These emotional responses were mostly triggered by a low grade or low self-belief in their academic work much. Following these instances, we were aware of the vulnerability that participants felt which required careful and sensitive responses; this was particularly relevant in our dual roles as practitioner researchers. Equally, learners shared some deeply personal experiences from their histories that had shaped their self-belief as learners. The talking space of the tutorials allowed for these to emerge and these confidences were as a testament to the learners' trust in our roles as researcher and as their teacher. Indeed we argue that the value of being the learners' teacher privileged us, as researchers, with 'insider's view'. As such, this research does not purport to generalise the findings beyond the context within which it is located. Conclusions arising from this study stand as a window into the phenomena at that particular time. We argue that the authenticity of the data is visible through the acknowledgement of the interrelations between the participants and the teacher researchers. The tutorial data were transcribed and analysed to draw out key individual themes initially and then cross sectionally from all 12 participants. The analysis of the data sought to uncover the emotional struggles that the learners encountered in relation to interconnected, often competing, identities when undertaking academic assessments for their FdA using an emic approach to extract the key themes from the data (Fetterman 2012). These struggles were identified in the transcripts from the language used by the participants. For example, Philippa shared that she 'nearly did cry' when attempting to write an assignment, and Lucy used the word 'struggled' when articulating how she felt in trying to write academically. Words and phrases associated with this sense of academic struggle became the codes used to analyse each participant's data using a more etic approach across all the learners' experiences (Fetterman 2012). This included the use of indicator metaphor such as Lucy's description of her first attempts at academic writing being her 'first bump' i.e. knock to her confidence. The learners were asked, once all four transcripts were collected, to review the data and approve their authenticity. It became increasingly important for the participants to validate the transcripts and they were offered the opportunity to add anything or to remove any of the data as they saw fit. None of the participants chose to amend the transcripts.

Discussion of findings

The personal histories of participants, both in the workplace and formal education, individual dispositions, aspirations and sense of self, family commitments and all other possible influencing factors were evident within the data. The tutorials formed an essential sharing research tool for these aspects of the participants' lives where life histories shaped their personal, professional, academic and writing identities. The close examination of the struggles related to producing academic assignments that each participant had shared during the tutorials enabled scrutiny of the shift change, or emergence followed by transformational learning to have taken place where this had occurred. These domains are tethered to distinct identities although are acknowledged as dynamically shifting and intersected. The following four vignettes from the data are used to exemplify and discuss how personal, professional and academic identities interplay and impacted on their perceptions of themselves as academic writers and members of the academy. The first two vignettes (Zoe and Louise) highlight areas of challenge that learners described in the tutorials related to reflecting on and applying academic, theoretical knowledge with their practice in written assignments:

Zoe and Louise: connections between theory and practice and authorial voice

Zoe found it difficult to make the necessary links between theoretical frameworks explored as part of their studies with practice evidence within assignments and her academic authorial voice. This is a characteristic of FdAs as identified by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2015, 4)

where 'the learning in one environment is applied to the other' in a symbiotic way. The term symbiotic is used here to reflect the interconnected, mutually advantageous relationship between these two sites of learning. Zoe discussed in tutorial two the relationship between theory and practice when undertaking her academic writing and where she engaged deeply with the content of the assignment. She talked about the writing being easier when she wrote from her practice experiences: And obviously you can relate it so much because you do it every day, that you can say, "I think this has worked for this reason and this hasn't worked . . . and you have lived it so it is easier . . . you know, to write about it, if it is an experience (Transcript 2, Zoe). Lavelle and Guarino (2003, 297) outline that learners using a deep-level approach to writing are focussed on what is 'signified by the text, or the implications and intentions'. Zoe's use of the word 'lived' is significant in terms of ownership and authorship of the writing. She talked about feeling passionate about her writing and what it said about the children and her work setting. The implications and intentions that Lavelle and Guarino (ibid.) refer to for Zoe were clear in the close inter-relationship between her studies and her role with children, within her expression of a desire to explain and justify her perceived practices with children. For Zoe, a tension and struggle emerged and was evident in her authorial voice within academic writing. She spoke about wanting to show and include 'empathy' in her writing (Zoe). When asked what she meant by this term she commented: When I write, if I write the essay and I feel like I have just been a bit, a cold word, but, sort of, you know, prescriptive, so like, that's gonna go there, that's gonna go there and then that is gonna link to that and that's like that, I feel like I'm not, it sounds really silly, not doing it justice because I feel like it should have that, you know, your opinion put into it and I think if you don't look at it from your point of view then you can't have empathy for the situation, or for like . . . because your writing about your experiences as well aren't you so you obviously have feelings in that moment, that is why you have acted the way you have acted, so I feel like I want to learn how to write that without writing it too not academically. Does that make sense?' (Transcript 2, Zoe). She appeared to equate a prescriptive academic writing style to not conveying the issue in her assignments fully, or doing her practice justice. Her need for ownership and a sense of her own opinion and voice in the writing was clear and was at odds with the perceived formality and objectivity of an academic writing voice and vocabulary (particularly in the use of practice jargon with local legitimacy but no universal meaning). The need for empathy indicated that Zoe emotionally invested in her writing where she linked experiences with feelings. Zoe saw her writing as a way of confirming what she knew and was evidence of her thinking as a cognitive map (Alamargot and Fayol 2009) and authorial ownership. Zoe's perception that academic writing was objective and 'cold' at the end of the first year appeared to trouble her, whereas she wanted to learn to write in a way that was 'not too' academic in order to retain the authenticity of her work. For Zoe, the notion of 'authenticity' represented capacity to describe her feelings about a child, a practice example or interaction that was interwoven into her professional identity. The need to explain alternative viewpoints from the literature made Zoe feel more distanced, or 'cold'. The orientation to deep academic writing, evident in her levels of personal investment to make meaning, indicated learning. This personal investment is also closely aligned with the sense of purpose for undertaking the degree; a desire to improve her practice which could be seen as independent from the academy and academic writing. For Louise, like Zoe, objectivity about her practice within her academic work was also challenging. In examining Louise's assignment feedback during tutorial 2, commentary from the marker focused on her academic writing style being too 'chatty', that her use of quotes was not explored sufficiently and that she made bold statements that were unsubstantiated. Louise expressed her frustration at not getting it right despite her endeavours: 'I mean I- I um, cos I- I am too opinionated in my work, and I talk about- cos I love talking about my practice, and I love talking about my interactions with parents and things like that, but I perhaps don't take it, cos I know last time we talked about a critical point that I'd made, and I- I thought I'd

made some in my work but I obviously hadn't, but . . . I've been trying to make that, so if I've written something that's like sort of about a positive point, I'll make sure I put 'however . . . ' and then say how it's negative, and then I'll quote it, try and get that critical point in . . . ' (Transcript 2, Louise). Louise's writing voice was, at this point, concerned with exploring her own views on the issues she explored in assessments, located around her practice. It became evident that Louise knew that she needed to include other viewpoints in her writing that created a discussion and argument; something she perceived she had done. However, the marker's commentary suggested the overriding voice expressed Louise's opinions on the subject. Her sense of herself and discovering her own views gained prominence in her writing. Here Louise illustrated reflections on her practice, although not critical selfscrutiny, and as such she was knowledge telling in her writing, rather than knowledge transforming. This may be attributed to Louise's stage in her career where she continued to learn the craft of working with children and her patterns of practice were not yet fully established on which to be critically reflective. The limited knowledge transforming identified in Louise's academic writing presented as a struggle, or frustration where her self-esteem, confidence and time were impacted. The third vignette explores how Philippa's self-esteem and confidence was affected by the process of the mechanics of writing. Vignette 3: Philippa: Translating thoughts into text Philippa shared the demands of the written task at the composition stage and of having writer's block. In the first tutorial, she commented on the distress she felt at not being able to translate her ideas into text and she talked about this being a recurring issue where she had been returning to taught session notes and tutors' PowerPoint presentations to try to trigger some starting points: 'I've found again, because I've just had this block I've been looking at, on my iPad, um, actually from the first one, um . . . the constructivist theories, just to sort of go through the PowerPoint's, just to see if anything, just to try and get something working, because I've just, yeah it's um . . . yeah I think at the weekend I did nearly cry, I just thought . . . just purely because I thought 'I know it's there but I just can't' . . . ' (Transcript 1, Philippa). Her frustration was tangible at being unable to organise her ideas into a written format. Philippa stated that she had been looking at academic sources to see how introductions were framed so that she could mirror these as a starting point. The researcher, as part of the 'talking space', shared with Philippa that this was an effective strategy of using the literature as a model for an academic writing style and as a way into beginning writing. This 'pause' (Epting et al. 2013, 242) that Philippa described generated a powerful emotional response as it becomes her struggle. She also stated some sense in the pleasure of these sorts of challenges as she acknowledged the power of them in forcing her to make sense of them: 'And, again, it sounds really silly, but I'm liking to have that experience, it probably sounds really silly because it's how you work through it sort of thing' (Transcript 1, Philippa). The capacity to remain motivated and work through resolving a challenge is a key aspect of transformational learning (Taylor and Jarecke 2009, 283) where learners are led to the edge and in doing so are most susceptible to new learning. The programme demands certain timeframes for work to complete assignments at a particular level of competency which may be perceived as setting the 'edge'. Philippa showed two key elements in transformational learning in fortitude and 'agency' (Archer 2003). She demonstrated fortitude and motivation to continue to seek out strategies to support her writing, and also agency where she felt emotionally rewarded from managing the challenge that she faced where these were mutually reinforcing. The fourth vignette (Lucy) highlights a significant aspect of academic and writing identity challenge that learners described in the tutorials as being the receipt of grades for their written assignments:

Lucy: academic gatekeeping

Lucy and other learners all had critical incidents on the programme where their confidence was shaken by a low, or perceived low, grade. For example, Lucy received 54% for an essay in the second

module of the first year; it was the lowest grade in her friendship group on the programme. Although a secure pass (40% or better), she was distressed at the time of receiving her work back and she explained her perception of this as a low grade. The perceived low grade appeared to have impacted on Lucy's confidence although during the first tutorial, a few weeks later, she was more positive about her studies and talked about enjoying the programme. She reflected on the challenges she had experienced in the first semester: Well I think the first bump was in the first term when um, I'd, I didn't think I could actually do any writing and I struggled, cos I've not done it for so long, but I got there eventually, and then obviously I passed the second assignment, but I'm a little bit worried about the score on that, that brought me down a bit, but, doing the last essay and the report boosted my confidence a bit more I think (Transcript 1, Lucy). When discussed, in tutorial 1, why Lucy had found the first few modules challenging, she outlined that she thought it was because it had been so long since she had been in 'education' and completed any formal assignments. This occurred again in the last module of the second year where Lucy received a grade of 45% and she commented in the final tutorial how she managed her feelings for this grade: So I knew what I did wrong, I knew how I could show that I did know what I was talking about . . . but I just got on with it I think, I thought: 'I can't sulk when I have a loan', I mean I suppose we all do- it can't just be me, but I can't keep sulking, I need to get on (Transcript 4, Lucy). Prior to meeting for the final tutorial, the researchers had been made aware by the module tutor that Lucy had been upset and emailed her to reassure her that the assignment was only worth 20% of the module average. Lucy responded via email and referred back to how she had felt in year one and acknowledged that she could manage this emotion to try hard to achieve a better grade in the second assessment component of the module. Lucy's determination to do well in this was realised and she secured her highest grade for a written assessment. The struggle that Lucy encountered in managing her confidence and emotions regarding the low grade she received, on both occasions, supported her self-efficacy and agency overall. As Lavelle (2009, 415) states 'selfefficacy changes as a result of learning, experiences, and feedback'. The higher grade also demonstrates increased evidence of analysis, evaluation and synthesis within the academic writing and therefore cognition, which indicates transformational learning.

Conclusion

It is evident from the data collected that the experience of studying a FdA programme has provided a catalyst for reflection and transformative learning with academic writing as a key site of struggle. The highs and lows identified by the participants in terms of their academic journeys also show the process of learning as far from linear, with work-based students often seeing themselves in a liminal state between practice and the academy. This liminal place, we suggest, is not only a normal reaction to engaging with the academy – from a practice background – but an essential part of a transformative learning process. The learners saw academic writing as both a barrier to engagement with the academy and a marker of their progress. The struggle the learners reported in adjusting to the conventions of academic writing were a key challenge; connecting practice and 10 S. MASON AND C. ATKIN theory, an objective authorial academic voice, and the receiving of assignment grades. The impact of assessed academic writing on the learners' academic identity was evident in the participant narratives and has been captured in their vignettes. A loss of confidence and motivation, frustration and self esteem were prevalent across the learners during the period of struggle. Based on the findings of this research study, we advocate the normalisation and acknowledgement of the emotional struggles that adult learners experience in undertaking academic programmes such as a work-based FdA. This will require greater transparency from universities that represents formal learning differently from the outset to manage learners' expectations of what lies ahead. The focus should be on the purpose and value of the learning which is imperative to adult learning. This may

be captured as individual purpose, programme and institutional purposes in order for a shared understanding that learning is indeed difficult and complex, and is highly emotive. For many learner's fear, frustration, doubt and anxiety surround academic writing as identified in this study. In this way, we advocate the importance for learners to use the struggle purposefully in an agentic way as a catalyst for change. Learners need to be supported in accepting and expecting their struggles as part of the process of learning. The academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2001; Ganobcsik-Williams 2010) identifies the need for the university to act as an active agent in using new technologies and new forms of writing which can re-position the learner away from being viewed as a deficit model. For example, in the increased use of first-person voice in undergraduate and post-graduate work in the social sciences which is a relatively small, although significant shifting of power and voice to the learner. Where writing is viewed at a level of epistemology and identity it allows for a wider examination of pedagogy that extends beyond the cognitive domain to the emotional and social in order to manage the struggles that learners have. At an epistemological level, greater transparency is needed where learners' struggles are acknowledged and the emotions that surround writing are more visible; that the process of writing as messy, iterative and highly individualised is not hidden. This is not intended to be a panacea for all learners; however, it can help to manage the struggles that learners have and to support their self-belief, self-efficacy and ultimately their agency. Learners' emotions, we argue, should be welcomed and nurtured as they frequently precede the business and purpose of an FdA; that of learning.

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