

ESL: Power and Voice

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A Project in Context

In July of 2008 Melbourne based writer and lawyer, Alice Pung, came to speak at the school where I teach; an inner city independent girls' school. She told the cohort of teachers at the presentation that 'as an Asian woman you don't feel you have much of a voice'. A month later in an opinion piece to *The Age*, Pung fervently defended international students against criticism of their supposed inability to integrate into mainstream tertiary culture and into wider Australian society: '(t)here is...the pointed accusation that international students do not "assimilate", but this is not always a choice they are able to make' (2008: 21).

I was teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to eighteen Year 11 and Year 12 international students; all young women from Asia who, according to Pung, would feel they don't have much of a 'voice'. My students were largely separated from families, culture and language. One or two had joined school orchestras, played tennis or badminton, mixing with the mainstream, but mostly they were on the edges of common rooms and classrooms; largely silent, except in the contact of each other. In my ESL classes, although they were still reticent to speak, when they did, their comments were always considered and instructive. And in writing, they were full of original thinking and insightful reflection; rich in 'voice'. It was my belief that through the practice of writing, the students' 'voices' could be nurtured. I believed that we might be able to harness the writing process so that the students might identify and address some of the actual and potential forces of exclusion that keep them quiet and potentially 'voiceless'; unheard and unseen by the majority. If so, they might be assisted in their capacity for critical action; and in their 'having 'voice"' in the new culture.

It is the responsibility of teachers to look beyond 'assimilation' 'that all immigrants would be incorporated smoothly within the dominant national culture, leaving their original cultures happily behind' (Ang 2001: 11), and do more to facilitate the valuing of the voices of international students. We need to do more than admire 'their stoicism' and be more attentive to 'their silences between words' (Pung 2008: 21). Gunderson argues '(w)e can begin by valuing (international) students' backgrounds and by trying to incorporate their voices into a cultural mosaic rather than watching them disappear as they dissolve into a cultural slurry' (2000: 705).

This research paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Freebody 2003) (Fairclough 1992; 1995; 2003); (Gee 2004; 2005) to explore the experience via writing of seven Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) English as a Second (ESL) students during their coursework for Area of Study 2: Creating and Presenting: context study 'Encountering Conflict'; a recently

introduced curriculum from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) (VCAA 2006). The paper attempts to achieve two primary aims:

- 1) To identify and explore the networks of power evident in a student's cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), and that are 'sustained and brought into existence by writing practices' (Kamler 2001: 109); and
- 2) To explore whether writing creatively, and using texts to connect to personal experience through writing, can lead to the emergence of 'voice' (Giroux 1987).

Networks of power, identity formation and writing

The liberation of self via writing is a vital step in the ESL student's ability to participate in the target culture. According to Giroux, naming the personal experience through writing, including identifying the specific powers of exclusion, 'is part of what it means to "read" the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up the larger society' (cited in Friere & Macedo 1987: 7). He comments, 'human beings...are the starting point for analysing not only how they actively construct their own experiences within ongoing relations of power, but also how the social construction of such experiences provides them with the opportunity to give meaning and expression to their own needs and voices as part of a project of self and social empowerment' (1987: 7).

An individual's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) or 'investment'- the language learner 'having a complex social history and multiple desires' which inevitably causes the subject to be 'both subject of and subject to relations of power within a particular site, community, and society' (Peirce 1995: 15) - is considered to be the fundamental determining factor of the language learner gaining success in the new language. Because an individual exists amidst the relations of power that are determined by their society, history, culture and linguistics it is argued in poststructuralist scholarship that power relations are implicated in second language learning (Giroux 1987); (Peirce 1995).

All of the seven students involved in this study are Asian students of Confucian tradition: four are from mainland China; one is from Hong Kong and two are Chinese born, permanent residents of Australia. Inevitably, their cultural capital generates tension within the academic structures surrounding the classroom: curriculum and pedagogy; and in the ongoing processes of identity formation in the new culture. In *Communicating Effectively With the Chinese*, Gao and Ting – Toomey comment extensively on the cultural tendencies and communication styles of 'the Chinese' including the position of extended family and community outside of 'the self' taking precedence over the individual identity; and emphasizing that 'Chinese communication is not primarily utilized to affirm self – identity or to achieve individual goals but to preserve harmonious relations with family, others and the

surrounding environment' (1998: 6). Another widely observed cultural tendency among Chinese is that of conflict avoidance (Kwok et al 2002); (Bond 1991 cited in Gao & Ting – Toomey); (Gao & Ting – Toomey 1998: 61); (Tsui et al. 1996: 145); (Farrell 1996; 1997). According to Bond, 'any direct confrontation or initiation of any type of dispute is considered an invitation to luan ("chaos") for Chinese' (cited in Gao & Ting – Toomey 1998: 61). In her analysis of *Reports of Examiners* (1996) Farrell observed conflict avoidance among Chinese students. While the markers 'expect the candidates to adopt a combative stance (this is what they believe is implied in the term 'discuss')', candidates from Chinese influenced cultures 'may write from the position that the best scholars imply their argument rather than state it explicitly (to do so is to insult the reader) and 'adopt a respectful stance towards recognized authorities (and their examiners)' (1996: 9).

It is also widely acknowledged that when ESL students write in the target language, it can be a way of overcoming these powers of exclusion existent in the social and academic structures in which the students find themselves (Giroux 1987); (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990); (Lam 2000); (Friere & Macedo 1987); (Brodkey 1987). Whereas Bourdieu and Passeron argue, 'it is possible to transcend the boundaries of social, cultural and linguistic origin: 'the direct relationship between social origin and linguistic competence can be weakened; the structure of the population is constantly changing' (1990: 81 – 82), Giroux suggests that writing is the means to do so: students will become more able to actively engage in 'struggles around both relations of meaning and relations of power', becoming equipped with the necessary skills to 'locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as agents in the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life and freedom' (Giroux 1987: 11).

Creative or aesthetic writing, in particular, can go much further in aiding emotional developments, identity formation and 'voice' emergence than more purely academic or intellectual writing. Misson and Morgan suggest that '(b)ecause of its re-creative representational aspects, drawing together the emotional and the intellectual, the reflective and the experiential, (creative writing) allows us to apprehend things that purely rational, intellectual writing cannot. We can write ourselves into understanding' (2006: 128).

'Through my writing I found myself again after a long time of being lost. I learned who I was in the past, who I was then, and who I wanted to be in the future. There I finally found freedom in writing. I flew to the sky with my pencil and notebook.' (Ngo 1994 cited in Peirce 1995: 27)

Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe's reflections, cited in Carter and Long: "Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?' His response: 'Certainly yes.' If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary or desirable for him to be able to do so...He

should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his particular experience...It will have to be a new English, still in full communion with his ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings' (1991: 168).

Achebe's comment is evidence of the second language learner moving between two cultures, shaping a personal "voice" and developing the new cultural identity essential for participation in the target culture.

Because of its emphasis on 'writing', in Area of Study 2 there is more opportunity for ESL students to take some important risks in their approach to writing tasks. There is also opportunity to represent the ESL students' language and writing structures in writing in more creative structures that would usually be repressed in the language and culture of academic instruction. According to Philipson 1991 and Muhlschler 1992, '(i)t is not appropriate for teachers to force students to accept the norms of the target culture and abandon those of their first culture. This would be a form of linguistic imperialism' (cited in Liddicoat 1997: 20). In Area of Study 2, there is opportunity for both students and teachers to explore personal concepts of what is effective writing; 'own' the new curriculum demystifying the dominant expectations that they and the examiners have of it.

Voice

There is broad acknowledgement that writing is most effective when it contains elements of 'the personal' (Misson & Morgan 2006); (Gilbert 1986); (Ozmolins 1981). Gilbert argues that (written) 'voice' is most accessible in personal writing, arguing that 'underlying school writing orthodoxy is a clear assumption that personal texts are 'real texts because real communication is involved. The writer's voice speaks directly to the reader. The voice is heard so the text is no longer a lifeless string of words' (1989: 28). She adds, 'students are advised'...'to develop a "personal voice", and teachers are told to 'listen' to these voices' (1986: 80), which suggests that 'voice' is a learned practice.

'Voice' is a necessary element in the international student's integration to a new culture. For Giroux, voice 'is the discursive means to make themselves "heard" and to define themselves as active authors of their world (cited in Friere & Macedo 1987: 151). Giroux's definition encapsulates what I interpret Alice Pung's usage to be – having the capacity to act by overcoming linguistic, cultural and intellectual barriers. Giroux's definition is one of two ways 'voice' is defined throughout this research paper. The other is the more contested meaning of voice: written voice; when, as I define it, linguistic, emotional and intellectual richness is simultaneously present in a student's writing; not arrived at without aesthetic elements. Gilbert argues that 'voice' is present, 'when the reader catches a glimpse of the hidden speaker behind the text' (1989: 21). Gilbert comments, 'For there to be a recognisable style, there must be recognisable features which can be repeated. If, for instance, teachers want personal

voice in students' texts, there must be features of this effect which will be recognized when they occur. If they can be recognized they must be repeatable – they must be imitations of other effects' (1989: 165). Protherough acknowledges this when he suggests that 'the growth of the personal voice in writing seems dependent – however ironical it may sound- on a process of trying on other voices' (cited in Gilbert: 1989: 165). It is a paradox because at once it seems 'original' and simultaneously it is the demonstration of learned practice. I believe that effective written voice necessarily enhances a students' capacity to 'have voice'. With this enhanced ability to express ideas, and more practice experimenting with the performance of multiple identities on paper, ESL students will not only have, but also feel they have, the capacity for critical action; 'the discursive means to make themselves "heard" and to define themselves as active authors of their world' (Giroux cited in Friere & Macedo 1987: 151).

The Research Project: In the Classroom

VCE ESL Area of Study 2 (introduced 2007) is a context study of one of four contexts: 'Encountering Conflict'; 'Whose Reality'; 'Identity and Belonging' and 'The Imaginative Landscape' in which at least one film or print text should be seen as a springboard into a general and deeper exploration of the ideas and arguments underpinning the 'context'. According to Bob Hillman, Senior English teacher at Trinity Grammar School 'It is crucial that student writing is sophisticated in both the control of language in the selected approach to writing and in the ideas that are being presented' (2009: 2) But primarily, as a replacement for 'Craft of Writing', the 'context' study is '(m)ost importantly...' 'about writing' (Hillman 2009).

I chose 'Encountering Conflict' and was using the prescribed Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Based on my understanding of the 'new' curriculum, that the study of conflict should go beyond the text, 'drawing on ideas suggested by their selected Context' (VCAA 2006: 32), and from my understanding that writing is most effective when it contains elements of 'the personal' (Misson & Morgan 2006); (Gilbert 1986); (Ozmolins 1981), I encouraged my students to apply what they learned from their reading to the vantage point of their own immediate lived experience and the wider world outside the text; to make links from *The Crucible* to their own histories and cultures. Pung's comment about 'Asian women' and 'voice' had given me a first link: Arthur Miller's allegorical play based on Salem's 1692 witch hunts is of course an event in which adolescent females demonstrate an immensely powerful voice. What would my 'Asian' students, for whom 'there is a commonly held cultural belief that the mouth (i.e., spoken words) is at the root of many misfortunes and calamities in interpersonal interactions' (Gao & Ting – Toomey 1998: 44), think of the 'crying out' of the girls in Miller's play?

Because of the enhanced focus on 'writing', I deduced that in addition to the necessary exploration of ideas in an informed and sophisticated manner, examiners of a 2008 ESL examination would be looking for stylistic elements of writers: flair; a natural ease in the

language; a clear, uncontrived 'voice'. I therefore intended to explore creative writing structures with my students as a means to help them find their 'voices' on paper.

The overall challenge was enormous: write an expository response hinging around a literary text; comment on issues of conflict within that text; and at the same time employ aesthetic elements in writing so that written 'voice' is present.

I collected all student writing completed as tasks for assessment as part of coursework for VCE ESL Unit 3 Area of Study 2: 'Context Study': 'Encountering Conflict', from February 2008 until August 2008 as primary data for analysis. I had 27 pieces of writing: 3 pieces per student, each between two and five pages, written at approximately month long intervals for the duration of the Area of Study.

The writing was comprised of the following tasks:

- Task 1: an account of a personal conflict experienced referred to as personal reflective writing;
- Task 2: a piece referred to as comparative writing in which students select an isolated section of *The Crucible* and link it in theme, content and / or message to one or two historical events;
- Task 3: a piece referred to as intertextual writing in which students respond to a given prompt, make reference to *The Crucible* and refer to an additional 4 – 5 texts;

All writing, once collected, was photocopied and given a pseudonym.

I aimed to explore how the content, structural and lexical choices of the students' writing were revealing of their cultural capital, identity development and personal and cultural orientations towards conflict, including evidence of syntactical directness or indirectness in the student's discussion of conflict. I next looked at whether writing creatively, and whether using texts to connect to personal experience through writing, could lead to the emergence of 'voice' (Giroux 1987). I looked for the presence of student 'voice' via the usage of figurative attributions, dialogue and reoccurring imagery. By exploring the various explicit and implicit substantiations and explications made by the students I also hoped to be able to gain access into the degree of 'voice' the students 'had' in the target culture; i.e. whether or not they were able to perform assertive identities, not only while writing in the classroom, but also beyond.

Results

The personal writing of the students reveals them as highly alert to the dominant power networks impacting upon them. They write most consistently about academic and parental pressure and a duty to the nation. Correspondingly, the references the students make to their various social identities: a student completing a task for formal assessment; a daughter

attempting to meet parental expectations; a loyal citizen studying abroad mold and shift according to the different elements of the students' 'self' being performed across a range of social environments. The cultural tendency to avoid conflict, while is evident in the content and structural choices of the students, and was something specifically discussed in the classroom, is not something they write about directly.

There is enormous and unrelenting pressure on the seven students to succeed academically in the Australian schooling system. Although many of them originate from wealthy families, others' parents endure considerable financial sacrifice to send their daughters to Australia. If the students fail in the Australian academic system and are unable to secure well paid internationally transferable professional positions, or do not progress to the status of permanent resident, the result is not only the terrible loss of family public face, they will struggle with their unyielding future responsibility to be the sole financial carer for both parents, both sets of grandparents and sometimes great grand parents. This intense familial duty encourages the students to seek tertiary courses in secure professional domains requiring high 'Enter' scores for VCE. Many of the parents and guardians of the international students believe that their daughters can achieve better results in VCE simply by working harder and this usually equates to longer periods of study and revision. It is not surprising then that in the personal writing every student refers in some degree to the complex structures involving schooling and study, and the external pressure from parents, teachers and peers to perform.

“The good scholar”

Sheila:

‘Starting from kindergarten, I had English and Chinese dictation every week in Hong Kong. Ten people that getting the highest score can go to the toy corner and have fun. It was my target that getting all spelling correctly and be the first person to go to the toy corner. I used to study vocabularies at home while most of the kids playing at the park.’

Even though Sheila describes herself as being more competitive than her peers, her comments about academic success in the kindergarten equating to personal freedoms and the possibility of pleasure, hint at interesting cultural sentiments surrounding childhood in Hong Kong where there is little emphasis on imaginative or creative play, and the desires of the child are submerged in the cultural expectations of the surrounding academic institutions. In China and Hong Kong a child is a product of the parents; loyal citizens of the nation, and the child should be shaped from a very early age to also comply with the expectations of that nation.

Cathie's piece is a vivid example of a student attempting to negotiate academic requirements and manage the external pressures of a mother.

'The moment when I got my biology exam back was like going from heaven down to the hell. I told myself to never let my mom know the terrible results on the paper. I tried to figure out a way to change the marks without leaving any evidence, but the disappointment of mom's unclear expression just kept appearing.' God can you please help me'? I begged desperately. I felt that this A4 paper would definitely ruin my mom's astronomical expectations of me.'

This piece is a rewrite because two pages of Cathie's writing had been 'lost' by a supervising teacher. Cathie had cried and I had arranged for her to have another go, sitting supervised at the large oval table in the 'Boardroom' opposite the Principal's office. When I first looked at it I marked it for craft as a writer. I now look at it and see a student in turmoil whose '*change the marks*', '*never let my mom know the terrible results*', reveals a student I could have perhaps helped a little more.

'I have found that I can not be rid of living with their expectations. I enthusiastically want to receive their compliments and to help them feel to the Leung family. It has already formed an essential duty to lead my life moving forward, however I found that was hard for me to keeping my own life balanced. I found myself torn in between what I want for my life and pleasing them. For example, like other teenagers I enjoyed my time hanging out with friends, and I also want to put more time into my interests, such as sports and music. But in the real life if I want to pleasing my parents with a good score like they anticipate, I have to give up all my leisure time on studying and face the possibility of disappointing myself instead. I do still feel thankful for they are there for me, because I strongly believe that my parents are my best supporters in my life, and I want to be their filial daughter as the Chinese culture suggested to 'xiao shu'n your parents, which means you have to carry filial piety with gratefully for your parents for what they have done for you.'

Cathie's direct reference to the traditional Confucian ideal of 'filial piety' she identifies in Mandarin, '*xiao shun*', captures her 'self' agonizingly suspended between the identities of the integrated international student who plays tennis and badminton and the dutiful Chinese daughter. Not only does she wish to please a parent, which is common among adolescents, but she shows herself bound by traditional Chinese ideology regarding parents and children. Cathie's awareness of this cultural duty is significant, '*This constant conscientiousness has already formed an essential duty to my life*', and she becomes '*torn*' under the pressure. In painting her confusion in managing her conflicting roles: sportsperson; musician; student; and daughter, Cathie's writing presents a fragmented self struggling to interpret who she is.

“The collective before ‘the self’”

Mandy explores a teacher's lesson in Primary School about the importance of the collective over the individual. In doing so she presents a version of 'self' rigidly propped and influenced by the mechanics of surrounding academic structures and identifies the power structures generated by a cultural ideology that recognizes the collective before the individual.

‘Our Chinese teacher told us that we should study Lei Feng to abandon our own interests when we face a choice between collective and ourselves.’ ...‘In that period, I think what teacher said or what text book said is the absolute truth. We preferred to follow our teachers’ demands in order to get praise.’

For her at this time there is no middle ground or suggestion of compromise. Her use of the inclusive, ‘our’, ‘we’, ‘us’ captures the sense of a collective classroom cohort who must obey the instructions of teachers. Nevertheless her, ‘*In that period, I think what teacher said or what text book said is the absolute truth*’, implies she is no longer so fixed. Of course, it is worth noting that she was writing in a cultural context that takes a more ambivalent view of authority that does her home culture.

The image of the dominant collective is enhanced by the teacher's direct reference to a traditional cultural sentiment, and quoted by Mandy, ‘*when my tutor received these wrapped presents she was so happy that she praised me in class. Until now, I can remember what she said. ‘Water drops compose the sea as a person should be with the collective. Only construct the collective well, people who in the community will feel happy.’*

In her quote, Mandy's teacher is operating under a larger power network that stipulates appropriate codes for social behavior. Ancient Confucian philosophy and Communist ideals amalgamate into a state rhetoric delivered in the form of a metaphor where the individual and individual concerns are submerged within a greater duty and common goal. The teacher gives Mandy a moral lesson, similar to ancient Confucian teachings about carrying out appropriate duty to one's fellow citizens.

Mandy is caught between the teacher's expectations and her parents worry for their daughter out late after dark. She becomes ‘*frustrated*’ by the realization that her actions, although receiving praise at school, generate conflict in the home. Outwardly she appears passive, but inside she is steaming, ‘*Didn't they obey what teachers said?*’ Her construction of the question implies disbelief and anger, there is an echo of parental instruction here: ‘*obey your teachers*’, and although Mandy inwardly challenges her parents with this direct question,

ultimately she appears to be non combative. In her move between roles of dutiful student, dutiful citizen and dutiful daughter, Mandy's 'self' is submerged. Presumably, Mandy is also shaping her experience here as 'narrative'. It seems to be the familiar neo- Confucian narrative of conflicting obligations: good scholar versus dutiful daughter, and in this light again represents the application of effectively learned narrative construction; effective storytelling skills acquired via structures of education.

"The dutiful citizen"

While Ying's references to larger power structures are the same as they are for many of the others: school; national ideology; propaganda; the peer group; expectations of parents and teachers, her awareness of the power structures impacting on her is heightened; she is adeptly able to move between a kind of public face and private face.

"Look at the blue sky in that picture." My father was pointing at the newspaper, there was a photo of Tian An Men Square. "Beijing is now industrializing, as well as the air there. It means the whole city is grey, and coated with dust. Blue? That's the illusion which painted by the publishers. Don't believe it, my girl!"

It was not just the blue, blue sky in the picture. The news on 7.30 every evening, my text book and all the meetings on National Day, my father says they're fake, they're all actors. He himself was a business man, he served the boss and the customers, says whatever they like to hear, writes whatever can be published, and make money.'

Ying's comments about her father playing the role of the dutiful citizen at work, but keeping something of him self removed and precious, show her able to peer through the state rhetoric. Ying's boldness at pointing out the layering of an individual's roles and hypocrisies of the machinery of national propaganda is breathtaking. Unlike Mandy who is genuinely keen to please her teachers, Ying understands that pleasing ones self and pleasing teachers are not necessarily in line. Ying's skills in metaphor allow her to imply rather than explicitly state her message which could stem from the cultural tendency to be 'han xu', which according to Yu and Gu, 'refers to a mode of communication (both verbal and non verbal) that is contained, reserved, implicit and indirect, and is considered a social rule in Chinese culture (cited in Gao & Ting Toomey 1998: 37). According to Young, 'The Chinese version of rhetoric nurtures a tacit and nuanced understanding and defers to the listener's ability to realize its full significance' (cited in Gao & Ting Toomey 1998: 38).

Ying: 'I was a top student. My writings always get full marks, pasted on the big board in my school, next to the teachings of Chairman Mao. But I'd never go there, if I had to I'd turn my face, not facing those warm, hot words I've written, they're next to

Chairman Mao. If my father had seen them, he'd say that they're fake, I am a fake person.'

But Ying is not an unalloyed rebel against the state; she reveals she too is heavily influenced by the collective goal to build a strong nation in China. When her father informs her he has left his well paid job to pursue writing, she admits to feeling adrift.

"Papa, are you not at work today"?

"No. I'll never be there anymore."

Destructing, my cement buildings were distracting. I could feel the glass breaking.

"But there's something, not sufficient for our country. Buildings can firm our land, but not the state. Papa is responsible to firm the state, you too. Everyone should contribute to our great country."

Here Ying displays her understanding of Confucian ethics: the good person has a virtuous role and carries it out. There is an uneasiness expressed in her urgent comments to her father. The inclusion of state rhetoric and propaganda in her rebuttal shows her caught between duties: to her father and her nation which is emotionally distressing for her, *'In my mind there was a ruin. Was that fake? Was my father an actor?'*

Post structuralist scholarship maintains, texts are fundamental to the construction of our identity' (Misson & Morgan 2006: ix). By writing about conflict, particularly in the personal mode, the students expose the networks of power that prevent them from unhindered integration into the target culture. By naming, organizing, defining and evaluating the influential power structures that construct the social reality of their personal conflict, the writing process contributes, also, to their construction of identity; an essential component for the ESL student's effective negotiation of the target culture. According to Giroux this naming of personal experience 'is part of what it means to "read" the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up the larger society' (cited in Friere & Macedo 1987: 7).

A cultural tendency to avoid conflict

In Australian academic conventions the ability to challenge an essay topic and argue logically a contention to a sound conclusion is desirable. Where in a piece of personal writing reluctance to challenge is interesting, in academic writing it could be detrimental. So for me, the teacher, implementing a curriculum, the incidences of conflict avoidance became a flag to my pedagogical choices and directions; to develop ability to challenge both the prompts given in topics and in their choices of content. In the students' choices of subject matter for the personal writing tasks i.e. the categorizations of conflict, and in the students' explanations of and reasoning for existing conflicts there is a high incidence of conflict avoidance. Most of the

students explore conflict in less confronting forms: the influence of school and academic pressure; the expectations of a parent, the position of 'the individual' in relation to 'the collective'; the importance of the peer group, removing the source of conflict from confronting interpersonal elements.

The explications and substantiations surrounding the managing of conflict are nearly always about the inevitability of conflict, its beneficial and enlightening elements and the importance of accepting it. There is a cohesive sentiment that managing conflict is a natural hurdle in life to be accepted and endured. Jiao expresses a kind of Marxist / Maoist dialectic that struggle is strength, that conflict has positive effects. She paints herself as impassive, suffering the inevitable cruelty of conflict like grief without being able to act apart from weeping and accepting, *'I realised that there are many things in life which I will have no control of. When they simply happen, I would weep and wipe off the tears on my face, then move on with new hope of the future.'* Embedded in this is a cultural understanding that the desires of an individual are submerged within life's cycle of experiencing pain that it is futile to battle. Individual grief is submerged in the rituals organized by the larger family group, within which comfort from others, order and the natural momentum of time moving by can assist in the management of conflict.

In the conclusions for both the personal reflective writing and the more academic writing on *The Crucible*, the students are reticent to end with strong opinions. After retelling a painful childhood experience that caused conflict with her parents Mandy regains control of her emotions and her writing and ends wistfully with commentary resembling a moral lesson; *'In a community, people always have struggle and battle which appears in their life. Whatever external or internal problems, people will have a develop of the attitudes and values about the world and themselves. It's maybe a kind of advantages of the conflicts happen on us.'* Even Cathie, who reveals her self to be a troubled teenager buckling under academic and parental stresses, moves from her expression of panic to tidily concluding that this conflict will inevitably make her stronger. Through her conclusion she becomes a student in control by demonstrating her awareness of the conventions of closing strategies: *'As I untangled this web with woven intensions I now face this problem with great confidence. Because the lessons that conflicts taught me not only bring a new perspective, also it teaches me a useful skill to cope with my future life. I might face more problems like this, but the greater confidence which built on before can now lead and guide me to a new direction.'*

Softening the conclusions reestablishes the students as competent and in control of their writing, and their lives, after being emotionally open. They can maintain their private and social faces while, at the same time demonstrating the learned conventions of discursive writing: thesis; antithesis; synthesis. In line with Farrell's discoveries surrounding Vietnamese students writing conclusions for academic essays: it is considered 'inappropriate to directly

express a point of view in the essay. It would be hubris, especially when the reader was a teacher or an examiner' (1997: 28), the girls are inclined to return to a synthesis of two opposing arguments. The typical conclusions of my seven students are examples of conflict avoidance or conflict suppression in the cultural artifact of an essay.

While the above analysis identifies some of the key power structures informing the students' cultural capital and contributing to their cultural orientations towards conflict and towards the writing practices, it 'is unwise', as Farrell argues to attribute features of (a student's) writing exclusively or unambiguously to culture' (1997: 28), or to cultural inclination such as conflict avoidance. It is also unwise to suppose that one's cultural orientations or previously learned approaches to writing in any way preclude a student from reassessing their writing style and structure. Indeed, my findings prove quite the contrary. In the planning and drafting processes the students were highly alert to any suggestions I offered and made significant adjustments to their approaches to and execution of writing. Increasingly, examples of boldness in syntax appeared through the use of more objective modality and more declamatory phrases such as Mandy's '*always*' in '*People who have power always have a prejudice of the people who have low status in the community, even if the powerless people are innocent*', or Sheila's '*We only have to reflect*' in '*We only have to reflect upon the damage caused by a group of hysterical adolescence girls in Salem Massachusetts 1692 to get some sense of the far reaching consequences words can cause*'. Here Sheila demonstrates employment of a sophisticated persuasive structure. Her use of the inclusive '*we*' and '*only*' establishes a highly authoritative tone indicating confident command of her content. This conclusion from Jiao is demonstrably stronger in syntax and more individually based than earlier examples: '*In truth, the verbal violence is more harmful than physical violence. The physical violence can be healed overtime, but verbal violence can extend to a long period of time. If physical violence is the attack to one's flesh, speech can hurt people right through because it attacks one's core soul*'. Her use of '*in truth*' is objective modality operating as a kind of declaration, and her use of it is a significant linguistic development for a student inclined to be indirect and operate in more passive structures.

Writing and the emergence of 'voice'

While in their descriptions the students are inclined to paint themselves more as passive victims rather than combative or assertive parties, there are examples in all students' writing of clear original voices and a sense of a strong identity being performed.

'Voice' is most brightly present when students incorporate aesthetic writing structures: metaphor; symbolism; dialogue, and use these to comment on their personal experiences of the past and present. In doing so, the students demonstrate enhanced aesthetic and intellectual control of their writing pointing to empowerment in the target language. Cathie's

choice of a spider's web is a suitable choice of metaphor to convey her state of inertia in the face of familial and academic pressure, *'As I untangled this web with woven intensions I now face this problem with great confidence'*. Similarly, Mandy's metaphor, *'At that moment, I was just like a boatman who lost his oars, but still have to stay in the boat which was lashed by two different waves'*, while simultaneously echoing traditional Confucian imagery and capturing the experience of confusion and helplessness, draws a passive self, unable to challenge either of the authority figures she writes about: teacher or parents.

Cathie's lexical attributions are highly physical, *'I found myself torn in between what I want for my life and pleasing them'*, *'my body being weighted down with anxiety'* and *'it make me feel burdened'*, capturing the intensity of the pressure she feels in the face of her mother's expectations. Jiao's description of the conflict experienced at losing a grandmother is wistful, and she is *'shocked'* at the abruptness of the death, feels *'left behind'* and even her *'heart was squeezed painfully'*, but the absence of anger doesn't remove her 'voice' from the piece. Even Lo Ping, whose stilted English impedes clarity at times, attributes effective lexical choices: *'melancholy'*, *'no smiled on everyone's face'*, *'anxious with my family'*, *'It's put me into upset'* to the conflict caused by the disruption to a meaningful shared family ritual. The anxiety and sadness she describes is perhaps enhanced via the writing experience in a classroom in Melbourne while the snow still falls in China and is further intensified by feelings of homesickness surrounding leaving home for another year of study in Australia.

This example from Ying, writing about 'Tankman' in Tiananmen Square, and referring to George Orwell's '1984', banned in China, stands out in that she is able to integrate elements of the aesthetic into the response suggesting her insights from the initial literary experience has been 'assimilated emotionally as well as intellectually' (Rosenblatt 1970: 275).

'In a state where is controlled by absolute power, like where being depicted in George Orwell's 1984, the citizens like Winston got their emotions manipulated and controlled by special agent. Winston's attempt of retaining freedom and privacy through keeping a real – thinking diary is jeered by himself as it "doesn't make any difference" In a totalitarian world where "freedom is the freedom to say two plus two equals four" Winston's consequence of resisting the absolute order is to be brainwashed. His misery only proves that being a tiny individual of the desired state, to live well is to learn that "Ignorance is Strength". In the real world, there are some real Winstons and their ending are also tragic. A picture from 1989's China has illustrated the relationship between a faithful individual and the power agent. The image of a young man, with the most ordinary white shirt on him and hanging two plastic bags with daily food, standing in front of a troop of tanks. There he combat the cold iron shells of the absolute power with his primitive enthusiasm of freedom, but the cruel reality would not allow this passion to challenge their power. The Tankman

was then 'pushed away' by some unknown watchers, and the street became clear of the tanks to forward.'

Ying's 'voice' is powerfully present behind the words of this brightly poetic, metaphorically rich, unclimbed response. Her awkward linguistic brilliance edges towards mistakes. Given the controversial choice of subject matter, the piece also suggests elements of trust and risk in the writing process; her admiration of this simply dressed man is breathtaking but her open comment via writing about him, and implicitly the Tiananmen massacres, both taboo in China, is surely a controversial action for a Chinese adolescent. Quite clearly the experience with literature, not only her set text, but her reading of 1984 beyond the classroom, enables Ying the powerful experience of national evaluation culminating in 'self' definition.

In addition to generating 'voice', the use of figurative language also demonstrates effective application of the learned conventions of aesthetic writing, and their intentions to meet my very clear instructions: "Go back to your draft and enrichen it with more original description". Given the importance of academic structures on the students, it is likely they gravitated towards replication of my models and instructions (I had interactional control and therefore substantial authority) as a way to ensure correct execution of the task, and in doing so show them selves to be active and willing participants in the academic structures that surround. Nevertheless, the demonstrated learned skill of effective aesthetic writing is an effective vehicle by which the students express their new cultural 'voice' by 'trying on other voices' (Protherough cited in Gilbert: 1989: 165); they 'have [found their] pencils' and are 'learning to fly' (Ngo cited in Pierce 1995: 27).

Summary of outcomes

When Alice Pung informed my teaching cohort that, 'as an Asian woman you don't feel you have much of a voice', I was encouraged to consider the young Asian women I teach who had made the brave decisions to come to study in Australia. I suspected that the kind of writing they might do in their VCE ESL Area of Study 2 'context' study: 'Encountering Conflict', might give them opportunities to find their 'voices' on paper and contribute to their 'having voice' in the new culture; 'the discursive means to make themselves "heard" and to define themselves as active authors of their world' (Giroux cited in Friere & Macedo 1987: 151).

Through naming and reevaluating their experiences in the target language, the students were required to navigate, to some extent, the potential powers of exclusion existent in the surrounding social and academic structures. I discovered that the most active discourses of power impacting on the seven students were those pivoting around education: examination stress; pressure from parents, teachers and the state; cultural expectations to be 'a good scholar', 'a dutiful daughter', 'a loyal citizen', and to put the values of the collective before individual desires. Furthermore, I discovered these networks of power contribute to a

student's performance of different identities indicating the often subtle negotiations of role and hierarchy and relational dynamics. I discovered that in the written structures of an academic essay the students demonstrated tendencies to avoid conflict, but that those tendencies could be altered with instruction to engage more effectively with Australian academic conventions.

As educators about to embark on a national curriculum we must remember that the aim of education is to encourage the development of creative adults with a sense of purpose and a 'voice', who can think critically. And, we should not be calling on our international students to "assimilate", but remembering that difference can be celebrated within equality.

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