

The teaching portfolio as a hybrid genre – Local and global influences

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The teaching portfolio is a relatively new genre in Finnish academic communities. It was first introduced in 1994, and has recently become a key instrument of evaluation in the filling of university posts. The genre originates in North America, and thus illustrates global flows of discourse, or more specifically, the mediation of institutional genres across cultural and linguistic borders. This paper focuses on the extent to which the take up of teaching portfolios in Finland has resulted in “genre hybridisation”. The analysis looks in particular at what genre models Finnish writers draw on, i.e. what intertextual influences are perceived as relevant and appropriate to the genre. The analysis is based on data collected at the University of Helsinki between 2003 and 2007: portfolio texts, interviews with writers and various types of normative materials (e.g. portfolio guidelines).

Keywords: genre, teaching portfolio, hybridity, localisation

1 Introduction

The teaching portfolio is an “import genre” introduced into Finnish universities in the 1990s. It was first developed in North America, and thus illustrates the globalisation of discourse practices in professional settings. In Finland, portfolios have all but replaced the traditional CV as the principal written genre used in staff recruitment at universities, especially in the filling of teaching posts (spoken recruitment genres include e.g. test lectures and interviews). Portfolios are different from CVs in that professional achievements are not described in the form of a list, but as a text. Moreover, the North American model introduces new content elements: besides accounts of qualifications and experience relevant to the job, applicants are supposed to describe their teaching philosophy, evaluate their teaching and outline plans for future development (see e.g. Seldin 1991). Thus, the normative portfolio involves a shift from a factually oriented genre to one including reflective and evaluative elements.

In this paper, I examine the extent to which the teaching portfolio illustrates generic hybridity, the mixing of different discursive resources within a genre. The study starts from the assumption that since the teaching portfolio is a new genre in Finnish academic communities, it is still relatively unstable; writers’ and readers’ genre expectations have not stabilised. Besides the official genre model (accessible for example through institutional portfolio guidelines), writers are likely to draw on salient local genres that they are familiar with and which are relevant to the practice of academic evaluation. Portfolio

texts can thus be expected to mix conventions of the imported genre model with local influences. As Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue:

not only do disembedded discursive practices [...] increasingly flow across linguistic and cultural boundaries, they are drawn into new articulations with each other and with local forms which vary from place to place and are shaped by and figure within local logics of practice. (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999: 84)

We can begin by asking whether the teaching portfolio is simply understood as an “extended CV” or whether other genre models also come into play. Are portfolios perceived as related to academic genres such as research articles or grant applications? Or in contrast, is the reflective requirement understood to mean that the text should read like a biography or diary? Is the job application letter a relevant genre model?

The overall aim of this mapping of intertextual influences is to trace the boundaries of appropriateness emerging in actual genre use: what conventions emerge as acceptable and relevant in Finnish academic communities? The analysis is based on data collected at the University of Helsinki between 2003 and 2007: 16 portfolios written as part of job applications, 12 writer interviews and various types of normative materials published by the university (e.g. portfolio guidelines). The informants applied for teaching positions in different faculties: biosciences, arts, social sciences and forestry. The portfolio texts are in Finnish and English; the interviews were conducted in Finnish. All translations are mine.

2 Globalisation and genres

The study is based on the assumption that many new institutional genres are imported rather than locally developed. This phenomenon can be observed in widely divergent settings, ranging from the mission statement hanging on the wall of a local coffee shop to reality shows on national television. Thus, examining the provenance of genre conventions is increasingly a question of analysing how globally available genre formats are appropriated into new linguistic and socio-cultural contexts. There have, however, been surprisingly few empirical studies of processes of localisation (notable exceptions are Clausen 2004; Pennycook 2007). This has allowed simplistic notions like “cultural imperialism” and “colonisation” to dominate public globalisation debates (see e.g. Thompson 1995; Tomlinson 1999 for discussions).

Finnish universities have experienced the effects of globalisation in concrete terms in the past decade – witness the Bologna Process, the rise of “audit culture” and tendencies towards the marketisation of higher education (Strathern 2000; Välimaa 2001; Ylijoki & Hakala 2006). These changes have involved the introduction of many new genres, often of Anglo-American origin (e.g. the quality manual and the self-assessment report). It is important to note, then, that the internationalisation of Finnish universities does not involve simply the spread of English as an academic lingua franca, but also the take up of Anglo-American genre formats. As Blommaert (2003: 608) argues: “What is globalised is not an abstract Lan-

guage, but specific speech forms, genres, styles and forms of literacy practice”.

The teaching portfolio is a good example of a globally mediated institutional genre. It was first used as a tool of academic evaluation in Canada, but has been mediated to Finland and various other countries around the world mainly through US models (Knapper & Wright 2001; Karjalainen 2003). However, as noted above, I am not assuming that the take up of portfolios is the simple adoption of a stable and discrete genre developed elsewhere. In contrast, we may expect that the genre is localised in particular ways.

One facet of the localisation process is which locally salient genres come to be understood as relevant neighbouring genres or genre models. Local genre repertoires are here understood as dynamic sets of resources rather than stable typologies; genres are constantly influenced by other genres within the same community or network of practices (see e.g. Devitt 2004: 55–58; Solin 2006). For example, a relatively stable element of academic genre repertoires, the research proposal, can be assumed to both influence and be influenced by a newcomer such as the teaching portfolio.

Globalisation as a theme draws attention to the notion that genres (as well as other discursive practices) are mediated, and thus emphasises the negotiated and intertextual character of genre conventions. In this analysis, the concept of interdiscursivity, put forward by Fairclough (1992) is particularly useful. The concept refers to the

way in which texts rely on different types of conventions in their build-up. Texts are assumed to be intertextual not only in the way they explicitly refer to concrete other texts, but also because writing and interpreting them relies on shared understandings of abstract genre models and conventions (for analyses of interdiscursivity/generic hybridity, see e.g. Östman & Simon-Vandenberg 2004; Kong 2006; Mäntynen & Shore 2006; Lähdesmäki 2007).

3 Genre models for teaching portfolios

Let us first look at institutional norms: what genres are suggested as relevant models in portfolio guidelines produced at the University of Helsinki. Such guidelines are key data for this study, since they appear to be the main source of genre knowledge for many writers. More than half of my interviewees had not had access to complete portfolio texts (e.g. portfolios written by colleagues) prior to writing their own portfolio. Even fewer had attended a portfolio course. Thus, the writers' first attempts at producing portfolios were mainly based on a close reading of whatever guidelines were relevant (mainly university and faculty guidelines).

As noted above, portfolios are supposed to contain accounts of relevant qualifications and experience, but also evaluative and reflective elements (such as *Teaching philosophy and ethics* and *Self-evaluation of one's teaching*, HU 2000). Indeed, the "academic portfolio" (the term used at the University of Helsinki for a teaching and re-

search portfolio) is construed as multifunctional by definition:

The academic portfolio may be used for self-evaluation, development, documentation and assessment carried out by others, for example, when filling teaching posts or specifying salary grades. The academic portfolio contains information about one's employment history, professional philosophy, work products, future plans, obtained feedback and self-evaluation. (HU 2003)

The guidelines refer explicitly to two genre models. These are the "scientific report" and the CV:

Academic portfolios resemble scientific reports, with the authors documenting their core professional skills and examining their academic work as a whole (research, teaching, administration and other duties). (HU 2000)

The traditional curriculum vitae or résumé can be regarded as a portfolio in condensed form. (HU 2000)

Interestingly, the guidelines do not refer to portfolios having a promotional function. For example, the job application letter is not construed as a relevant genre model. While portfolios are construed as multifunctional, the guidelines emphasise the more factual elements of the genre.

The interview data also provide some insights into the genre models that Finnish writers perceive as being relevant when producing a portfolio. In the following, I will focus on the way the teaching portfolio is related to three genres or "genre colonies" (Bhatia 2004): the CV, research genres (e.g. research articles and grant applica-

tions) and promotional genres (e.g. adverts and job application letters). Additional genres which are at least potentially relevant include mission statements, diaries and biographies. These cannot, however, be discussed here due to lack of space.

3.1 The CV

The CV emerges as a powerful genre model in my data. The genre is widely used as an instrument of evaluation both in Finland and around the world. Moreover, it was the main written genre used in academic recruitment in Finland before the introduction of the teaching portfolio. In fact, some of my informants, especially those in the sciences, argue that universities could manage staff recruitment equally well using just the CV. They argue that the CV is a useful model since a “fact-oriented approach” is necessary for an application to be successful:

I find it very difficult to see that anything but a fact-oriented approach could work in my field [forestry] if the portfolio is to have the desired effect (interview H10)

the application processes tend to be dry and academic, it's like let the facts speak for themselves, that's the tradition (interview H9)

Such an orientation is evident also in the portfolio texts. CVs are often attached as an appendix to portfolios. In a number of portfolios, some content elements are realised in the form of CV-type lists (e.g. teaching experience, research grants, publications). Both forms of reliance on the CV model are related to an assumption that what the evaluation panel wants is information about the appli-

cants' academic "output". One informant argued that it would be risky to leave out such information:

that's why I added all those appendices, I thought I can't leave that stuff out, I know they're going to count who's done what and say, right, that person's got fifteen papers published, that person's taught so and so many hours, they've got to be listed somewhere (interview H3)

However, writers are also concerned about whether the portfolio is just an extended CV or whether they should also try to include reflective elements, as the guidelines suggest. One interviewee complained that this did not appear to be clear to either portfolio trainers or those who had drawn up the guidelines:

you take the course and they tell you to reflect and you think okay fine, then you look at the guidelines and they list stuff like how many dissertations you've supervised and how many articles you've written, the list sounds just like a CV (interview H3)

In fact, there is some evidence in my data of applicants who have been successful even though their portfolios have contained only a minimal amount of reflective text and no self-evaluation. This illustrates the instability of the genre: despite explicit calls for reflection and self-evaluation in the university guidelines, a written-out CV can function successfully in recruitment processes.

3.2 Research genres

My informants are all experienced research writers; all have a doctorate and have published nationally and internationally. An orientation to a specialist audience is evident in the portfolio texts. Especially passages describing applicants' research history and plans for future research make use of discipline-specific terminology and occasionally read like research proposals. This is particularly true of portfolios in the sciences:

I postulate that the incomplete understanding of the physical and biological processes underlying the photosynthetic acclimation to varying environment prevents us from predicting reliably the effects of climatic change on photosynthesis and growth of trees. This an important issue [*sic*] if we want to predict the canopy level effects on growth and success of tree species in a changing climate. (portfolio H5; English original)

There is also evidence in the texts of an adherence to well-established conventions of research writing, such as the hedging of debatable claims (see e.g. Hyland 1998). Passages in which writers evaluate themselves as teachers or researchers provide interesting examples. Instead of making unmodalised claims of the type *I am a good researcher* or *My strengths as a teacher are X*, writers tend to frame their evaluations as opinions:

My strengths as a teacher are derived from the characteristics that make me (in my opinion) a good researcher: an analytical and critical mind, capability of linking specific issues to a bigger picture, clear expression, and an (almost) endless patience. (portfolio H10; English original)

I think that the main strengths of my teaching are thorough preparation of lectures and clear teaching materials. (portfolio H11; my translation)

Self-evaluations are also marked as originating in statements made by others (peers or students), illustrating the academic concern for close referencing of claims:

I consider myself a very good university teacher, which is supported by the comments in the official assessments of my teaching abilities by the Faculty of Agriculture of Forestry in 2004 and 2006 (see App. 5). (portfolio H22; English original)

I enjoy small group teaching the most since it allows for authentic interaction. However, according to student feedback I am also a good lecturer (see Appendix 4.2.). (portfolio H18; my translation)

Despite this orientation to conventions of research writing, most interviewees do not refer to genres such as research articles or grant applications as explicit models. A key distinction is that research genres are not perceived as promotional, while portfolios usually are. One writer claims that grant applications are different from portfolios since they do not require self-promotion:

when you write a grant application to the academy [Academy of Finland] [...] you don't need to boast, the main product is the research proposal and that's scientific writing (interview H7)

To summarise, while writers perceive portfolios as different from their research writing, they still seem to orient to research genres in an implicit way: the careful argumentation and hedging of strong claims in the self-

evaluations can be read as signalling deference towards the community they are aspiring to join. Academics are writing to fellow academics.

3.3 Promotional genres

In contrast to the official guidelines, most interviewees perceive portfolios to be promotional in function. One interviewee refers explicitly to the portfolio as an advert:

the portfolio is more like an advert [rather than a tool for self-development], it's about describing your strengths (interview H9)

However, the portfolio texts in my data contain few of the linguistic features established as typical of the genre of print advertising (see e.g. Myers 1994). For example, there are no instances of direct address to the reader: the writers do not use imperative forms (e.g. *Please consider inviting me to give a test lecture*) or ask questions (*Are you happy with your current teaching staff?*). Here we can identify implicit normative constraints at work: linguistic choices which might trigger direct associations to adverts are avoided.

Vocabulary choices are interesting exceptions: in a number of portfolios writers combine factual accounts of qualifications and experience with promotional elements, evident for example in positive evaluations of the experiences gained (on “genre mixing”, see e.g. Fairclough 2003; Solin 2006). For example, one portfolio describes the writer’s research fellowship at a UK laboratory as follows:

These two years have taught me many things. I have gained insights into [x] [...] I have learned new techniques [...] Importantly, I got to know how one of the world's leading laboratories in cell biology works and how important it is to have collegial support and criticism to your research ideas and results. [...] I have obtained interesting research results as well [...] (HU22; English original)

Here, instead of a mere description of facts (such as the what, where and who with), the writer emphasises the learning (*insights*) derived from the research period: she construes the laboratory as prestigious (*one of the world's leading laboratories*), what she learned as *new and important* and her results as *interesting*.

For most informants, self-promotion seems problematic. A key issue is that promotion is equated with lack of sincerity. Writers feel that they need to keep quiet about any difficult experiences or negative feedback and emphasise an optimistic “can do” spirit:

it's all about tactics, what's worth saying and what's not worth saying, that's probably what bothers me most about it [the portfolio] [...] I'm enthusiastic and always ready to learn new things and have lots of potential, I'm not like that at all (interview H7)

Another issue is that self-praise is assumed to be bad form in academic settings, which is traditionally marked by deference to peers and an assumption that new knowledge is necessarily collectively produced. A number of interviewees voice concerns about appearing conceited if they “boast” about their achievements:

I suspect it [positive self-evaluation] might have been something that the evaluation panel sniggered at a bit, look at all this boasting (interview H15)

is this too promotional, will readers think I'm really conceited? (interview H8)

Most writers perceive promotion as unavoidable, but are also troubled about appearing insincere or arrogant in the eyes of their readers. Portfolio writing thus emerges as a highly demanding writing task: writers need to be able to promote their achievements and distinguish themselves, while also putting forward an image of themselves as reflective and analytic academics, with attendant requirements of modesty and detachment.

4 Uncertainty and ambivalence

As the above discussion has illustrated, my interviewees did not talk about portfolio writing as a smooth process of genre learning. In fact, many writers appeared to be at a loss about relevant conventions even after they had written their portfolio. Many interviewees were also ambivalent about the value and status of portfolios in their communities.¹

One informant referred to her uncertainties about the genre several times during our discussion:

you get the feeling that what you're writing might be completely ridiculous, I mean does it make any sense, is it what it's supposed to be (interview H20)

¹ Disputes over teaching portfolios have also been reported in previous research as well as in observations from the field (see Tenhula 1999; Salminen, Salmela, & Meuronen 2003; Leggett & Bunker 2006).

She described her first attempts at portfolio writing as being repeatedly interrupted by giggling fits – the text she was producing seemed so strange, even absurd, compared to her usual research writing. It took her a long time to begin to feel that she could construe a credible academic persona within the genre.

Interviewees also referred to the struggles that they had faced when trying to orient to readers' expectations. They thought it difficult, if not impossible, to predict what a given evaluation panel would judge to be acceptable or desirable:

if we knew what they were expecting it would be easier but you really have no idea what they are going to pay attention to (interview H3)

Such uncertainties are partly related to a lack of open discussion about portfolios in departments and faculties. Few writers had had the possibility to discuss their text with peers or received feedback from those evaluating their portfolios. The genre thus emerges as a highly private one.

Even those who felt quite comfortable with the writing demands of the new genre were ambivalent about its actual status in academic recruitment. Interviewees commented that portfolios did not always seem to be taken seriously by evaluation panels and that investing much effort into them would perhaps not be worthwhile.

what's the point of putting lots of effort into this [the portfolio] when it doesn't make any difference in the end because they've decided in advance who gets the job (interview H3)

I've noticed there's an undercurrent of sarcasm at this university, people make jokes about portfolios (interview H15)

These experiences show that the portfolio genre is not challenging simply because it is new or because it demands an ability to manipulate and combine different genre models. There is widespread uncertainty about what kind of a mix is appropriate – for instance how much and what kind of self-promotion is acceptable and how a fact-oriented approach can be balanced with reflection. In addition, writers need to orient to an audience whose commitment to the genre is difficult to predict and likely to be highly variable.

5 Conclusion

The principal genre models referred to explicitly in the interview data are CVs and promotional genres. The textual data, however, also show an implicit orientation to the conventions of research writing. The normative materials studied refer to scientific reports as a genre model while downplaying the promotional function of portfolios. In this respect, there seems to be a mismatch between the official views of the university administration and the experiences of portfolio writers. Another key issue is the widespread uncertainty regarding those elements in portfolios which go beyond the CV model. The CV emerges in the interviews as a well-established and

relatively unproblematic genre, while portfolio writing is generally described as difficult and frustrating.

Much of the frustration that writers experience relates to uncertainties about what counts as an acceptable or good portfolio in the eyes of readers. The data show that “addressivity” (Bakhtin 1986) is a central concern: writers orient carefully to a particular audience, consisting of peer and senior members of their disciplinary community. While the CV is a safe model to draw on, some readers can be expected to judge portfolios also in the light of the institutional understanding of the genre, including the requirement to reflect on and evaluate one’s practices. The challenge is then to combine an adherence to the university’s guidelines and the kind of writing which can be assumed to construe a credible professional identity in the eyes of a specific readership.

The data also illustrate the way in which the localisation of an institutional genre may result in hybridity or the mixing of different generic influences. The data show that the take up of the portfolio genre should not be seen simply as an imposition “from above”, but rather as a process whereby local traditions and practices come to influence the imported form. The self-promotion and reflective writing which are central elements of the US model (a hybrid itself) are being combined with local traditions such as a reliance on the CV and deference towards models of academic argumentation.

Finally, we need to consider global flows from the point of view of power relations. Recent examples of globalisa-

tion in academia suggest that much of the traffic between academic cultures is from economically and politically strong centres to the “periphery” (a term used e.g. by Canagarajah 2002); in the case of teaching portfolios, from the United States to Finland. Additional examples are the introduction of quality assurance systems or plans to establish “world class universities” in Finland on US models. Thus, particular hegemonic positions appear to have stabilised: there are established directionalities to the flows and specific forms of mediation at work. While my analysis shows that imported genres are not necessarily “reproduced” in any simple sense in local sites, research on globalisation and discourse should also address the “conditions of mixing” and the “terms of mixture” (Nederveen Pieterse 1995: 57). While hybridity can be celebrated as an antidote to colonisation and cultural imperialism, it is also important to recognise that it is not free or random intertextual play.

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