

New genre resources in academia: Self-evaluation in academic portfolios

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Abstract

The paper examines the spread of Anglo-American influence in academia from the perspective of genre change. The focus is on the take up of a new genre, the academic portfolio, in Finnish universities. The genre is of US origin and is mainly used in the filling of academic posts. The genre is still relatively unstable and it is therefore of interest to map emerging criteria of acceptability. The analysis focuses on one of the most contested elements of the genre, the production of self-evaluative descriptions. The inclusion of self-evaluative elements is recommended in many institutional guidelines, but what constitutes acceptable forms of evaluative writing appears to be both variable across different settings and obscure to many writers. The data consist of ten academic portfolios used in applying for teaching positions at the University of Helsinki between 2003 and 2009. The analysis focuses on the positioning and framing of evaluative elements, the presence of negative self-evaluations and the extent to which positive self-evaluations are mitigated. The analysis points to some emerging conventions: while most portfolios avoid negative self-evaluations, unmitigated positive self-evaluations are also rare. Positive self-evaluations are also often framed as a result of learning through experience, rather than as stable qualities or attributes of the writer.

1 Introduction

It is a widespread assumption that English is slowly colonising Finnish academic practice. Academics deplore that internationalisation is equated with Englishisation (Hakulinen 2010) and that universities “randomly drift” into using English in teaching (Kotus 2009: 103). Indeed, an increasing number of publications and teaching events opt for English rather than Finnish as the principal language. Moreover, English has become a crucial resource for pursuing an academic career (see e.g. Hiidenmaa 2010; Lillis & Curry 2010).

However, the use of the English language in Finnish universities is only one facet of the expansion of Anglo-American influence in academia. Such influence is evident also in the spread of generic formats originating, most notably, in the United States. That is, Finnish academic writers are not only producing more and more of their writing in English, but are also having to frame their writing within formats imported from other academic contexts. Following Blommaert, it is not simply the English language which is being globalised, but “specific speech forms, genres, styles and forms of literacy practice” (2003: 608). Thus, global flows of discourse need to be examined not only from the point of view of the spread and take up of English(es), but the movement of discourse practices across linguistic and cultural borders.¹

Cameron (2003: 28) refers to “the international diffusion of certain discourse norms from the English-speaking world”; even if local languages are not displaced, local ways of interacting may be. Finnish academic writing has been affected by such changes at a speed few could imagine 15 years ago: besides research papers and grant proposals, academics are now writing self-evaluation reports, quality manuals and reflective statements. Such changes in academic genre repertoires relate to broader developments in higher education internationally, more specifically to the rise of “new public management” and the marketisation of higher education (see e.g. Strathern 2000; Deem & Brehony 2005).

This paper focuses on one new genre introduced through such political and institutional changes, the academic portfolio. The genre (also known as the teaching portfolio) is of US origin and was introduced into Finnish universities in the 1990’s as part of new practices of recruiting academic staff. The first institution to adopt the genre was the university of Oulu in 1994; the university of Helsinki followed suit in 2000 (Karjalainen 2003; University of Helsinki 2000).

The academic portfolio is a genre in which applicants for university jobs describe their research and teaching qualifications; the principal audience is a departmental or faculty evaluation committee. The portfolio is not obligatory in every Finnish university and faculty; its use varies across different sites. However, it is a well-recognised and widespread genre at least among the section of staff who are not yet in a permanent position.

The genre is loosely related to the CV in the sense that portfolios are supposed to contain accounts of the applicant’s research and teaching experience.² In fact, prior to the introduction of the new genre, applicants mainly used CVs when applying for jobs. However, there has been a major shift in the type of writing required of applicants, as academic portfolios are also expected to contain, for example, descriptions of the writer’s teaching philosophy, evaluation of past performance and “visions” for the future. The portfolio guidelines provided on the recruitment website of the university of Helsinki are a good example: they list content elements such as “Education and degrees” and “Experience in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and supervision” but also “Pedagogical approach” and “Visions and personal development plans”.³

In the analysis of academic portfolios, I will focus on forms of self-evaluation. One of the most striking differences between portfolios and CVs is that while the latter traditionally comprise lists of achievements without much commentary⁴, the former are supposed to contain evaluative elements. Thus, writers are encouraged not only to describe their academic activities, but to provide an evaluative gloss on these activities. For example, in the Helsinki guidelines mentioned above, the list of suggested contents includes the heading “Strengths, development challenges and visions of one’s teaching”.⁵

Thus, the introduction of the new genre has brought about the possibility for applicants to write explicitly promotional descriptions of their professional achievements. Notably, the guidelines provided by universities do not tend to advise on whether the portfolio is to be understood as a primarily informational genre (as academic CVs have traditionally been) or whether it should be understood as a promotional genre, as a job application letter of sorts. For example, when portfolios were officially adopted at the University of Helsinki, the senate decision referred to the portfolio as “an organised collection of one’s *best* work for public presentation” (my italics), but other guidelines provided by the central administration stated that

“Academic portfolios resemble scientific reports”.⁶ The senate decision also referred to a third genre model: the reflective journal: “Creating a portfolio requires systematic follow-up and development of one’s work, reflection of one’s scholarly agenda, self-assessment and assessment by others”. The portfolio genre is thus also framed as a tool of professional development through reflection on one’s activities. The problem from the writer’s point of view is, then, not simply whether to interpret the genre as a primarily promotional one, but how to combine different generic resources (information, promotion and reflection) in a portfolio text.

A further problem for writers is that promotional writing is a contested resource in academic genre repertoires overall. In the case of academic portfolios, the contestation appears to concern both the amount of self-promotion and the forms of promotional writing evidenced in portfolio texts. Senior members of Finnish academia have publicly criticised the use of portfolios in evaluating applicants, since they are perceived as being too promotional and thus as lacking objectivity (unlike the CV model). For example, Kivirauma (1997: 53), a professor of Education, refers to teaching portfolios as “writers’ celebration of their own teaching”, while Lyytikäinen (2010: 49) writes that when acting as a member in evaluation panels he read portfolios “with his ears turning red” due to the amount of “boasting” they contained.

2 Data and analytic focus

The main data for the study comprise ten portfolios written in English for the purpose of applying for teaching and research jobs at the University of Helsinki.⁷ The writers represent both arts and sciences and submitted their portfolios between 2003 and 2009.⁸ While Finnish appears to be native Finnish speakers’ default language for portfolio writing, the writers studied here either chose to or were expected to write in English. In some cases, there was a faculty or departmental policy encouraging or prescribing the use of English (e.g. in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry). In other cases, writers felt that it would be convenient to prepare the portfolio in English in case an English language portfolio should be required in future applications.

My aim here is to provide a preliminary mapping of the types of linguistic and generic resources which writers draw on when they produce evaluative descriptions of themselves in their portfolios. Given that the genre is an unstable one, with genre conventions being debated rather than established, it is of particular interest to examine where the boundaries of acceptability come to be set. Can academic writers draw on the conventions of well-established promotional genres such as adverts and job application letters? If indeed the “scientific report” is to be understood as an important genre model, then very different norms and values are at stake.

While several influential approaches to evaluation have recently been proposed within language studies (e.g. Biber & Finegan 1989; Hunston & Thompson 2000; Martin & White 2007⁹; see also Hyland 2005), the present analysis does not systematically apply any of the proposed models. This is due to the exploratory nature of the study: as noted above, the aim is not to provide generalisations about generic conventions, but to gain a sense of emerging norms in one institution.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on insights from recent genre research (e.g. Swales 2004; Devitt 2004; see Solin 2009b for an overview): it begins with an initial review of typified features of textual form and content in the data. More specifically, the

analysis examines whether the texts have a shared structure and shared content elements ordered in a predictable manner. Next, the self-evaluative elements of the texts are analysed. The data are classified into three types on the basis of how frequent such elements are and how they are formulated. Relevant analysis questions include the following:

- Where does self-evaluation occur in the portfolio texts?
- Are there negative self-evaluations?
- Are positive self-evaluations mitigated in any way?

3 Evaluative writing in portfolios

In terms of structure and length, the ten portfolios are relatively similar. Their length ranges from 4 to 7 pages, as prescribed by the university guidelines. Seven out of ten portfolios opt for the following structure (also suggested in the guidelines):

- Basic information
- Research and scientific activities
- Teaching and supervision
- Administration and other activities

The other three portfolios are variations of this structure, with one or two of the four elements missing.

The four structural elements do not neatly correspond with the key content elements of the portfolios, which may be included in any of the structural slots. Recurring content elements in the data are the following (illustrated using examples from the texts):

- A. Information on research and teaching activities (resembling a written-out CV)
I have been teaching at the Departments of [x] and [x], University of Helsinki, regularly since 1989. (HU10; "Teaching and supervision")¹⁰
- B. Account of the philosophy or set of beliefs underlying academic activities
A goal in my teaching is to instill in students the unyielding sense of curiosity that is the hallmark of higher learning. (HU27; "Teaching and supervision")
- C. Self-evaluation of one's performance, account of evaluations by others (e.g. student and peer evaluations)
The strengths of my teaching lie in my experience to give many types of teaching from group-based teaching and internet-based teaching to traditional lectures. (HU22; "Teaching and supervision")
- D. Account of future plans or "visions"
I would also like to take more responsibility in supervising graduate students thesis work. (HU24; "Teaching and supervision")

While element A is well-established and familiar in the context of applying for jobs, the other three elements are likely to have been more challenging for the writers to produce (though less so for those writers who had attended pedagogical training, who would have had to write texts outlining both beliefs and visions during such training). As noted above, the new elements are recommended both in the university's central guidelines and in some faculty guidelines.

Despite the institutional recommendation to move beyond CV-type writing, the CV element is clearly the most salient in the portfolios, in the sense of dominating their contents. Moreover, while all portfolios contain the CV element and the philosophy element, only eight out of ten contain self-evaluations and references to future plans. Thus, not all writers follow the guidelines to the letter in terms of including all prescribed contents.

Three of the portfolios in the data contain no or very little self-evaluation, and were therefore excluded from closer analysis. The remaining seven portfolios can be categorised into three relatively discrete types on the basis of how the self-evaluation requirement is fulfilled. What the portfolios have in common is that all contain evaluative descriptions of the writer's activities, skills and/or qualities and all contain positive self-evaluation. However, they also differ in various ways, particularly in terms of the amount of positive self-evaluation, where such evaluation occurs in the texts and whether evaluations are mitigated or not. Here is a brief outline of the three portfolio types:

1. *The sales pitch portfolio*. This is the most explicitly promotional portfolio type, where the whole text focuses on promoting the applicant's activities and achievements (in a sense, then, on "selling" the applicant). The CV element (element A) is typically mixed with positive self-evaluation (element C): writers not only give an account of their professional experience and history, but describe their activities as "important", "of high quality" or "innovative".
2. *The reflective portfolio*. Here the focus is on element A, but usually combining it with element B. That is, writers describe their academic activities in terms of what they have learnt from them or how their beliefs and practices have been shaped by their experiences. Some evaluation of activities also occurs, but typically with a process orientation, not as a description of static skills or qualities ("I have become a versatile teacher as a result of X" vs. "I am a versatile teacher").
3. *The humble portfolio*. Two of the portfolios in the data could be interpreted to downplay the writers' achievements in the sense that most positive self-evaluations are hedged, some markedly so. The two portfolios also include references to feelings of uncertainty and/or apologetic remarks, features missing from portfolios in the other two categories.

In the following, these three types are discussed in turn, outlining and exemplifying the typical features of each.

3.1 The sales pitch portfolio

As noted above, in sales pitch portfolios the CV element tends to be mixed with positive self-evaluation. There are two examples of such a portfolio in the data. Typical of both is that achievements in research and teaching are not merely listed, but a positive gloss is provided on them.

In the two portfolios, positive self-evaluation occurs throughout the texts. The key linguistic resources are adjectives with a positive value in academic contexts (e.g. “significant”, “thorough”). Research articles are described as having been published in “leading” journals, datasets collected as being “unique” and courses taught as being “innovative”. Both writers also construe themselves as energetic and enterprising: they perform academic duties “actively” and “regularly”.

Here are more extended examples from the two texts:

- (1) As I have an exceptionally wide research background [sic] having hands on experience about [x], [x] and [x] I can teach with deep understanding a wide repertoire of [x] courses. I have demonstrated ability of high quality teaching on both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Finland and abroad. (HU25; “Teaching and supervision”)
- (2) [...] my doctoral dissertation contained a rare combination of different research methodologies, which the Ph.D. evaluation committee singled out as an important contribution of the research. The evaluation committee assessed my dissertation to be the most comprehensive and significant study of [x]. (HU13; “Research activities”)

These examples illustrate one of the distinctive features of sales pitch portfolios: writers do not miss an opportunity for positive self-evaluation. In Example 1, the writer describes her research experience as being unusually extensive, leading to “deep understanding” and a “wide repertoire”. Her teaching ability is not only “demonstrated” but of “high quality”. The writer in Example 2 does not shy away from positive adjectives either: he describes his doctoral dissertation using the adjectives “rare”, “important”, “comprehensive” and “significant” (though attributing the latter three evaluations to authoritative others).

Both writers describe their career so far as a success; they do not refer to difficulties, disappointments or failures. The writers thus appear to perceive the genre as primarily promotional: activities and experiences are presented in an exclusively positive light.¹¹

However, most positive self-evaluations are hedged in some way.¹² While there are some unhedged assertions of the type evidenced in Example 1 above (“I can teach with deep understanding...”), positive evaluations tend to be attributed either to some disciplinary authority (e.g. a peer reviewer) or to “clients” (e.g. student feedback):

- (3) The experts evaluated it to be a highly innovative project. (HU13; “Research activities”)¹³
- (4) In an evaluation 2008 by the Teaching Skill Board of the Faculty of [x] of the University of Helsinki my teaching skills were rated as excellent. (HU25; “Teaching and supervision”)

- (5) I have received very positive response from the students from the varied and streamlined assessment methods used on different courses. (HU25; “Teaching and supervision”)

Some expressions seem to rely on the reader being able to judge whether the writer’s evaluation is credible through being a disciplinary insider. In Example 6, the writer refers to papers having been published in “well-known” journals. The evaluation of which journals are “well-known” is insider information, unlike for example the ISI ranking of a journal, referred to in Example 7.

- (6) Alongside with the dissertation (A1), the research produced a number of other publications in well-known journals within the field of [x] [...]. (HU 13; “Research activities”)
- (7) One of our collaborative papers from this project (C8) has been accepted for publication in [x], which is in the ISI rankings the leading journal within [x] with an impact factor of 1.579 in 2004. (HU13; “Research activities”)

It is evident from these examples that while this category of portfolios takes self-promotion furthest, writers still adhere to conventions of academic writing in some ways: most positive self-evaluations are attributed to authoritative sources (some in considerable detail, as in Example 7). Thus, while promotional elements are frequent and negative experiences are not referred to, the writers still avoid presenting self-evaluations as straightforward facts or stable qualities.

3.2 The reflective portfolio

Three portfolios in the data tend to combine self-evaluations not only with element A – as in sales pitch portfolios – but also with element B. That is, activities are described in terms of a process of learning and reflection: the positive qualities and skills that the writers describe themselves as having are a result of a process of gaining maturity and experience in different academic communities. Writers do not describe themselves in static terms as possessing particular skills or qualities (as in “I am an innovative teacher”), but as having developed into professionals through a process of learning and reflection.

Here are extended extracts from two of the portfolios:

- (8) These two years [as visiting scholar at a UK laboratory] have taught me many things. I have gained insights into [x] [...] I have learned new techniques of [x] [...] Importantly, I got to know how one of the world’s leading laboratories in [x] works and how important it is to have collegial support and criticism to your research ideas and results. I do not think one can over-estimate the value of such discussions. I have obtained interesting research results as well, which I am processing into publications at the moment. (HU22; “Research and scientific activities”)
- (9) These responsibilities [in administration] have given me insight of the operation and organization of the university on different levels as well as

the legislation and policies guiding it. Through my research, teaching and coordination experience I have a comprehensive [sic] overview of [x] and [x] and I have good networks on that area. (HU24; “Basic information”)

In Example 8, the writer describes her international experience in positive terms: in particular, she labels her place of work as “one of the world’s leading laboratories” and her research results as “interesting”. Overall, the visit is construed as valuable and productive. However, the whole positive evaluation is framed within a narrative of learning, as indicated in the first sentence of the passage: the time abroad has “taught me many things”.

In Example 9, the writer also construes her knowledge and skills as deriving from professional activities. Her knowledge and networks are described as having come about through having different types of responsibilities and through “research, teaching and coordination experience”, rather than being permanent qualities of her professional persona.

As in sales pitch portfolios, there are no direct references to failures or disappointments in the reflective portfolios, but the texts do describe moments of uncertainty. Such moments are, however, portrayed as having been useful in some way. For example, in portfolio HU10 the writer describes herself as having experienced unease as a graduate student when her research did not proceed as expected. The event is not described as a setback or an unwelcome detour, but as a “strike of luck”:

- (10) Getting results contrasting the initial hypotheses (that were well based as such) was actually a strike of luck, although it did not seem so for an inexperienced student. It opened my eyes to see the fascination of the complex interactions in [x], and the importance of a holistic view in understanding [x]. Not to mention the need of constantly challenging one’s own thinking about how things work and why. (HU10, “Research and other scientific activities”)

Here, an unexpected turn is described as leading to professional development. The tone is highly optimistic, even celebratory (eyes are opened, thinking is challenged).

Similarly, the writer in HU22 explains that her master’s degree took eight years to complete because she took more courses than she would have needed to and because she started a family. She is not apologetic about either, but construes these periods as having enhanced her professional skills:

- (11) These additional studies took some extra time but they provided me with a very good basis to understand [x]. I was able to fully use this knowledge when I did my MSc thesis [...] During [the maternity leave] I completed my MSc thesis and learned, perhaps more importantly, how to use my time effectively. (HU22; “Basic information”)

In line with Example 10, what may look like inefficiency in CV terms is construed as the opposite: additional studies were “fully” used and a temporary absence from the workplace contributed to the writer’s time management skills.

The portfolios also include passages where positive self-evaluation is not framed as a result of a learning experience. However, unlike in sales pitch portfolios, these are

typically in separate sections or paragraphs, not a feature of the whole text. In the case of HU22, the writer presents positive self-descriptions in sections titled “Vision and personal development” (in the section on research activities) and “Strengths, development challenges and visions of one’s teaching” (in the section on teaching activities). The evaluations are usually hedged and/or attributed to some authoritative source:

- (12) I consider my field of research, [x], a very important area of research. (HU22)
- (13) 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 [x] in 2004 and 2006 (see App. 5). (HU22)

In the other two portfolios, positive self-evaluations which are not framed in reflective terms also occur in separate paragraphs. In HU24, the writer describes her qualities as a teacher and positive student feedback in one paragraph at the end of an account of her teaching philosophy. In HU10, positive self-evaluations occur in sections titled “Pedagogic approach and training” and “Administrative approach”. As in HU22, the positive evaluations are hedged and/or supported with references to peer and student evaluations:

- (14) My own view is that as a teacher I am easily contacted and clear. This idea is supported by the feedback I collect by electronic or paper form from every course I have. The feedback has been positive in general. (HU24; “Teaching and supervision”)
- (15) 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. (HU10; “Teaching and supervision”)

The key difference between reflective portfolios and sales pitch portfolios is, then, not the presence or absence of hedging in positive self-evaluations, but the way in which such evaluations are positioned and framed.

3.3 The humble portfolio

The distinctive feature of this type of portfolio vis-à-vis self-evaluation is that while writers include some positive descriptions of their professional achievements, such evaluations are expressed in relatively modest terms, particularly compared to sales pitch portfolios. Positive self-evaluations are rare overall, and often heavily hedged. Moreover, the portfolios include what could be interpreted as apologies for not having achieved more in particular areas. In contrast to reflective portfolios, academic achievements are not described in terms of a process of learning through experience, nor are problems or shortcomings construed in positive terms, as triggering professional development.

The presence of apologies is particularly striking in HU5:

- (16) During the recent years I have not participated in as many congresses as I wanted, due to my two maternity leaves. Yet, I have presented the results of my research in 10 meetings, where I have had mostly posters but some oral presentations as well. (HU5; “Research activities”)
- (17) I have always had a great interest in teaching, although so far I have had limited opportunities for that. [writer goes on to describe experience of mentoring PhD students] (HU5; “Teaching and supervising”)

Here, lack of relevant professional experience is simply stated; the writer does not try to construe the gaps in her record as somehow conducive to professional development (cf. Examples 10 and 11 above).

This portfolio also includes an unusually explicit description of feelings of uncertainty:

- (18) Supervising the master and doctoral thesis is [...] a demanding task. Especially when supervising masters students I feel it is difficult to decide how much a supervisor should provide tools in different steps of making a thesis. (HU5; “Teaching and supervising”)

While the other portfolio in this category, HU27, is not quite so humble, many of the self-evaluations in it contain a remarkable amount of hedging: the writer does not seem to want to make strong claims about her qualities as a teacher and researcher.

- (19) In general, I am pleased with the rapport I usually am able to attain with students and the level of engagement most students exhibit in my classes. (HU27; “Teaching and supervision”)
- (20) [...] my dissertation can be considered quite successful judging from what I have been able to accomplish from it [...] (HU27; “Research and scientific activities”)

Here, the positive evaluations are construed as uncertain and/or limited in their validity or strength (“usually able”, “most students”, “quite successful”). There is a marked contrast here with the two sales pitch portfolios (where such heavy hedging is avoided). Current research activities are also described in very modest terms:

- (21) My most current research interests involve the interface of [x] [...] While my post-doctoral positions have been lectureship rather than research positions, I nonetheless have taken the opportunity to follow up as best I can on this main point of interest. (HU27; “Research and scientific activities”)

One might imagine a sales pitch portfolio representing a similar situation using a wording like “Despite working as a lecturer, I have maintained an active research profile in my areas of interest”.

Overall, the writer in HU27 appears to prefer an analytical approach to the description of activities: she argues for the positive evaluations she presents instead of stating them as facts. This is evident in Example 22, where the writer distances her

qualities as a teacher by representing them as data from questionnaires. Structurally the choice is not to place the writer in subject position (as in “I am...” or “My teaching is...”). Instead, the subjects here are “types of question” and “highest ratings”:

- (22) On the evaluations for the courses I taught at [x], the types of question that always received the highest marks were those that pertained to my personal qualities as a teacher. Usually the highest ratings for my courses were questions having to do with “enthusiasm,” treating students with respect, and making them feel welcome to ask questions. (HU27; “Teaching and supervision”)

The contrast with sales pitch portfolios is again notable. To take an example, HU25 refers to the writer’s “deep understanding”, “wide repertoire” and “demonstrated ability” (all within one paragraph). These are stated as qualities and abilities which the writer possesses or can draw on. They are not argued for or analysed, nor are they framed in process terms (as in reflective portfolios).

4 Discussion

This paper has focused on mapping recurrent linguistic and textual resources which portfolio writers draw on when writing evaluative accounts of themselves. While the analysis is based on a limited amount of data, some emerging conventions can be discerned. As noted above, seven portfolios out of the ten in the data contain some positive self-evaluation. However, it is notable that most such evaluations are hedged in some way, either by marking claims as personal opinions (“I consider...”), marking their validity as limited (“I am usually able to attain”), or attributing the evaluations to authoritative others. Unsupported assertions, such as “I am an innovative teacher” are mostly absent from the data.¹⁴

This finding suggests that writers orient more closely to conventions of academic expression than conventions of promotional writing. Self-representation and personal branding can be assumed to take much more explicitly promotional forms for example in genres like job application letters and dating ads (and, in the context of academic writing, in American teaching portfolios; see examples in Seldin 2004). However, the writers studied here choose to maintain a relatively modest tone when they write to fellow academics. They appear to be concerned about the believability of their claims, responding perhaps also to publicly voiced criticism about the promotional nature of portfolios.¹⁵

Another notable feature of the portfolios studied is that there are no negative self-evaluations, apart from the apologetic remarks in HU5. HU5 is also the only portfolio to refer to feelings of uncertainty. In sales pitch portfolios and reflective portfolios, the few times difficulties or shortcomings are referred to, these tend to be framed as triggers for learning and development, not as failures or sources of frustration. This is a marked omission in the sense that rejected papers or critical student feedback are part of the experience of every academic, from junior to senior, from centre to periphery. It appears, then, that in its contemporary form, the academic portfolio genre discourages expressions of negative affect. A relatively affirmative, optimistic tone seems to be the norm. This quality emphasises the promotional function of portfolios.

Indeed, writer interviews conducted as part of my research on academic portfolios suggest that writers perceive it as risky to refer to difficulties or negative experiences. Moreover, many writers feel ambivalent about having to write self-evaluative texts in a promotional context (see Solin 2008). One interviewee referred to a conflict between what he wrote about himself in the portfolio and his actual perception of himself:

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 (writer interview HU7)¹⁶

Another informant referred to the same tension: she felt that the genre did not allow her to describe her qualities in a sincere manner, but forced her into producing a kind of “designed” self, which she assumed would match institutional expectations:

it forces you to sort of withdraw into a shell, you try to think of weaknesses that aren't really weaknesses just to fulfill the requirements but then you don't really . I mean the use of portfolios when applying for jobs doesn't really encourage honest self-analysis (writer interview HU1)

The extent to which the academic portfolio genre can be expected to influence or change practices of academic writing and existing genre repertoires in the Finnish context is not a straightforward issue, however. The data also suggest that the normative model and particularly the way it is put to practice is not as powerful as perhaps many writers assume. Even this small amount of data shows a degree of heterogeneity in portfolio contents and structures, suggesting that writers need not follow institutional guidelines to the letter in order to be considered acceptable applicants. The data show that both portfolios which resemble written-out CVs (e.g. by failing to contain self-evaluation and accounts of own beliefs) are accepted as valid in the recruiting process. Normative policing at the receiving end is not very strong: there appear to be no sanctions in place against non-normative texts. That is, applicants are not disqualified from the recruitment process even if they fail to adhere to the guidelines.

Since the regulation, particularly as far as sanctions are concerned, is relatively weak, writers can be assumed to orient in varying ways to the institutional recommendation to include self-evaluation. Some may not include any, others will include some, but frame it in relatively detached and modest terms, while others will be influenced by more explicitly promotional forms of writing. In any case, as long as reader feedback is rare (as suggested by my interview data) and genre norms are seldom discussed in public, there is not likely to be a very clear sense of what counts as acceptable self-evaluation in an academic context.

Notes

¹ On issues relating to the globalisation of discourse practices, see e.g. Machin and van Leeuwen (2007), Fairclough (2006), Pennycook (2007) and Blommaert (2010).

² In fact, portfolio guidelines available at the University of Helsinki refer to the genre as an “extended CV” (see e.g. the Faculty of Arts guidelines at <http://www.helsinki.fi/hum/hallinto/portfolio.htm#>, accessed 9 Nov 2010) or label the CV a “condensed portfolio” (University of Helsinki 2000). However, full CVs tend to be included as attachments in portfolios, so writers do not appear to perceive the portfolio as replacing the CV.

³ See <http://www.helsinki.fi/sivut2006/recruitment/academic-portfolio.html> (accessed 9 Nov 2010).

⁴ See, for example, the CV models presented at

- <http://www.proselectum.fi/index.php?id=44> and
- http://urapalvelut.tkk.fi/fi/tyonhakuprosessi/hakemus_cv/hyva_cv.

(Both accessed 9 Nov 2010.)

⁵ Individual faculties may or may not require writers to include self-evaluation in their portfolios. In Helsinki, the Faculty of Biosciences asks the applicant to describe “teaching strengths” and “development needs”, while the Faculty of Arts only asks writers to describe the student and peer feedback that they have received:

- http://www.helsinki.fi/bio/liitetiedostot/ohjeet/portfolio_ohjeet200404.pdf and
- <http://www.helsinki.fi/hum/hallinto/portfolio.htm>.

(Both accessed 9 Nov 2010.)

⁶ See

- <http://www.helsinki.fi/henkos/tyopaikkailm/yopofoperiaatteet> and
- http://www.helsinki.fi/henkos/academicportfolio/portfolio_glossary1.htm.

See also the portfolio guidelines provided by the University of Oulu

- http://www oulu.fi/oky/opetusvirkojen_taytto/ohjeet_opetusvirkojen_tayttomen_ettelysta.html#liite3

and the University of Turku

- <http://www.utu.fi/henkilokunta/palvelussuhdeasiat/portfolio>.

(All accessed 9 Nov 2010.)

⁷ The study draws on data collected for a larger research project on the take up of academic/teaching portfolios in Finnish universities (see Solin 2008, 2009a). Other data collected for the project include 18 portfolios written in Finnish, 22 interviews with writers, eight interviews with administrative staff and portfolio trainers as well as a broad range of normative materials (such as portfolio guidelines, teaching materials and manuals).

⁸ Of the writers studied here, nine are native Finnish speakers and one is a native English speaker permanently resident in Finland. The data were collected by contacting potential informants (applicants for university posts) and enquiring whether they would be willing to participate in the study. Potential informants’ names were found by reviewing faculty documentation on recruitment processes.

⁹ See also <http://grammatics.com/appraisal/> (accessed 9 Nov 2010).

- ¹⁰ References to the writers' disciplinary background have been omitted in order to protect their anonymity.
- ¹¹ Kennedy (2005: 234) claims that there is a similar social rule operating in the genre of the holiday postcard: "the sender should project a positive image of the activities presented in the postcard – the overall impact on the reader is one of positive evaluation".
- ¹² On hedging, see e.g. Hyland (1998).
- ¹³ In the examples, hedging and attributions are marked with underlining.
- ¹⁴ This is also true of the Finnish language portfolios in the data (see Solin 2009a). In this respect, academic portfolios differ, for example, from the academic mission statements studied by Connell and Galasinski (1998), where expressions of tentativeness were rare.
- ¹⁵ We might speculate, though, that the genre may undergo changes as a result of the increase of explicitly promotional genres in Finnish universities (such as mission statements and self-evaluation reports) as well as the increasing popularity of internet genres such as blogs and facebook accounts among university staff.
- ¹⁶ The interviews were conducted in Finnish; these are my translations.

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