Time and affect in students’ thesis writing

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Studies on affect and literacy often focus on how practices of reading and writing can change ways of performing and evaluating affective states (Besnier 1995, Ahearn 2003). This paper examines the role of affect when drawing on existing language resources. It looks at how master’s students utilize previous writing-related experiences when completing their theses. The focus is on the role of affect students connect to these experiences and their imagined futures: How might past experiences and future-oriented desires influence thesis writing? How is this negotiated in the context of the present thesis assignment?

Affect is conceptualised as part of interactional practices (see Wilce 2009). Therefore, the study is based on an ethnographically informed case study. The study involved twelve students from four social science oriented departments at an English university. Students were regularly interviewed during the completion period of their thesis. The interviews were based on the students’ drafts and referred to students’ literacy histories and imagined futures. To gain further insight into the complexities of the thesis projects, second-level data were collected including supervisor interviews, thesis workshop observations, analysis of relevant guidelines and seminal literature for each thesis. The analysis combined stance and narrative approaches (Baynham 2011).

The presentation will focus on interviews with two students from the same department with contrasting past experiences and future goals. The analysis underlines how language resources and values derived from past experiences affect the understanding of current activities. It reveals the constantly shifting nature of hierarchies of desires and goals within a complex framework of possibilities that are shaped both by the individual’s past experiences (and resources) as well as institutional conventions. The analysis demonstrates how expressions of affect linked to past and future are central to the negotiation of conflicting institutional requirements and individual goals.

Keywords: thesis writing, temporality, affect.