

Modes of positioning agency in academic writing

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Abstract

This study aims to enhance our understanding of agency in academic writing by examining its multidimensional nature. It takes a holistic socio-cultural and narrative approach to agency, viewing it as a dynamic process that is socially situated and includes awareness of one's actions, goals, and autonomy. The study is based on interviews and drawings from eight bachelor's thesis writers at a Finnish university. The data is analyzed through positioning analysis, identifying four agency positionings: instrumental, questioning, self-willed, and solitary. The findings highlight the tensions between individuals and the academic community in academic writing and underscore the importance of institutional support. Trust and positioning are identified as crucial elements in the practice of agency. The research suggests that creating self-portraits as an academic writer during the writing process and sharing them with others can be a practical way to position oneself in the academic community and enhance one's understanding of agency.

Keywords: Agency, academic writing, positioning, reflection

1 Introduction

The nature of academic work and knowledge production is constantly evolving due to global changes, such as digitalization, mobility, and managerialism (e.g., Kallio et al., 2016). Academic writing, being a central but demanding practice in learning and studying at the university level, is both a process of meaning-making and a means of gaining access to the language of an academic community (Lea, 2011). It plays a crucial role in enabling students to navigate academic communities and practice their agency, which refers to their social capability to take action. Agency has a social basis (e.g., Vygotsky, 1979), meaning that sociocultural factors, such as ethical norms, shape individuals and communities. Thus the concept of agency is closely tied to the concepts of equity and social justice. From the point of view of equity it is important to ensure that all individuals have access to resources, opportunities, and support systems that enable their participation in the community and the achievement of their goals (e.g., Burke et al. 2016). A deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in agency formation and pedagogical practices that support it is required however in higher education (Jääskelä et al., 2021; Jääskelä et al., 2020), where a high degree of self-management is expected. Students enter higher education from diverse backgrounds, leading to diverse expectations about the academic environment. As educators it is essential to acknowledge and understand these expectations to create equal opportunities for all students. This study, one of the first in the field, provides valuable insights into the different forms of bachelor candidates' agency and their connection to their beliefs about social aspects of academic writing.

There are studies on related aspects, such as metacognitive awareness, in student academic writing (e.g., Negretti, 2012), students' self-regulation in academic writing (e.g., Castelló et al., 2009), and undergraduates' conceptions of academic writing (e.g., Scharlau et al., 2021). Our narrative research is about the relationship dynamics between bachelor's thesis writers and their communities, focusing especially on writers' positionings of themselves within their social contexts. Positioning means that a person positions oneself or others as a certain kind of agent in social relations (Bamberg, 1997, ; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). In this study, positioning is understood as "the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (Langenhove & Harré, 2003, p. 16). Narrative research refers to examining stories people tell about themselves and others (Bamberg, 2012). In applied linguistics, the narrative approach and positioning analysis have been used to analyze the socialization processes of students in the context of second-language learning (Ros i Solé, 2007), as well as to analyze the agency of language teachers (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). It has been noted however that "[t]he relationship between agency and positioning has not been adequately addressed in the literature" (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, p. 101). Our study approaches this research gap between agency and positioning because it is crucial to understand the importance of positioning when supporting students' agency in the context of academic writing. In this study, writer agency is considered multidimensional, meaning that students can – or have the possibility to – actively direct their own research and writing processes and position themselves within a community to access various resources provided by the institution, such as the library, supervision, and courses. Additionally, students can also make use of opportunities and resources available outside of the university. Generally, as a component of education, writing can be understood to be about adaptation to changes, induction into social practices, becoming a member of the learning community, and increasing self-understanding (about education, see Cope & Kalantzis, 2020). In summary, in this study, we used the concept of agency positioning to describe experiences of agency linked to social situations in the context of academic writing at a university. We therefore addressed the following research questions: 1) How do students position themselves as agents when reflecting on their academic writing

processes? 2) How do these positionings relate to institutional support? To answer these questions, we took a narrative approach and analyzed, through narrative methods, interview and visual data from eight bachelor's thesis writers at a Finnish university.

2 Theory

This research took a narrative approach to studying academic writing and agency in the sociocultural framework (Bamberg, 2012; Nicholson, 2023). In the narrative approach, the experiences narrated are viewed as stories in which the individual dimension reflects the social one (Bamberg, 2012). Academic writing in turn is understood in this study as a process that involves observation, thinking, feeling, interaction, and identity work, all of which are part of social practices (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Prior, 2008). The writing process is not limited to language but takes into account a variety of forms and semiotic systems (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; Perry, 2012), such as the visual, which in this study means drawings. Accordingly, we view agency as a socially situated dynamic process and mediated action that becomes possible through other people, signs, and tools (Ahearn, 2001; Archer, 2012; Prior, 2008, p. 55; Vygotsky, 1979). Agency is "the human ability to act through mediation" (Lantolf, 2013, p. 19) and requires intentionality and goal orientation and allows individuals to actualize their selfhood (e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Lantolf, 2013). In this way, it is linked to reflexivity and the ideas of freedom or autonomy (Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Lantolf, 2013). We believe that navigation in social practices and meaning-making processes becomes easier for a student when the role of agency in becoming an academic writer is supported (Gourlay, 2009; Cazden et al., 1996). This study approached agency methodologically from a narrative perspective, which is a powerful way to understand human existence, action, and experience through introspection and reflection (Bamberg, 2012; Johnson & Golombek, 2013) by applying the idea of positioning (Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

Previous studies have suggested various ways to study agency. For instance, Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) proposed that research should focus on the lived experience, as it brings forth reflective consciousness of one's agency and moral dialogue with others, instead of concentrating on the system level that forgets the sense of agency in local situations. According to Eteläpelto et al. (2014), agency should be analyzed by examining its manifestation in both sociocultural and discursive reality, as well as in the interpretations of individuals and their identities. Writing can therefore be considered as a sociopolitical action in which a writer positions her-/himself in an ideological position that is available in a sociopolitical context (Clark & Ivanič, 1997/2006). Ivanič (1998) proposed that prototypical possibilities for selfhood are available in the social context, and practices of writing are supported and valued in different ways. Sociocultural activities form agency by assigning value to certain acts and recognition to certain actors. These meaning-making processes and social practices occur in power relations, often without conscious attention (Holland et al., 1998).

In the process of becoming a bachelor of social sciences at a Finnish university, the thesis plays a crucial role as a cultural mediator. It enables students to position themselves as legitimate members of a disciplinary community. This discursive action also contains small stories of self, which construct agency (Eteläpelto, 2007), and we scrutinize these stories in our study. Narrating is a typical human behavior (Barkhuizen, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1988) and is closely connected to positioning (Polkinghorne, 1995), as both are concerned with the meanings of people's actions as social acts and the experiences of rights and duties (e.g., Harré, 2010). Thus, agency can be understood through positioning (Clark & Ivanič, 1997/2006; Kayi-Aydar, 2015), as individuals encounter restrictions or support that affect their actions through positionings and "positional moves" (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). For example, various institutions and disciplines, with their procedures and regulations shape students' writing practices and can thereby influence the construction

of their agency (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). In an educational setting, the moral codes of respect for another's thinking and research are present in learning academic writing, which requires a sort of positioning of oneself in relation to others and to the discussion in the field. According to Kayi-Aydar (2019), the relationship between positioning and agency is mutually shaped and unpredictable, because an individual may choose an action other than what the first position suggests. It has been suggested that support in academic literacy and understanding between staff and students can enhance students' agency and engagement within the institution (Deeley et al., 2019; MacKay et al., 2019).

Thus, individual experiences of academic writing are connected to the social practices and values of a community and may reveal different kinds of positionings concerning cultural norms etc. We identify agency positionings by analyzing students' narratives where they reflect on their writing process. We describe agency positioning as expressed experiences of agency linked to a social situation. Positioning reflects, for example, the options and duties the students experience for action in their environment (Harré, 2010). We understand this kind of view on necessity and possibility through positioning and thus recognize the connection between the idea of realized options for action and one's agency (see also Kayi-Aidar, 2015; Nuyts, 2006).

3 Material and methods

This study was conducted partly in connection with the research communication course (three credits), which supports the academic writing process of bachelor's theses. A bachelor's thesis is a report of approximately 25 pages on a small-scale research project conducted by a student in a 10-credit (10 ECTS) research seminar, where supervision and peer support are available. Ideally, the student joins both courses at the same time and writes the thesis during an academic semester. Both the communication course and the seminar facilitate discussion around students' writings. The learning goals of the seminar and thesis are that the student can manage a writing and research process, follow ethical guidelines, and evaluate the results of his/her own and others' research. The thesis is evaluated on a scale from 1 (Fair) to 5 (Excellent). The research communication course aims to help the student understand academic meaning-making processes, analyze the aims and contents of a text, and recognize one's skills as a multilingual communicator. The course accomplishment is evaluated as pass or fail.

Kati Rantala-Lehtola had a twofold role as a teacher and researcher. She was one of the teachers, only at the beginning, of two parallel research communication courses in the fall of 2019 and recruited eight participants studying social sciences and philosophy from these courses. She did not participate in the assessment of the course assignments. The students were told that participation in the study would not affect the assessment of course performance and that the research would be mainly carried out outside of the course. The participants voluntarily gave their consent to take part in the study, which was approved by the institution. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used for the participants as follows: Touko, Pyry, Kuisma (males), and Aamu, Suvi, Helmi, Iiris, and Minttu (females).

Rantala-Lehtola collected the data from autumn 2019 to spring 2021 outside the course context. The data consist of narrative interviews conducted in Finnish from the beginning, middle and end of the students' academic writing processes, and include self-portraits from the last interview because visual and verbal expressions can offer potential knowledge of the individuals' narratives (Kalaja et al., 2013). The individual interviews of all participants followed the basic principles of a narrative interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; see Appendix): An opening question about when or how things started (the idea of doing a bachelor's thesis) helped the interviewees to talk about their experiences. The researcher understood that the interviewees may experience similar events differently and want to emphasize certain aspects. Their experiences were

understood narratively which meant viewing them through the dimensions of time, individuality and sociality, and position (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interviews were carried out mainly during one academic year. However, one participant (Minttu) did not finish the thesis during the two academic-year data collection period.

During the interviews, the students were encouraged to talk about their thesis-writing process with the help of the application of a lifeline technique in which they were asked to recount their experiences with academic writing (Rantala-Lehtola & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022; see also Pirskanen et al., 2015). A lifeline is a sort of timeline drawn by a student expressing past and (in turn) future emotions and actions related to a thesis-writing process. The lines rise or fall depending on the positivity or negativity of the emotions associated with the experiences. Some questions were asked during the narrative interviews (see Appendix)—for example, what could be learned and what kind of support they had—if the students did not touch on those issues. The students spoke about their thesis in general too. In the last interview, after receiving grades for their theses, the students were asked to draw a sort of self-portrait. The exact assignment was as follows: draw yourself as an academic writer and add some relevant things that you connect with your academic writing process. Although some students stated that they were poor at drawing, they began to engage with the task once they realized that the drawings could be simple and match their drawing skills. Positioning oneself as an academic writer was new for many students, but using a visual mode of reflecting on one's own writing process might facilitate the task. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by Author 1. The interview data of this study have been partly used in Rantala-Lehtola's and Ruohotie-Lyhty's (2022) published study.

The data were analyzed by using positioning analysis on verbal data (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) and visual analysis on visual data (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006). These analysis methods have similar features, even though they work on different modalities (i.e., semiotic systems). They both have three steps that identify 1) different agents, 2) the agents' relationship and interaction with others and the audience, and 3) the meaning of the representation offered by the agent, as Table 1 shows. The agency positionings, which were identified in the verbal data through the positioning analysis, were additionally analyzed in detail by checking linguistic and semantic modal expressions that helped in observing the different shades of the agency positionings. Modal expressions reflect matters, such as what is possible, acceptable, and necessary (Nuyts, 2006) from the agent's point of view, and thus how the agent is oriented towards action.

This study includes four different analysis phases: positioning analysis for verbal data, visual analysis for visual data, checking modal expressions, and forming a synthesis. The first two analyses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Steps of Positioning and Visual Analyses.*

Focus of the Steps	Positioning Analysis	Visual Analysis
1 Agents	Actors in the “story world”	Actions and the features of the participants in the image
2 Interaction	Narration and audience of the story	The interaction of the image’s participant and a “viewer”
3 Meaning of the representation	The narrator as an actor and the story as a representation	Roles of the participants and the compositional meaning of the image

More specifically, the first step of the positioning analysis (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) focused on actors in a “story world,” which involved analyzing the transcripts of the narrative interviews to identify the persons or groups mentioned by the students and the words they used to describe themselves and others. This helped pinpoint different characters and the groups the students identified with. The second step involved identifying the relationship between the narrator and the audience of the story, which meant identifying all the references made by the students to the researcher herself, or implicitly to the future readers of this article, as well to as their ways of providing answers. This included indirect questions and repetitions of something that the researcher had said earlier. This step was found to be unimportant in the context of the research question, however, since the students did not question the position of the researcher. The students found the interviews and tasks beneficial and accepted the interventional nature of the study. The third step was to examine the narrator’s own positioning as an actor in his/her story, which is thus a representation of him-/herself. This step involved identifying references made by the students to their positions. It included descriptions of their personality or agency, or implicit aspirations to be understood in a certain way. Finally the observations were organized in a table to identify the most significant features in the positioning levels (1–3) at the beginning, middle, and end of the writing processes, with the help of modal expressions as well.

The participants’ modal expressions concerning the aspects of possibility, acceptance, and necessity to act were analyzed in the interview data connected to the positionings that were identified in the positioning analysis. The analysis focused on the action expressed by the verb (e.g., believe) and auxiliary (e.g., can, must, may), and some other expressions that were judged as significant, such as adjectives or adverbs that described the subject’s relationship to their topic. The agents saw themselves as being able to or having the potential to or needing to act to control the state of affairs (Nuyts, 2006).

The self-portraits were analyzed by focusing on the social semiotics of visual communication with the help of visual grammar (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). First, the focus was on actions and the features of the participants in the portraits (the representational function of an image, see Jewitt & Oyama, 2004), which included analyzing, for example, vectors of movement and relations and features of participants and elements. Secondly, the interaction of the image’s participant and a “viewer” (the interactive function) was studied by analyzing the participant’s contact with the viewer, in terms of distance or perspective. Thirdly, attention was paid to the roles and relations of the participants and elements in the image, which form a compositional meaning that serves as a basis for interpreting the image (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). This meaning of the image was also reflected in the drawer’s verbal explanation and was connected to modal reasoning (i.e., modalities that express, for example, possibilities and necessities).

During the last phase, synthesis, we formed the main agency positionings that we assumed to be related to the subjects' agency formation. These are addressed in the next chapter.

4 Findings

4.1 Different agency positionings

Upon analyzing the reflections of students, we identified four distinct agency positionings in writing: instrumental, questioning, self-willed, and solitary. The instrumental agency positioning reflects a subject's intention to follow the guidelines and rules of academic writing. The questioning agency positioning reflects an effort to improve the external circumstances of academic writing that are experienced as unsatisfactory. The self-willed agency positioning shows a tendency to disagree with the criteria of academic writing and to find support outside the institution. Last, the solitary agency positioning reflects an attempt to manage the writing process independently, without any help. We have included citations from the interviews translated from Finnish into English and self-portraits from different students to illustrate the core features of each positioning. The self-portraits depict the students as academic writers at the end of their writing processes; thus, they reflect the students' agency as well.

All the agency positionings unfold in an institutional context. Our study found that the support that students received from the institution was crucial in experiencing their agency as writers. This support can come in the form of resources such as supervision, seminars, peer reviews, networking, and research communication courses. Students can consider the institutional support significant, taking advantage of all available support, or insignificant, avoiding it and seeking help outside the institution. Also, their opinions may change throughout the writing process. It is important to note that individual students may express different agency positionings at different phases of their writing processes. However, most of them tend to express consistent views on their work throughout the interviews rather than showing significant changes. These changes and consistencies will be discussed in section 4.2.

4.1.1 *Instrumental agency positioning*

The instrumental agency positioning expresses the school-like type of positioning. It involves actively participating in courses and utilizing available support to ensure tasks are completed correctly. There is a strong emphasis on following rules, conventions, guidelines, and similar standards. The goal is to reach a goal for the goal's sake. Experienced support from the institution is seen as important and sufficient. Being under supervision and in a peer group is valued, and the instructions given are made use of until the end of the thesis-writing process. Instrumental agency positioning is reflected in following instructions and participating in the institutional support such as peers, because that is how the task will be completed in the right way, step by step.

The distinctive features in the self-portraits representing this type of agency positioning are the presence of an institution and a non-smiling actor. The portraits mediate emotional-cognitive and social resources. These are the sense of confidence in the writing process and trust in the institution, even though the process is seen as demanding and normative.

Figure 1 illustrates the presence of the "imagined institution" that is manifested in the form of giving instructions to oneself with a propensity for perfectionism and institutional requirements in mind.



Figure 1. Instrumental agency positioning illustrated by Aamu's self-portrait.

Giving oneself instructions can be understood as an internalized voice from schooling. Additionally, a big grammar book positioned higher than the actor can be interpreted as a sign of the importance of "doing things right" (i.e., the power of institutional norms and practices). The actor does not appear to be smiling, and the speech bubble's reference to writing reflects serious concentration: "The text must be written in detail and carefully." The actor stands on an equal level in front of "the viewer" and allows thoughts and expressions to become visible. The idea of one ideal way of writing is often present and leads to both following instructions and cooperating with others. The idea of belonging to the peer group of bachelor candidates is seen as important. Additionally, comparing one's progress to others is relevant throughout the writing process, as it offers aspects of both competition and care, as Excerpt 1 from an interview shows.

Excerpt 1. We have maybe an advantage over others because we can compare our progress with each other and see it. So, we cheer each other on at the library, while others working alone may find it more difficult to do a thesis. (Pyry, second interview)

Even though the idea of good performance is present, thesis writing is understood as instrumental in "learning the process" throughout the writing, as follows:

Excerpt 2. Nevertheless, that bachelor's thesis is such a small work that any knowledge in it changes the world now. Luckily, I understood it quite early on and realized that, as long as I just learn these different steps, it helps me go a long way. I have, for example, many friends who agonize over a thesis because they want to do some proper research and find new information or

say something, but I try to say to them that it is not possible with a thesis, and here we just learn the process and obtain no information about anything at all. (Pry, the last interview)

Generally, in the instrumental agency positioning, institutional norms are seen as essential factors in academic writing and restrictions for writer agency. The instrumental agency positioning reflects the intention to follow the guidelines and rules and may encourage students to work on a thesis together if it involves mutual concern for the progress of each other's work and trust in assistance from the institution as well. Support from the institution provides opportunities for acquaintance with different ways of thinking and writing, and relying on norms may help understand the goal of institutional action. Despite this, academic writing is often approached with a one-size-fits-all mentality, without consideration of variations. This can result in strict excessive adherence to instructions, which can impede individual critical thinking and a flexible writing process.

4.1.2 Questioning agency positioning

Questioning agency positioning is likely to arise when institutional support does not meet expectations of normative action. The support from the institution is seen as important but insufficient. Dissatisfaction with the circumstances and willingness to change them leads to determination to have an impact on a seminar group and also to create other support groups. The action is characterized by one's power. At the end of the writing process, participation in any group or course that has provided support has been valued as very important. Self-organized support helps in finishing the thesis.

In this type of agency positioning there is a belief in one's capability, as can be noted in Figure 2. The actor in the foreground faces "the viewer" frankly and with a positive expression; at the same time, others are smiling in the background. The power over one's actions in a community is clearly illustrated.

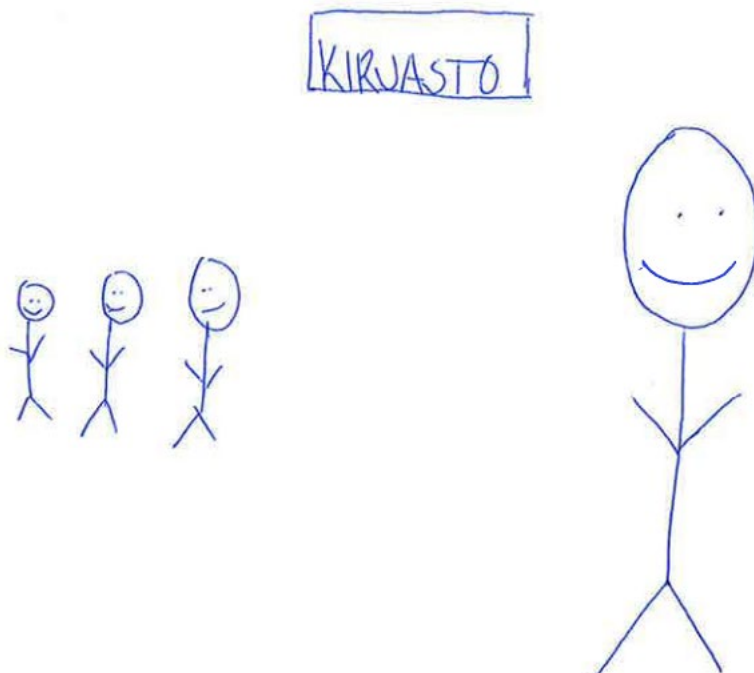


Figure 2. Questioning agency positioning illustrated by Suvi's self-portrait. The place in the drawing is labeled a "library."

The meaning of social connections is described, for example in the following way (Suvi, the last interview): “Peer support is always very important when I write, so that I can mirror experiences and the writing process with someone.” These supportive others are not however something taken for granted and organized by the institution, as is shown in Excerpt 3, where Iiris explains how she took part in organizing a social media discussion group for support between academic writers.

Excerpt 3. In a way, it seemed that scheduling [peer review sessions] in that situation itself was somehow terribly difficult. Then we were just, “Well now, let’s share these in this [WhatsApp] group like this. And is this okay for everyone?” And then somehow it seemed that for the teacher [the schedules] weren’t that important, but then, in a way, for us that kind of information when you need to have something ready, and this kind of turned out to be really important. So, then it was nice that we got organized like that. (Iiris, first interview)

It is characteristic of this type of agency positioning to have a role model and further a vision of being a sort of do-gooder. For example, Helmi (first interview) wants to be “Finland’s next new Martti Ahtisaari”, because she has been interested in working for peace and resolving conflicts for a long time. That kind of strong ideal is present during the writing process and orients action—for example by choice of topic and taking care of the progress in writing, and additionally contacting experts in the field outside the university—for example, politicians. The university is not seen as the only available resource.

Excerpt 4. As a student, it’s hard to get face-to-face teaching, and that kind of thing is quite scarce, and you just had to develop it by yourself so much that they then start to be the kind of personal-level relationships where you get that contact teaching or self-challenge. At least when analyzed so abruptly, the role and impact of the university is in that way quite diluted in terms of the actual bachelor’s process. (Kuisma, second interview)

Even though the role of the university is challenged, and the seminar during the thesis writing is seen as insufficient, some other support from the institution besides peer support is found to be beneficial later with increased awareness of different practices in academic writing. For example, an ongoing research communication course is seen as valuable in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5. In [a research communication course], I have been thinking about something like what techniques and ways to write things down or think about things or make idea papers [exist], or whether it is worth looking at old bachelor’s theses. Otherwise, I’ve always thought that something like that is a bit extra that you don’t necessarily need. But when you actually produce something big like this, then you realize that it’s really important that you do good groundwork, and yes, that’s what I’ve learned. (Suvi, second interview)

Since agency is seen here to be connected to an idea of changing the world with others, the institution itself as the only support available is brought into question when writer agency is explored. Pondering the meaning-making process and the significance of the thesis for the future increases engagement in the process. Orientation to collaborative action is a way to cope with the confusing situation and possibly increase understanding of the significance of caring relations in academic writing processes. The variety of instructions and writing practices is likely to be noticed when navigating in an academic community, and if suitable support from the institution is lacking, disappointed individuals may seek assistance elsewhere.

4.1.3 Self-willed agency positioning

In a self-willed agency positioning, personal goals are to some extent different from those of the institution, creating tension in the reception of institutional support and

weakening the sense of belonging with peers. Social practices may be broken because of the idea of doing more than is expected and only in one's own way. The positioning reflects a strong sense of agency. Support from the institution and being in a group are not valued; instead, people outside the institution are leaned on. Eventually, the aim of the action set by the institution is not considered rewarding enough when another competing route to continue life or studies emerges and steals attention. Thesis writing is likely to be discontinued.

Kuisma's self-portrait – Figure 3 – gives some hints of a self-willed agency positioning in the sense that it indicates doing things in one's own way without thinking of social practices and institutional restrictions.



Figure 3. *Self-willed agency positioning illustrated by Kuisma's self-portrait.*

The actor in the image has a large brush and other painting materials instead of conventional writing equipment. He is doing a lot: painting and speaking at the same time and leaving out the available support from the institution in the form of the easel behind. The actor is not looking into the eyes of “the viewer.” The clear identity representation—the actor as an artist—can be interpreted as a strong feature of the self-willed agency positioning that was echoed in the interview as well. The idea of having one’s own way of acting is supported by the following (Kuisma, last interview): “I’m original when I start arguing. So, in that sense, I like to be creative and am willing to take risks, even if someone thinks I’m going to fail completely.”

In this type of agency positioning, there is a dissonance between personal and institutional values. The desire to become a graduate who completes studies in one’s own way reflects a lack of understanding of institutional requirements and operating beyond them.

Excerpt 6. I’ve got that bachelor’s degree from a university of applied sciences in the background, so then, yes, I thought that I could obviously have directly credited it and then got straight to the master’s stage, but then I felt that it would be useful to complete this bachelor’s degree as well, this university-based bachelor’s degree. (Minttu, first interview)

However, due to limited resources such as time, skills, or study grants, the writing process can become confusing, leading individuals to seek advice from sources outside of the institution rather than from their supervisor or support group. Additionally, experiences of distance or feelings of difference from peers are factors that are likely to increase a lack of commitment to writing.

Excerpt 7. Then came the writer’s block for three weeks, and then I figured out – as I actually continued the work really hard during the fall – what caused it. It was because of the enhak [from “the guys” in a support group]. And that’s where the importance of soloing really began to materialize. That’s what I consider to be very valuable, and what I think – in my experience, he [=my friend] also considers it very valuable – is not really appreciated here. (Kuisma, last interview)

Soloing means writing according to different criteria than expected. An underlying lack of trust in the institution colors the actions in self-willed agency positioning and threatens their progress in writing. Support from outside the institution may serve as an extrinsic motivator, but individuals who distance themselves mentally from the institution or do not accept the criteria of academic writing may be at risk of not understanding the language used by the academic community. Focusing on goals needs to be at the core of motivation to continue or quit writing, and it highlights the importance of commitment and the influence of educational politics, such as the financial preconditions for studying. In the long run, the impossibility of achieving one’s own goals or the experienced meaninglessness of the thesis may ultimately bring the whole project to a conclusion, as happened with Minttu. She chose to go to work instead of writing the thesis.

4.1.4 Solitary agency positioning

Solitary agency positioning is characterized by several features: aspiration to write the thesis alone, learning through the process, and understanding peers as a disruption in one’s progress. Some flexibility, however, is needed in participating in the institutional support for the thesis to be completed. In a solitary agency positioning, support from the institution is experienced as useless, but from the point of view of the result, the support has been sufficient. Being in a group is not valued, whereas studying alone and discussing with sources are preferred. Since only obligatory participation is seen as necessary, interaction with others is avoided for as long as possible.

The self-portrait illustrating this agency positioning contains concrete tools and abstract emotional-cognitive aspects in writing around the actor, who is actively progressing and going further (to the right) (see Figure 4). The representatives of “thinking” and “the mess” related to academic writing are on the opposite corners of the image, as extremities. The actor does not make contact with “the viewer.”



Figure 4. *Solitary agency positioning illustrated by Touko's self-portrait.*

The drawing of light at the top left represents thinking, and the scribble below represents the messiness of the writing process, according to the student.

Starting the bachelor's thesis process or progressing with the thesis does not depend much on support from the institution but on the cohesion and balance in life in general. Namely, "[t]he aspects of life should be in order, like a good peaceful environment and food and sleep" so that one can get into "the taste of work" (Touko, last interview). Writing progresses according to a study plan and personal rhythm. Courses are not considered significantly helpful in thesis writing, which must be done independently. That is why compulsory courses are attended with minimal participation in mind. Discussion with others is almost avoided.

Excerpt 8. If I talk about these things too much, I just talk and talk, then I'm not writing that bachelor's thesis. It's just a good way to approach the thesis that you write some version of it, then you throw it out for the eyes of others, and that's it – well, others don't actually crush it but say what's wrong with it. Even if you go and speak, well, no one can write it for someone else. (Touko, second interview)

The word "crush" in Excerpt 8 exposes anxiety and insecurity in feedback situations. Scarce interactions or discussions with peers may be a reason for the positional fluctuation. Positioning oneself in extremities, for example, alternately as an impostor and a researcher is connected to self-confidence, as Excerpt 9 shows.

Excerpt 9. The uncertainty of not having a clear vision of what I'm doing sometimes makes me a little anxious, and I get the feeling that this is just this kind of impostor syndrome, maybe. I'm just pretending that I know something, even though I don't really know anything. But you have to take an attitude towards it somehow. (Touko, second interview)

Discussion with "characters" or "voices" in literature may create a feeling of belonging and fellowship, however, that is not so simple to gain with peers. Touko (last interview) experiences that he has had "such a dialogue with other experts in the field," even though experts in the field will probably not read his Finnish-language bachelor's thesis. That kind of positioning oneself as a conversationalist among characters in the literature of the field is typical of a solitary agency positioning. The literature provides an essential route to gaining access to an academic community. Reflection is connected to criticality and responsibility toward one's actions and helps to see the importance of others in developing the writing. In the end, social interaction with actual people is still needed to obtain a realistic estimate of the state of the work.

4.2 Agency positionings and institutional support

Based on the findings, agency positioning can be illustrated with experienced institutional support as shown in Figure 5. The perspectives of significance and sufficiency provide insights into the usefulness of institutional support. A student may consider the support significant or insignificant for him-/herself per se and, on the other hand, experience its sufficiency during the writing process (i.e., whether the support is enough to complete the thesis). For instance, in the instrumental agency positioning the institutional support is experienced as sufficient and significant. When the experience is the opposite and the institutional support is seen as useless, the positioning is characterized by self-will. In cases where institutional support is insufficient, thesis writing is at risk of being abandoned.

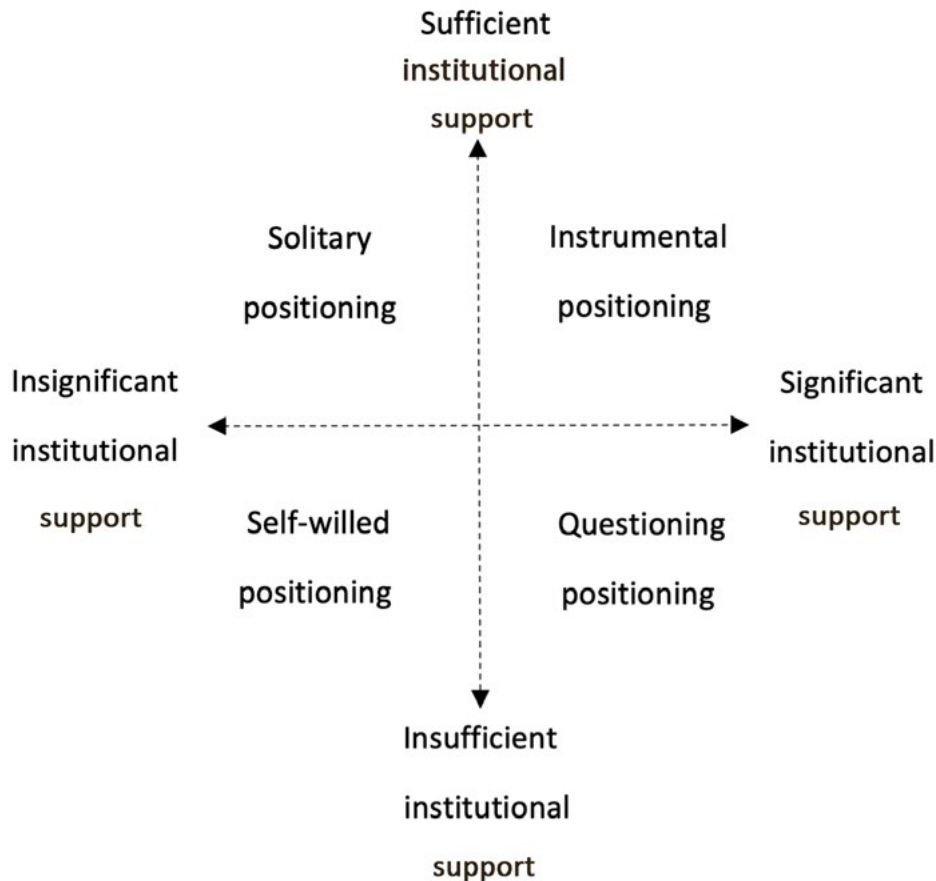


Figure 5. *The modes of positioning agency with experienced support from the institution.*

Although Figure 5 should not be considered definitive, it can be used as an informative map to identify different positionings and possible relations. In theory, a student can position her-/himself as an agent in various ways, but based on the data of this study, it seems that the dominance of one or two positionings in the students' reflections on writing is more common than broad variation. This might be due to the natural human striving for coherence in actions and narratives concerning self, despite the tension between continuity and change (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Change becomes possible with new experiences, an understanding of the world, and social interaction (Heikkinen, 2018). Students' perceptions of institutional support may shape their action designing when they consider what type of action is possible or available to them. A certain catalyst is needed to generate a clear change in the agency positioning. For example, an emerging new goal, difficult circumstances, understanding of the situation, or an aspect of trust can work as such a catalyst.

Trust is also linked to a sense of care or psychological safety (Jääskelä et al., 2020), which is essential for students to feel a sense of belonging in a community and to work toward a sociocultural purpose. Without trust in the support provided by the institution, the resources available to students, such as collaborative action, may become invisible, making learning and writing difficult. Thus, the perception of one's position is linked to possible action. The whole situation can be comprehended in a new way, however, if one is aware of other possible positionings. According to Harré (2010, p. 53), "[c]hange in positionings can change the meanings of the actions people are performing because beliefs about positions partly determine the illocutionary force of members' actions." This can be understood as by speaking about one's positioning, a person can make a change in his/her state of affairs.

5 Discussion

We aimed to study the dynamic nature of agency in academic writing. We scrutinized students' reflections on their bachelor's thesis-writing processes by applying positioning and visual analyses and found the importance of experienced support in their different agency positionings. The students' different orientations to action and their experiences of social support and relationships with peers and supervisors were reflected in four agency positionings, which were *instrumental*, *questioning*, *self-willed*, and *solitary*. These positionings were illustrated with excerpts from the interview data and self-portraits. Our study indicated that a capacity to direct one's own research and writing process is bound to the support from the institution. This support cannot be understood as unidirectional support from the supervisor to the student, but rather as an interaction of students, their peers, supervisors, and teachers in the institution. Thus, agency does not appear only as an individual process, but also as the interaction between people in time and place.

The agency positionings brought different aspects of social resources to the forefront that are important to notice during an academic writing process. For instance, in the instrumental agency positioning, the awareness of sociocultural norms came to the fore; in the questioning agency positioning, mediational collaborative action did; in the self-willed agency positioning, institutional restrictions came to the fore; and in the solitary agency positioning, individual reflection on one's action did. These aspects helped raise awareness about certain issues in academic writing. The self-willed agency positioning, however, where individual and institutional goals do not align, can be the most challenging for progress in thesis writing. In such cases, students may not consider the support provided by the institution to be important or sufficient. They may rely on themselves, seek support elsewhere, or interrupt the writing process. The relationships outside the university may shape their writing work, especially when the seminar does not meet their expectations. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of competing discourses and practices at the heart of academic literacies (e.g., Lea, 2011).

Our study revealed that thesis writing is typically viewed as an individual task at most with the support of peers. This is evident from the self-portraits created by the participants, which did not depict institutional support from supervisors or teachers. It is important that educators try to create spaces for open discussion about social practices in academic writing and enhance a safe study climate among students, because sociocultural norms and beliefs can be reflected in students' positionings and interactions with each other and in the community. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Clark and Ivanič (1997/2006), have found that academic writers consider examining their ideas, self-positioning, and establishing their sociopolitical identity as writers to be important aspects of their writing process. According to (Jääskelä et al. (2020), teacher-student relationships and also emotional safety and support from peers can increase participation and facilitate agency, contributing to students' motivation and success in their studies. Our study also supports the idea that the experience of trust in a climate of safe interaction and collaboration positively impacts student agency (see also e.g., Jääskelä et al., 2017, 2020). Trust in oneself and institutional support seem to be essential elements in agency positionings and is related to the understanding of sociocultural action.

Different orientations toward social relations may enable different kinds of agency in the academic writing process, depending on situational and sociocultural factors. By positioning oneself, a student may limit or open up possibilities, which is why it is important to understand the relevance of positioning when offering or arranging suitable support for students. Based on our findings, we suggest that both compulsory and voluntary seminars, workshops, courses, and low-threshold meetings should be available often enough for students to discuss and create a conscious relationship

with writing in many different modes and positions. While it is the institution's responsibility to organize opportunities for students to develop their agency, dialogue about expectations is essential during the writing process (e.g., Eteläpelto, 2007). Thesis supervisors and writing teachers can use the agency positionings offered by this study as inspiration for how they might discuss and address the possibilities and necessities of writing with their students as well as in supporting their writing process. By becoming aware of positioning in social relations, students can recognize the social nature of meaning-making processes, cultural ideologies, and personal agency. Discussing academic writing and its requirements can help students reflect on their actions, grow (e.g., Castelló & Iñesta, 2012), gain a sense of legitimacy and confidence, and engage themselves in the community (Deeley et al., 2019; Gourlay, 2009).

Our study shows the significance of positioning, social awareness, and ambivalence in agency in the context of academic writing. When analyzing the implications of this study, we can draw a couple of perspectives that can be used both in research and in writing pedagogy. Encouraging students to use different semiotic resources, such as verbal and visual resources, can open interesting views of agency. Generally, communicative practices and meaning-making processes should be seen as translingual and various semiotic resources should be utilized, as then cooperation and mutual understanding are likely to increase (Canagarajah, 2012). A simple drawing or a self-portrait can serve as a methodological tool for reflection about the writing process and as a pedagogical tool that helps to position oneself in an academic community and to understand different agency positionings in academic writing. Engaging in discussions with peers and reflection activities that explore different agency positionings and their connection to possibilities and necessities in the sociocultural environment can help students view academic writing holistically.

When considering the complex process of academic writing, developing inclusive writing pedagogy and ensuring equitable access to academic writing can strengthen students' agency. It requires understanding the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students, their varied study habits, and their familiarity with academic writing as a process of socialization into discipline-specific norms, and taking conscious action to foster fair practices, establish a safe study atmosphere, and provide suitable forms of support. Equitable access to academic writing could be enhanced by creating a fair and inclusive academic environment that respects and empowers diverse voices. At the universities, systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups, such as financial constraints or lack of institutional support should be addressed (e.g., Burke et al. 2016). Moreover, awareness of valuing should be raised, including awareness of ideas, epistemologies, and methodologies from non-dominant cultures or traditions. The academic community could also foster a more equitable and empowering environment for all writers by developing assessment, for instance ensuring peer review and grading systems are impartial and culturally aware, avoiding bias in evaluating academic writing styles or topics. Constructive, inclusive, and dialogic feedback practices can enhance students' agency and promote equality in academic writing. Also, appreciating students for their idealism and efforts to make the world a better place may support them in their research and writing process. It is not a cliché to say that students are in touch with the future. From a social justice perspective, inclusive pedagogy offers equal opportunities for all and can enable students to navigate the academic community critically and ethically by creating an equitable and empowering environment.

When reflecting on our study, it should be noted that the number of participants was relatively small, as is typical in qualitative and narrative research. Furthermore, the voluntary participants were interested in academic writing and research in general. Additionally, self-portrait drawing was used as a pedagogical tool to raise awareness of writers' agency after completing the theses, not in the middle of the writing process. In future research, portrait drawing could be implemented in the middle of the process

as an intervention to see how it works as a pedagogical tool in practicing agency. In addition, social network maps could be used to capture thesis writers' closest, close, and remote relationships in more detail. In addition, anthropologic longitudinal research in various study groups and learning spaces could provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of writer agency.

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APPENDIX

RESEARCHER'S GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWS (translated from Finnish)

Get prepared for an interview

- Schedule the meeting and book a recorder.
- Take along
 - ◊ the assigned consent
 - ◊ the recorder, mobile phone, and their cords
 - ◊ questions
 - ◊ printed templates for experience lines
 - ◊ pens and paper
 - ◊ calendar
 - ◊ tissues.

Write notes after the interview

- What made the interviewee tell me about his/her experiences the way she/he did?
- Why is the story important for the interviewee? What is interesting in general?
- What did I do with the interviewee, how did it feel, what happened and what did I remember?
- What was the interviewing experience like?
- Other?

Remember also

- Individuals may experience the same event differently—remember individual differences.
- Research is not about satisfying others' needs, however, they should be reckoned.
- Narrative research is re-search ergo searching, meaning that the subject has to be named many times, time after time.
- Try to understand the interviewee's experience narratively in a three-dimensional research space (dimensions of time, individuality-sociality, and position).

RESEARCHER'S SUPPORT TEMPLATE FOR THE FIRST INTERVIEWS (translated from Finnish)

Beginning

- I appreciate, that you participate in this study (reference to the consent).
- I collect data as a researcher.
- I listen to you and will not talk about your interview with other people.
- Why did you want to participate in this study?

Experience-line (past)

- Makes it easier to talk about academic writing.
- Try to remember the first moment, which you can perceive as a starting point for your bachelor's thesis process.
- Mark it down on the paper and draw a line or curve, which illustrates your thesis process from that time until the present moment. The horizontal axis shows time and the vertical axis positive and negative feelings and emotions.
- Designate events, phases, places, feelings, situations, turning points, or similar. You may finish your drawing.
- Tell me about your drawing.
- (Can you show particular moments on the line where you have been making some notes? What kind of feelings have you had then?)

Academic writing

- How has writing your bachelor's thesis felt so far?
- What is it like to write a bachelor's thesis?
- What is your relationship with academic writing?
- What are you like as a writer of an academic text?
- What would you like to be like as a writer of an academic text?
- What does writing your bachelor's thesis mean to you?
- What is central to you in academic writing?
- What topic are you writing a thesis on?
- Why that particular topic?

Experience-line (future)

- Sketch on the template, how your bachelor's thesis writing process will proceed in the future. Tell me about the drawing.
- In the research writing course you have made a collage that represents your bachelor's thesis writing process. Could you tell me about the collage?

In addition

- What else would you like to tell me?
- How does this study look like?