

Changing identities in the narratives of academic writing

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Even though identity formation is seen as essential in learning academic writing, it has not received much attention at the Bachelor thesis level in higher education research. This narrative case study focuses on the identity formation of two young students of philosophy during their bachelor's thesis writing processes by applying narrative analysis and the model of the hero's journey to interview data. The study demonstrates students' adaptation and resistance to institutional norms and social practices and identifies many possible identities, including an institutional one and two different heroes: the grower and the fighter. The findings suggest that students recognise that the institutional narrative of bachelor's thesis writing has a clear impact on their identity transformations. This study challenges the idea of purely rational and technical understandings of academic writing and describes it as a diverse transformational journey which can be utilised in revealing underlying questions about academic practices and assumptions in order to help students understand academic writing and their actions more deeply. The study offers cultural archetypes as a pedagogical way to explore students' learning experiences and identity change in becoming an academic writer. Additionally, useful guiding questions are provided for pedagogical use.

Key Words: Identity, narrative, academic writing.

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that, as academic literacies change together with changes in global higher education, this has an impact on the expectations for students' academic writing and their identities as well (Lea, 2012). Hence, it is important to support students in their studies, especially in academic writing through which they not only learn academic practices but also create their relationship to their academic field and identify themselves in academia. Students being unable to identify themselves as part of the learning community may be one reason among others for them to drop out of their studies. In Finland, the geographical location of this study, dropout rates have risen from about 4.2 percent to about 6.2 percent in the 2000s (Statistics Finland, 31.3.2024). Recently, one significant global change has been the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence, including large language models, and its increasingly widespread use, which also challenges the learning of academic writing (see e.g. Calderon & Herrera, 2025; Delello et al., 2025). Academic writing should not be seen as just a technical skill, because that does not foster a deep understanding of the process of knowledge formation and discipline-specific writing practices, nor does it encourage authors to see their own potential as part of the scientific community

(e.g. French, 2018). Supporting students' awareness of their identity formation is important for their engagement at university (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Therefore, it is also important to explore the learning process during academic writing and during the striving for an understanding of how knowledge is constructed within a particular discipline.

This study draws on the approach of academic literacies, which views literacy as a social practice and socioculturally mediated action (e.g. Cazden et al., 1996; Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Ivanič, 1998), meaning that learning academic writing is understood as the formation of knowledge and identities in the context of disciplines, rather than general skills or socialisation (e.g. Lea & Street, 1998). Academic Literacies is closely related to New Literacy Studies, which has been informed by writers' accounts of their engagement in academic writing (e.g. Lillis, 2001), which is here also viewed as socially situated, ideologically inscribed meaning making that includes identity formation and working with different semiotic resources. This study highlights the importance of identity in learning experiences of writing and illustrates its formation during two students' bachelor's thesis writing processes by applying the narrative of the hero's journey at a time before the release of generative artificial intelligence specifically designed for writing (i.e., ChatGPT in 11/2022). The study focuses on the identity work of two young students of philosophy, Touko and Kuisma (pseudonyms), who have high expectations for their bachelor's thesis writing but differ in their identity work and writing process. Through their narration of how they navigated through academic writing, socio-cultural phenomena in the form of institutional and counter-narratives can be recognised (e.g. Bamberg, 2004). As well as identifying what these narratives are, this paper suggests how explicit discussion of such narratives with students may be used to support them during their academic writing process.

Identities during students' academic writing processes at the bachelor thesis level have been rarely studied (Ädel et al., 2023; Haines, 2015) compared to studies on first-year (e.g. Gourlay, 2009; Lea & Street, 1998; Perrow, Feldstein, & Sieler, 2020), masters (e.g. Cameron, Nairn, & Higgings, 2009), and doctoral levels (e.g. Carlino, 2012). Generally, in Europe, a bachelor's degree includes basic studies and intermediate studies and is the culmination of the undergraduate degree and a phase before advanced studies and a master's degree. The bachelor's thesis is thus a key challenge in students' academic journey, and that is why it is important to investigate that step before the master's level. Ädel et al. (2023) have suggested that further research could be carried out on how students' roles change during the bachelor's thesis writing processes and which factors influence those roles, and this current study answers that need. Instead of a role, understood as a part played by a person, this paper adopts a broader narrative approach to identity. Identity is seen here as multifaceted, dynamic, and social (e.g. Burgess & Ivanič, 2010), not as a stable personal quality. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What kind of identities do the students form during their experiences of learning to write academically? How do these identities reflect institutional expectations of academic writing?

2. Sociocultural and narrative approaches to identities

This study approaches identities in academic literacies by integrating a sociocultural and narrative perspective. Academic Literacies itself "is a critical approach to the researching and teaching of writing and literacy and to the role and potential of these activities for individual meaning making and academic knowledge construction in higher education" (Lillis & Harrington, 2015, pp. 13–14). The study discusses the conflicting and contested nature of writing practices, and hence it focuses especially on power relations and identities (e.g. Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Harrington, 2015).

In the sociocultural approach, identity is understood as an actively internalised social and cultural phenomenon, where language shapes our focus, guides our actions over time and also forms our agency (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Rió & Álvarez, 2007; Vygotsky, 1930, 1999). Although identity is a dynamic process shaped by individual biographies and deeply rooted in long-term

social interactions, individuals can still construct their own identities to some extent (e.g. Eteläpelto, 2007; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Ivanič, 1998). This is particularly evident through narrative practices, which serve as thought experiments that allow us to explore unfamiliar worlds, including our own history, by employing our imagination (Ricoeur, 1988). In the narrative approach, identity is seen as a discursive construct, meaning that individuals can tell stories about their own life and ideal self by utilising available cultural story models (e.g. Bamberg, 2012; Eteläpelto, 2007; Ricoeur, 1988; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2016). Identity can also be understood as narrative that is unstable because of human imagination, and that is why one can tell variable and contradictory stories of one's own life (Polkinghorne, 1996; Ricoeur, 1988). Based on these theorisations, identity is defined here as both a partly unconscious, socially internalised perspective of self and an active process of becoming through experiences.

From the perspective of narrativity, students take part in a certain kind of story while doing their bachelor's thesis at university. The institutional descriptions of bachelor's thesis writing, such as written documents and oral instructions, can be understood as an institutional narrative that offers a model of an assumed normative experience that is unconsciously internalised and reproduced in personal stories – or resisted (Andrews, 2004). Resistance against the institutional narrative provides the possibility to form counter-narratives involving different identities. Institutional narratives can be seen as sociocultural frames that act as guidance yet also reduce the range of actions, and counter-narratives can be seen as the flipsides of sociocultural frames (e.g. Bamberg, 2004). Narratives play essential parts in identity construction and relate to culturally shared values and existing normative discourses that are considered and contested (Bamberg, 2012). Identity involves issues of continuity, change, and permanence, which require navigation between past, present, and future, as well as the construction of agency in potential personal development (Bamberg, 2012). In responding to the two research questions, this study focuses on change, especially the changes in the students' identities during their writing processes.

One aspect of addressing the change in identity formation is to recognise the hero narrative which is common in Western culture and functions as a model for storytelling and a mirror in which to examine experience (Campbell, 1966; Douglas & Carless, 2015). The hero myth, which derives from ancient Greece, depicts a skilled and courageous individual who undertakes a journey of challenges that have to be overcome in pursuit of truth and meaning (e.g. Douglas & Carless, 2015). The heroic journey contains three main phases: departure, initiation, and return (Campbell, 1966). In other words, an individual embarks on a quest for something, faces a test, and ultimately is rewarded. The hero narrative has been utilised to some extent in student guidance as a framework to help students in their writing processes (Gooch, 2021; Regalado, Georgas, & Burgess, 2017), for example in making students' emotional and transformational dimensions of their academic writing journey visible (Batty et al., 2020; Moore, 2013). I have come across no evidence of the pedagogical use of the hero narrative in academic writing in Finland, however.

In this study, I compare students' stories with the hero narrative by applying the model of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1966; Moore, 2013) to illustrate identity formations during the bachelor's thesis writing processes. The students' descriptions of their thesis writing supported my decision to utilise this narrative model. For example, I found metaphors related to fighting (e.g. from Kuisma's interviews: "*sensei*" [in Japan a teacher of martial arts]) and sports (e.g. from Touko's interviews: "*running*") where the heroic journey is traditionally widely sustained (Douglas & Carless, 2015). Common narratives "tie us with other people, events and actions" and are thus needed for sharing experiences even though they may constrain identities or behaviors (Douglas & Carless, 2015, p. 23).

3. Methods and material

3.1. Narrative case study and educational context

This study is a narrative case study whose value lies in providing a nuanced view of human action, interpreting its complexity, offering a more insightful perspective compared to general theories, and enhancing the learning experience for the reader (Flybergg, 2010). By comparing the students' narrations and comparing them with the institutional narrative, it is possible to find general significance in them and strengthen research with new exemplars (Flybergg, 2010). In that way, students' narrations may represent identities in progress and link to broader social identities and cultural narratives (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

The educational context for this study is Finland and specifically, the Bachelor studies in Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä. A bachelor's thesis is an obligatory part of the program (University of Jyväskylä, 2019), and it is written after basic studies during intermediate studies, typically at the end of the second academic year but it depends on the individual's study progress. It is an approximately 25-page report on a small research project that is typically conducted in an obligatory research seminar during an academic semester. The written instructions for thesis writing and the seminar offers a rationale for the assignment, gives guidance for finding support, describes thesis writing in general and explicates assessment criteria (Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, 2021). The instructions state that when outlining the idea paper and research plan, it is advisable to familiarise oneself with the previous literature on the subject. Thesis writing is also characterised as story writing. Students are guided to tell a story about a chosen topic, for example how they formed a research problem and solved it, and what they found. Ten pages of this 19-page document provide instructions on how to properly reference sources and construct a reference list, and the document is available for students on the internet. It is important to notice that these instructions for the students who participate in this study covers both empirical and theoretical as well as philosophical research, a combination which may cause confusion among them.

In the seminar, students receive supervision and peer support and get acquainted with the selection of research topics as well as with the practices of scientific research and writing. Usually, students are given smaller tasks during seminars, such as outlining an idea paper, writing a research plan, and making a report on a scientific article. While working on their thesis, students engage with the theoretical discussions in their field as well.

The learning outcomes of the seminar and thesis are that the student can undertake and implement a writing and research process: compose a research plan, search and evaluate information, follow ethical guidelines, apply a method, write a logical thesis, present the research, argue the choices made, and evaluate both the reliability and significance of their own research as well as that of peers in a constructive manner. The thesis is evaluated by the supervisor on a scale from 1 (Fair) to 5 (Excellent).

3.2. Participants and data

This study is part of a broader research project involving several students at the Bachelor thesis level in social sciences and philosophy at a Finnish university (Rantala-Lehtola & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022; Rantala-Lehtola & Tarnanen, 2025). The study was approved by the institution and approval by an institutional ethics board was not required.

I recruited the participants from an obligatory research communication course in which I worked at the beginning of the course, as it was shared with other teachers. The participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study, and their participation was voluntary, and withdrawing from the study at any time was possible. I chose two young male students Touko and Kuisma (pseudonyms) for this study among others who worked on their bachelor's theses because they both studied philosophy, and their stories represent different academic writing processes and identity formations in which there is a gap between the academic purpose of the thesis assignment and

their understanding of what they are supposed to do, which may be due to their backgrounds. They have both done some practical work which is quite different from academic work. I have anonymised or removed people's names and other identifying information and managed the data in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation of European Union (GDPR, 2016/679).

Touko and Kuisma were interested in research in general and wanted to support it by participating in this study. I met and interviewed them separately several times during their research and writing processes outside the course context. They both turned out to be highly analytical, reflective, and ambitious students.

The data collection involved interviews with the two participants at the beginning, middle, and end of their writing processes. I followed the basic principles of a narrative interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) by encouraging the students to talk about their thesis writing process with the help of an application of the lifeline technique, where the line depicts significant ups and downs of writing (see Rantala-Lehtola & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022), and I asked them to recount their experiences with academic writing as well. In the last interview, the students made a self-portrait in a line drawing of themselves as academic writers.

I interviewed Touko three times. I recorded the first interview with him when he had made notes from sources he might need in his thesis. That was before his seminar had started. The second time I interviewed him was in the middle of his writing process, and the third when he had submitted the thesis and it had been graded. He managed to finish the thesis in the normative time frame of one academic semester.

Kuisma's process was longer; it took two years for him to finish the thesis. I interviewed him six times. The first interview was conducted when he had found some sources for his thesis and started a research communication course. He had participated in the seminar prior to the course and felt that he had not made satisfactory progress. The next interviews were carried out during his writing process and the last one after the thesis had been graded. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish and transcribed by the researcher.

3.3. Analysis

I scrutinised the data by applying first the analysis of narratives approach, which focuses on significant events and meanings to identify themes concerning the research questions (Kim, 2019). Next, I applied narrative analysis which creates coherent and metaphorically rich stories with essential themes (Kim, 2019; Polkinghorne, 1995; Sinner, 2013). I describe the steps of the analysis below. Third, I compared students' stories with the hero narrative model for storytelling (Campbell, 1966). When the students talked about their writing process, they also represented themselves as they wanted me as a researcher to see them. In this way, identity became a performance inside the narrations. I was acting as a researcher and also a creator in the interpretation of narrating when attempting to understand lived experiences through time, contexts, and social dimensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In the analysis of narratives, I proceeded with transcriptions of the interviews in the following way: at first, I organised sequences and sentences of transcription so that a chronological plot could be perceived, and removed redundant sentences, such as repetitions. Secondly, I coded the sentences that concerned learning experiences in academic writing in general (e.g. the process itself, writing academically) during the thesis writing process and identity. I then read through the data several times and checked sentences indicating meaningful experiences with the help of the lines of ups and downs heuristic (Rantala-Lehtola & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022; see also Pirskanen et al., 2015), descriptions of institutional norms and individual resistance against them, feelings, descriptions of self and others, uncertainties, questionings of self and actions, beliefs, goals, wishes and fears, and metaphors. Third, I identified and listed manifested identities and learning experiences in academic writing, questions the student had had in mind, and characterisations of

the institutional and personal narratives (Bamberg, 2004). I collected these lists of elements of both students' interview transcriptions in a table and was able to notice possible changes in identity work in different phases of their writing processes.

Next, in the narrative analysis (Kim, 2019), I created first-person stories by organising and combining coded sentences that indicated learning experiences and identities in the transcriptions, and then smoothing them, making them a bit condensed (see Appendix 1). Altogether, I created three stories from Touko's narrations and accordingly six from Kuisma's. I also noted features of sociocultural narratives as I wrote up the institutional narrative based on the interviews and the instructions for thesis writing and seminar (Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, 2021), and I evaluated the students' stances toward it.

In the last phase of analyses, I compared students' experiences and narratives in bachelor's thesis writing with the hero narrative. The students went for something, were tested, and in the end were rewarded. So, I have collected the students' personal meanings and stories and analysed them through the model of the hero's journey.

4. Findings

The findings concerning changes in the students' identities are constructed by applying the form of the hero narrative: departure, initiation, and return. Extracts from the transcriptions are used to illustrate the students' experiences. At the end of the article, different heroes and conceptions related to academic writing are illustrated.

4.1. Touko's change

4.1.1. Grower

Touko gives an image of himself as a calm thinker who ponders and uses his words carefully, as we see in his remarks quoted below. He describes himself as a humble person who avoids being the center of attention in a group. In the phase of *departure*, he starts writing "hidden", that is to say on his own, keeping his writing to himself but gradually, step-by-step begins to participate in the seminar and fit the writing in his rhythm of life. He knows how to manage his time. From the research point of view, in the phase of *initiation*, Touko finds positive aspects of his past identity that are partly constructing his actions, and in this way, he gains a more holistic agentive perspective on his bachelor's thesis writing process. Touko sees writing as a human activity like any other work. This kind of broad identity of a "human being" involves learning and growing and further transitions, for example from freshman to Bachelor and from hider – an academic writer who does not yet openly participate fully in the group – to participator. His research and writing process can be described as reflecting the identity of "a grower" as he also points out in the last interview, in the phase of *return*. One can consider the grower as a type of hero, as they overcome challenges and grow mentally.

4.1.2. Departure

Touko starts studying at the university and finds many things new. He wonders, for example, why a bachelor's thesis is even necessary. He orientates himself towards the task, however, and a couple of months before the inception of the thesis, in the first seminar meeting, he starts writing "hidden". "Well, I'm writing some essay here", he thinks, and cannot refer to it as bachelor's thesis writing before "one is certain or when one is committed to it" (Touko, 1st interview). He is not eager to discuss his work with others, and especially at the beginning he prefers writing over speaking and adapts to the seminar somewhat reluctantly. "I've been doing this thesis really hidden so I still don't want to talk about it to others" (Touko, 1st interview).

Overcoming the resistance and committing to the thesis writing practices takes time. "It's a long-distance run, not just some sprints and breaks", Touko thinks as he starts to understand that writing "must follow those scientific practices, it is restrictive and demanding, but it is still being

done” (Touko, 1st interview). The identity of a hider needs to change into the identity of a participator because participation in the seminar is required.

4.1.3. Initiation

Touko engages in his research, encounters challenges, and finds himself in a role he would prefer not to be in. *“It’s frustrating that the research is playing with concepts, and I’ve somehow ended up in the role of a kind of historian instead of having a phenomenon (to study in that thesis)”* (Touko, 2nd interview).

By “historian”, Touko is referring to the necessity for the student to investigate the history of philosophy and to conduct a literature review. He adapts to the uncomfortable identity, however, but decides that studying the thoughts of historical figures would not happen in the later master’s thesis process.

He thinks that his vocational background sometimes serves as an explanation for his actions and finds positive influence from the past in his learning experiences in academic writing. *“At least I can already write, and I can formulate sentences. There is also some kind of strength in being able to write grammatically clear text (–) and not throw just any concepts into the text”* (Touko, 2nd interview).

Something that helps Touko to tolerate the reluctant role of “a historian” is his understanding of being a learner and gaining status.

It’s nice and motivating to get something concrete done – the Bachelor’s degree. That goal is pretty instrumental, although of course there should be value in doing it and not only in the outcome. However, it’s nice to think that I’ll get the degree and I’m no longer a freshman but even a Bachelor. (Touko, 2nd interview)

Touko accepts his position as a student per se, which he perceives as an aspect of human growth, and which can be seen as a rebirth of identity. He reflects on his experiences through the broad identity of a human being.

Somehow for me this is growing and increasing control over my own life. And maybe it’s hard to detach that learning about how to do a bachelor’s (thesis) from all the other learning. I’ve probably just learnt some kind of life management and things like that. I may not have so much need to go to many places and prove myself, but can be more neutral. So that has been perhaps the great realisation of this autumn. (Touko, 2nd interview)

During the process, Touko learns that focused writing depends on the general mastery of one’s own life. He understands writing as part of everyday life and describes writing as *“a sensitive sport”* (Touko, 2nd interview).

4.1.4. Return

Touko’s thesis is evaluated with a grade of very good (4). He is very pleased.

[I]t’s (Bachelor’s thesis) a really good milestone before a master’s thesis. It gives you a really good idea of what it is like here at the university and what is done here, or what a scientific text is. It has been a really important job to get in and understand (what is done at university). (Touko, 3rd, last interview)

In the end, Touko obtains the identity of Bachelor which is a socially available identity usually gained during the studies and identifies his strengths and learning.

I have some experience of the whole process. At least I can tell first-year students what writing a bachelor’s thesis is like, how to define the topic, and how to approach the research question. At least I have the readiness to start writing a scientific text, to gather information about the process, the ability to

narrow down a question, and of course, perhaps the ability to evaluate a scientific text. (Touko, 3rd, last interview)

Understanding oneself as a learning human being colours Touko's thinking. *"There is so much that should be mastered that learning and reading do not stop. Man is very limited in the face of all that scientific knowledge"* (Touko, 3rd, last interview). Touko's heroic academic writing journey has not only been a quest but also a rite of passage, by which he became a full member of his academic social group.

4.2. Kuisma's change

4.2.1. Fighter

Kuisma introduces himself as a quick thinker who likes talking and being in socially challenging situations, as we see in the quotes below. He has many projects and that creates some problems with time management. His research and writing process reflects the identity of an underdog. He has a confrontation in the beginning, in the phase of *departure*, and he still has some ambivalence towards the process at the end, in the phase of *return*. He fights as an underdog against the status quo and socio-cultural practices in philosophy and frames his action as *"a test lab"*. He approaches philosophy as if it was an empirical science, which misleads him in the writing process. In addition, he is troubled by the question of whether thinking and writing are separate processes or not and his preference for speaking over writing is one reason for his slow progress. Instead of seeing himself as a Bachelor, he positions himself among professional researchers, but at the end of the phase of *initiation*, he realises he must be flexible in his objectives and accept his position as a student learner. From the research and fight point of view, Kuisma recognises his positive entrepreneurship and the limited power of an individual actor.

4.2.2. Departure

In his first year of university, Kuisma outlines what he will study in his Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral thesis, and as a result he organises a research club where he can process his ideas. However, he intends to start designing the bachelor's thesis only when the seminar begins. When the seminar starts, he cannot keep up with it because of the challenges in finding and reading literature and because of his other study commitments. The seminar ends, and Kuisma takes a break from the thesis process. He thinks of his pause (Kuisma, 1st interview): *"I can't wait until my master's thesis, I can't wait until my doctoral dissertation as I have something to say about how research should be done."* Kuisma (1st interview) dissociates himself from peers by taking *"a big leap away from the fact that I am not the same as everyone else as an interpreter of history, but something new"*. The status of a Bachelor as a socially available identity is abandoned when he sees himself as more ambitious than others and chooses to try a different kind of research. *"I kind of identified more with this kind of human science research that respects methodology and its explanation and hypothesis testing"* (Kuisma, 1st interview).

Kuisma recognises differences between fields of science but does not yet understand the reasons for the variety behind knowledge production. He sees his new study as *"a test lab for developing research skills"* and the research club as *"a tool to make the process work"* (Kuisma, 1st interview). He positions himself as a researcher. In addition, he receives emotional support from his two wise old academic friends outside the university, whom he refers to by name in several interviews.

4.2.3. Initiation

During the research process, Kuisma experiences strong opposition from the research club's members concerning his attempt to conduct contemporary research based on the type of text in the scientific article. He has difficulties also in time management. Despite these drawbacks, Kuisma continues on his path until he becomes exhausted, and he needs to check his goals and recognise the importance of personal limits and resources.

I'm pretty much in favor of limiting what I have to say in the research report, which I have of course done with thoughts and notes. But it's so difficult to write a research report, so now you must try to play with your own resources to see what you can and can't say in it. (...) But that self-image as a researcher, it has remained the same here, where the awakening began. But then it has become clearer, of course, what resources can be used to realise which dreams. (Kuisma, 3rd interview)

Even though Kuisma starts to understand the risks in his study by listening to others, he continues with more decisiveness and expresses criticism.

That's where I realised this difference between courage and moderation, which is related to being a researcher or arguing in general. And it has been such a learning experience that I have also learned to measure my own level of risk-taking, in a way, how big the risks are that you ultimately take when writing a research text or arguing with others. (Kuisma, 4th interview)

Because of the continuous contesting feedback from his friends in the research club, Kuisma experiences “writer’s block” (Kuisma, 5th interview). He starts to think of authorities he admires, including well-known scientists who have changed paradigms in sciences, such as Wittgenstein, and understands that he himself challenges the status quo with his study as well.

In a way, there's no better time when you're ready to make a contemporary philosophical argument. Either you start practising it, or you put it aside and do historical research. And this is, of course, my way of doing things, and the fact that I believe I must start practising now naturally challenges (the status quo). (Kuisma, 5th interview)

Gradually Kuisma starts to understand his high-ambition mission of doing contemporary research. The important turning point concerning the progress in his writing process is some kind of acceptance of his position as a Bachelor. He accepts the role even though the idea of the identity of a scientist may remain in the background. When that happens, he meets his supervisor and gets useful tips. He needs to play the role of an interpreter of history.

4.2.4. Return

Kuisma is satisfied with his process in the end, but he wonders about the grade of Satisfactory (2) for the thesis, although he understands the reasons for it. His main learning experiences are about understanding the different identities of a professional researcher and a student and his own actions.

I'm self-ironic when I portray myself as a crazy scientist in the human sciences, but well yes, you also have to be able to relate to yourself with a little humour in a way, so that no, I'm not really that serious after all. (Kuisma, last interview)

The ambivalence between different identities leads Kuisma to think of sociocultural aspects in academic writing and the meaning of courage and risk-taking through which he perceives the artistic dimension in his researcher identity. “*In fact, they are the artist's tools, which I use to conduct research*” (Kuisma, last interview).

Kuisma finds explanations for his actions and for the grade from sociocultural practices.

If you are entrepreneurial – at the bottom of the pile – in an academic environment, then it is not possible to express your entrepreneurship in the same way, and the thing about this is how... I feel that I've inherited my father's (traits) very strongly in a way, and as I've been in such an entrepreneurial role earlier because I have taken part of the responsibility for our family

business and so on, then it is very visible in my current work. (Kuisma, last interview)

I've also learned that the author of the thesis is not a full member of the scientific community, and I've previously thought that he is not because he's bad, but he's not because he may not be grounded in the criteria for conducting research. (Kuisma, last interview)

Academic writing is an action conducted by members of a community within a sociocultural context that sets borders for action. This membership means here the status of being a Bachelor, which Kuisma finally gains, with mixed feelings. He also appreciates the support he has received from his two wise old academic friends. “*Yeah, these specific senseis have played a big role*”, he says in the last interview as he has received a conversation partner and emotional support from them.

4.3. Heroic academic writing journey

Based on the students' stories, a bachelor's thesis is expected to be a history- and theory-oriented literature review that is written for a supervisor, and the thesis writing process is assumed to contain internalisation of the role of the interpreter of history or historian of the science. This frame works as an institutional narrative for the students. It is interesting that “the role of the interpreter of history” or “the historian” is their own wording and interpretation of the requirements, as there is no mention of history in the instructions for thesis writing and seminar. However, both students struggle with the requirements as they do not fully understand that previous studies and literature should be explored when writing a thesis, in order to gain understanding of developing thinking in the discipline. They both dislike taking the role that is presented in their institutional narrative. They feel that academic conventions restrict writing, and that is why they try to resist them. The expressions of identities including metaphors connect with learning experiences and conceptions related to academic writing.

Table 1 conceptualises two different heroes based on the students' stories: the grower and the fighter. The institutional-guided thesis writing as normative action by the normative actor is placed between them, for the institution gives support by creating spaces for discussion around writing and texts and opportunities to learn and develop critical thinking.

The heroes should be understood as archetypes that are offered to generate reflection and discussion that could benefit students in their writing journeys. The first column in Table 1 lists various perspectives on academic writing, which the heroes relate to in different ways. For example, the heroes' conceptions of the target of academic writing differ from each other. It is noteworthy that the fighter hero's ambitious target to change the culture might stem from role models in the history of science and itself carry historical values and assumptions that are reproduced. It is also interesting that the grower hero's framing of academic writing as life bears a sort of reason and validation for action: some human beings do academic writing. So can I.

When the types of heroes are named at the end of the academic writing journey, many possible identities emerge during the writing process, reflecting conceptions related to action that colour learning experiences in academic writing. These changing identities in the students' narratives of growth and fight can be placed within the phases of the heroic journey, as Table 2 shows. The phases are listed on the left by applying Moore's (2013) adjustment of Campbell's (1966) framework to academic writing. Possible identities on the right can be identified in the students' interview transcripts in different phases of their writing processes and are organised according to the phases of the heroic academic writing journey. Different identities may be nested, overlapping, parallel, or contradictory.

Table 1. Conceptions of different heroes in academic writing.

Perspectives on academic writing	Grower	Normative actor	Fighter
Interaction	solitary, self-made	individual, supported	extended, collaboration
Publicity	hidden, alone	shared, supervised	exposed, social
Critique	avoiding	peer-review, discussion	searching
Target	change in self	learning about argumentation, critical thinking, and self	change in culture
Writing	writing and reading are preferred	multimodal (reading, writing, speaking, presenting)	speaking is preferred over writing
Research	historical	small-scale	contemporary
Virtue	modesty	discipline	ambitiousness
Place	hiding place	seminar	test lab
Value	clarity	acknowledged, criteria	enterprise
Frame	life	practice, “storytelling”	art

Table 2. Possible identities in a heroic academic writing journey.

A phase of a heroic academic writing journey	A possible identity in progress
Departure	freshman
Call to adventure and change	hider
Resistance	reader
Overcoming the resistance	participator
	tester
Initiation/transition	academic writer
Crossing the threshold and engaging in research	student
Road of trials	historian
Identifying the lessons learned in order to experience rebirth	interpreter of history
	contemporary researcher
	human being
	underdog
	fighter
	presenter
	practical worker
	grower
Return	Bachelor
Victory	scientist
The road back and experiences of learning	artist
	human being
	entrepreneur
	academic writer
Future calls to change ...	teacher
	researcher
	Master of Social Sciences

At the beginning of the writing journey – the departure – some identities emerge that have been unconsciously internalised during earlier studies and life, and some identities that are socially available or offered are recognised. For example, in recognising the identity of a freshman, the students' understanding that a certain process needs to be followed and the studies and thesis to be implemented through certain acknowledged criteria also causes resistance. These practices and conventions are something that they start to pay attention to and understand during their processes, which can be seen especially in their experiences of borders that are connected not only to defining the research topic and question, choosing literature, reading selectively, and following academic conventions, but also to recognising limitations in one's abilities and identities.

During the initiation and transition, additional possible identities are emerging and valued differently – for example, desired or resisted. The students' point of view concerning the borders changes when they move to trials. At first, their perception is that academic culture restricts them, but further along the process they realise that it is they themselves who need to limit or reorient their own goals and actions in order to manage to finish the thesis. So, the students learn both about research and themselves – twin objectives in the curriculum of the seminar and thesis writing. Resistance and adaptation can be seen as dimensions connected to the idea of place, borders, and relating to others. Students' metaphors for a place – the hiding place and the test lab – and for an identity – a grower and a fighter – illustrate their situation and actions as well, and the question of borders in social interaction becomes visible.

In the end, during the return, some identities are experienced as gained and others as discovered. Both students recognise the meaning of their earlier vocational identity in their present actions and ponderings about the future. They also recognise their strengths, interests, and challenges better in the light of the past. Kuisma however sees potential in the past to determine the future, and his view reflects a sort of identity crisis as a member of academia and a potential departure from his background. Clark and Ivanić (1997, 2006) understand the potential of this kind of crisis in learning academic writing and jargon, especially for working class students. Touko, for his part, might have started studying alone due to his vocational background that meant he too had difficulty in identifying with the students writing the bachelor's thesis.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to illustrate identity formations during the bachelor's thesis writing processes by applying the model of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1966; Moore, 2013). The answer to the first research question, "What kind of identities do the students form during their experiences of learning to write academically?" can be formulated as follows: Generally, multiple identities emerged during the writing processes including identities from the past and the future, meaning that many perspectives were available for reflection. The students came to realise, however, that a thesis writer must take on the role of interpreter of history as part of the institutional narrative of bachelor's thesis writing. They resisted that role with the help of countering identities until they realised they needed to adapt to the sociocultural practices, even though they did not fully accept them. The same phenomenon – where conflicting and contradictory identities can be encountered, absorbed, and abandoned – has been noticed in French's (2015) study on a doctoral academic writing journey.

The second research question, "How do these identities reflect institutional expectations of academic writing?" was answered by creating two heroes based on the students' narratives, a grower and a fighter – in addition to a normative actor in the institutional narrative. Although the institutional narrative had a clear impact on students' actions, they showed a critical stance toward both their own actions and sociocultural practices, and they endeavoured to comment on and change them. The same kind of ambivalence has been addressed in Burgess and Ivanić's (2010) study where adult learners in literacy education expressed an ambivalent relationship with the mediating identity that was available through education.

In this study, through their identities and concepts of action, the students experienced learning and understood themselves as powerful agents. Identities constructed learning experiences in academic writing in such a way that they provided certain perspectives through which the experience was viewed and reflected. The narratives of a grower and fighter show also that different kinds of identities are needed before becoming a Bachelor. This result is in line with the study of Daniels and Brooker (2014) that argues that the identity of a student needs to be assumed before becoming a graduate, and that is something that is often ignored when only graduation and work readiness are valued. Writing the thesis is a process of the development of an academic identity in general, and academic scholarship includes understanding of the historical development of the one's own academic field.

Problematising identity formation as an important task can enhance students' participation and develop pedagogy (e.g. Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Additionally, paying attention to identity might reveal underlying questions about academic practices and assumptions. It can be eye-opening for a student to understand how some ideals even from the Newtonian era, such as a desire for universality, can be absorbed unconsciously from the literature of science, and today be embedded also within higher education practices (e.g. Lillis & Turner, 2001). For example, in philosophy, understanding the relationship between knowledge construction and disciplinary specific expectations for academic writing is crucial, as philosophy is a non-empirical science. Such awareness of values and practices can make navigation and goal achievement in the academy more manageable.

In addition, a narrative may play a transformative role, making students' experiences more transparent to others, thus promoting change both in individuals and the institution (e.g. Haines, 2015). The hero's journey has been seen as a model that can guide writing mentors and students by bringing the meaningful, including emotional, aspects of academic writing into discussion (Moore, 2013; Regalado, Georgas, & Burgess, 2017). Additionally, Ädel et al. (2023) suggest that during the thesis process, different kinds of roles are needed, as they are easier to discuss and choose in different phases of the thesis process than identities, which are biographical continuums formed in personal and social interaction and are thus restricted (Eteläpelto, 2007). The roles may depend, however, on local culture and practices. For example, Ädel et al.'s (2023) study did not find references to the roles of critic or subject expert in students' thesis processes, whereas this study found many identities (e.g. tester, interpreter of history, student) that take critical stances. I suggest that changing identities could represent a sort of criticism as well, in that, paradoxically, both the sense of a stable self and sufficient flexibility to be transformed are needed in identity formation during the rite of passage that is the bachelor's thesis writing process.

This study encourages viewing academic writing as a transformational process, rather than as the production of an artefact, and illustrates academic writing as a diverse transformational journey, where identity formation is partly unconscious internalisation and also active processing of experiences and objectives in relation to others in time. The active process of narrating offers a powerful tool for thought experiments to see different identities and their mediational nature. A narrative of a hero or a heroic academic writing journey can work as one mediational and metaphorical tool that helps to realise one's potential, strengths, and progress in the academic community with an institutional narrative. This kind of narrating includes also metaphorical thinking that is pragmatic in learning situations. For example, the study of Perrow, Feldstein, and Sieler (2020) showed how describing academic writing through a metaphor can develop first-year students' identities as writers, help them overcome obstacles in writing, and understand that writing is to be practised.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers should be explicit about the purpose of bachelor's thesis at the beginning of students' heroic academic writing journeys. The paper suggests that the hero narrative can work as a framework for understanding how a student learns to do academic writing and the narrative is applicable as a part of any writing pedagogy that sees knowledge

construction and disciplinary writing as intertwined (e.g., academic literacies, genre theory, systemic functional linguistics). A discussion with students about academic writers on their hero's journeys could reveal many identities that are related to different expectations of academic writing process. The narratives and the tables offered by this study can be used as a basis for such discussions with students. There are also helpful questions related to the phases of a heroic academic writing journey in Appendix 2.

Thus, this study contributes to the previous studies on academic writing by combining the dual focus of identity work and the heroic journey, which have been studied separately earlier. Recognising the variety of interconnected and contradictory identities and their roles in institutional and counter-narratives during academic writing processes can be seen as a contribution of this study. From the pedagogical perspective, the study provides ways to address students' learning experiences and identity in academic writing, helping them understand their potential, agency, and academic practices.

This narrative research leans on two individual cases. Both students were interested in research and saw participating in this study as a chance to develop their research and writing process. Their field of science was philosophy, which differs from empirical sciences epistemologically. The findings of this study can work, however, as an incentive to discussions in different sociocultural situations, and the methods are applicable in academic writing generally. Future research could explore whether the creation of different hero narratives (e.g. through methods of creative writing or comic drawing) in student groups improves students' multiperspectivity in thinking and writing.

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Declarations

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix 1. An example of a story

An example of a story that is condensed out of a transcript of Touko's first interview by using sentences connected to learning experiences in academic writing and identity. The narration has been slightly edited for smoother reading. The story has been translated into English.

I started my bachelor's thesis in the summer by taking notes hidden in secret, as if I were just writing an essay. Only now that I participated in the bachelor's seminar, I have started to talk about the fact that I've been working on my bachelor's thesis. I was relieved there at the seminar when others didn't have topics yet, and I had already managed to narrow mine down well. There we were given the task of making a summary of an article related to our own topic, but I had already kind of done this on my own before. So, I was ahead of schedule. My topic is now more of a personal clarification of thoughts than a work-related one. I would like to make my Master's thesis working-life-oriented. Now I'm just practicing, and I want to finish my thesis. It will be interesting how this will progress. I refer to the literature a lot, and I'm quite humble. [Note, from this point on, the text deals mainly with the future and is therefore not straightforwardly connected to learning experiences.] I would like to be precise and easy to read. When writing a thesis, you can learn the art of writing and perceiving a larger project in your head. If I can write thirty pages about a cryptic philosopher, I can necessarily write job applications and

emails. In the work of the thesis, one learns to think and write; that's all you can expect from the university. Continuous reflection is important for perceiving the goal.

Appendix 2. Questions in the phases of a heroic academic writing journey

Departure

- What motivates you to embark on a journey?
- Do you experience resistance in the beginning of the journey? What is the resistance related to?
- Who do you wish to be on this journey? What does it indicate about your perceptions of research and academic writing?
- How do you get started?
- What kind of help or support might you need?

Initiation / transition

- What makes you engage in the research?
- Are you practicing critical thinking?
- What kind of challenges do you face?
- Who assists you? What helps you?
- What do you learn from difficulties?
- What is your target?
- Do you recognize the change that you may be experiencing?
- What kind of metaphor would you provide for research and academic writing?

Return

- How do you achieve the objective?
- What kind of hero are you?
- When reflecting on your journey, what have been the significant experiences?
- What have you learned?
- What are the most important lessons that you intend to apply in the future?

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