

*'Is it ever enough?': Exploring academic language and learning advisory identities through small stories*

V. Grossi and L. Gurney

**Correspondence details**

Dr Vittoria Grossi

Academic and Peer Support Services, Deakin University  
221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood VICTORIA 3125 Australia

Email: [vittoria.grossi@deakin.edu.au](mailto:vittoria.grossi@deakin.edu.au)

[vittoria.grossi17@gmail.com](mailto:vittoria.grossi17@gmail.com)

Phone: +61 3 244 5563

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0989-7454>

Dr Laura Gurney

School of Education, University of Waikato,  
Hillcrest, Hamilton 3216 New Zealand

Email: [laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:laura.gurney@waikato.ac.nz)

Phone: +64 7 837 9563

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3416-2967>

**Notes on contributors**

Dr Vittoria Grossi is Team Leader of the Academic and Peer Support Services at Deakin University (Division of Student Life).

Dr Laura Gurney is a Lecturer in Te Kura Toi Tangata School of Education, University of Waikato.

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## **Abstract**

Contemporarily, higher education workplaces are characterised by collaboration, transitions, fluidity and the crossing of boundaries, where individuals are involved in ongoing negotiation of multilayered identities and simultaneous membership to various groups. These conditions impact the negotiation of professional identities, work, and work relationships. One group of professionals affected by the impetus to fluidly operate within institutions are academic language and learning (ALL) advisors. In this article, we explore the identity negotiation of a novice academic language and learning (ALL) advisor through a positioning lens, focusing on small stories conveyed during an interview. We highlight the ways in which she constructs identities vis-à-vis interactions with students, and within the ideological and institutional structures of the contemporary university. This article contributes an important new perspective to existing depictions of ALL advisors as a marginalised group of professionals, making space for the study of advisory agency alongside structural analyses. While continuing to negotiate structural challenges, we argue that the participant's sense of agency needs to be garnered to strengthen group identity and allow for professionals to transition to the role.

Key words: Positioning, narrative, small stories, professional identity, workplace communication, academic language and learning advisors, higher education

## **Introduction**

Workplace identity negotiation has developed into a prominent strain of research in sociolinguistics (see for example Angouri, Marra, & Holmes, 2018; Marra & Angouri, 2011; Tracy, 2011). In this article, we draw on a constructivist approach to identity as something that is 'done' or 'performed' through social interactions, rather than an innate, given or conferred property (Angouri, 2016; see also Butler, 1990). Furthermore, we underscore that identity is *always multiple*, and employ the plural *identities* to represent this. Negotiation of professional identities is nuanced and multilayered; in workplaces, layered identities manifest and become differently apparent across situations and interactions – for example, professional role, experience, knowledge, age and gender may become more or less

prominent from interaction to interaction (Holmes, 2005; Miglbauer, 2012). Ultimately, identity construction is always two-directional (Tracy, 2011).

Any instance of communication provides opportunities for identity construction (Schnurr, 2012). Language and identity are construed “in terms of a balance between the ways in which discourses position participants as ‘subjects’ in competing ways and the ways participants make their own and other people’s actions socially determinate” (Baxter, 2016, p. 41). Agency is, therefore, not constrained to acts of resistance or compliance with discursive practices (Baxter, 2016); rather, individuals shape, (in)validate and (re)constitute discursive expectations and norms, vis-à-vis “concrete occasions of language in use” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 43).

In this article, we explore the identity negotiation of a novice academic language and learning (ALL) advisor through a positioning lens, focusing on the small stories she conveyed during an interview. Identity studies in higher education workplaces are beginning to gain traction, and there have been some explorations of academic identity through narratives (Jones, 2011; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). However, while attention has been paid to academic staff, including early career (Enright & Facer, 2017) and mid-career academics (Brew, Boud, Lucas, & Crawford, 2017), there is a lacuna of research investigating identity negotiation amongst other professional groups, including ALL advisors. These advisors work independently and collaboratively with academics and other professional groups, including librarians, to provide academic literacy and study support to students. Despite the growing body of research exploring the experiences of ALL advisors within higher education institutions, which we review below, advisory identities remain underexplored and undertheorised. Our investigation of ALL advisory identity negotiation here extends understandings of how members of this group may negotiate contemporary challenges, and (re)position themselves within the hierarchical, neoliberalised milieu of the academy.

### **Working in contemporary higher education: Identities and collaborations**

For many practitioners across professional domains, collaboration within and across professional groups is a common feature of practice. However, the intersection of professional roles has implications for identity negotiation. Collaboration amongst groups and individuals with diverse priorities and practices – including the focus of their practice, the desired outcomes of this, and effective means to achieve these outcomes – may generate opportunities and tensions. Such situations are well illustrated by the intersection of the

priorities of administrators and educators, which are often divergent, within universities (see for example Edwards & Roy, 2017). Collaboration is complicated further by hierarchies, which manifest within and across institutions and industries, demanding the additional negotiation of authority. Against this background, individuals are compelled to develop capacity to cross boundaries whilst also maintaining a functional sense of their professional selves.

Within higher education institutions, professionals who are highly specialised within different fields operate under increasing expectations to bring together their complementary expertise to achieve educational and administrative outcomes. A salient example of this is the work done by ALL advisors, which articulates disciplinary content and academic literacy. ALL practice involves some degree of collaboration (direct or indirect) with content specialists and other support professionals, as well as interaction with undergraduate and postgraduate students from across academic disciplines of study. Within Australian higher education particularly (Coates, Goedegebuure, & Meek, 2015), policies to strengthen internationalisation and increase the participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds have instigated more systematic approaches to develop students' academic literacy skills, accompanied by a growing interest in ALL advisory practice (Evans, Henderson, & Ashton-Hay, 2019; Gurney & Grossi, 2019). Pedagogical impetus for collaborative approaches derives from notions of effective practice in academic literacy skills instruction, where ALL advisory practice can socialise students into discipline-specific communities of practice (Airey, Lauridsen, Räsänen, Salö, & Schwach, 2017; Maldoni, 2018; Wingate, 2006, 2018). In Australia, there is governmental support for these agendas. The *English Language Standards for Higher Education* promote the “contextualisation within disciplines and integration of language development across the curriculum” (Department of Industry, 2012, p. 8). Additionally, the standards framework of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (2015) holds universities accountable for supporting student transition into higher education.

### **ALL advisory practice and identities**

ALL advisors face a number of systemic challenges in the negotiation of their professional practice. These challenges have been raised in a growing body of literature which charts the generally unfavourable ways in which advisors are positioned along professional axes within higher education institutions. Researchers have investigated the value and results of collaborative work undertaken by advisors (Macdonald, Schneider, & Kett, 2013; Stevenson

& Kokkinn, 2007; Strauss, 2013), their interactions with students (Ashton-Hay, Yin, & Ross, 2018; Chahal, Rodriguez, & Schneider, 2019), work satisfaction (Cameron, 2018), and challenges experiences by advisors (Malkin & Chanock, 2018). Prominent challenges include the appointment of advisors as professional rather than academic staff, restricted formats for working with students, and a general lack of awareness of advisory practice and expertise within institutions (Gurney & Grossi, 2019). Advisors are broadly described as inhabiting the ‘third space’ of higher education practice, which entails the performance of “quasi-academic functions” between the traditional academic and administrative divide (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 379). Considering the hierarchical nature of higher education institutions (Mertkan & Bayrakli, 2018), and the stratification of academic and professional staff, this can be a problematic foundation for negotiation of collaborative practices and development of effective professional identities.

However, while systemic challenges are increasingly documented, there has been no exploration of identity negotiation and the ways in which advisors interact with – that is, resist, endorse, challenge, adopt or shape – the positions suggested to them by discursive opportunities and institutional structures. Against a backdrop characterised by the increasing need for effective articulation of practices between stratified professional groups, and the impetus to support diverse student populations, the ways in which advisors take up possibilities for practice and identity while working across intersecting professional domains are questions of much importance. Furthermore, while deconstructive exploration of systemic factors is important, analysis of structure without consideration of individual agency paints a partial picture. To occupy this perceived gap, we draw on positioning theory as our broad framework (see Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009) and, within this, focus on the small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2015) told by an ALL advisor during an interview to capture events and snapshots experienced in her role. In so doing, we point to key aspects of her professional identity negotiation, including the ways in which she positions herself relative to students and within institutional structures, to begin to understand advisory work and identity more comprehensively at the intersection of structure and agency.

### **Positioning via narratives of professional self**

Professional identities are constructed in interactions through the language choices which individuals make. We all “draw on a range of linguistic resources in claiming, negotiating and renegotiating our emerging identities in interaction” (Marra & Angouri, 2011, p. 1). Within the broader field of research investigating professional identity, a significant amount of attention has been paid to the ways in which individuals position themselves through narratives (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017; Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000; Holmes, 2005; Vásquez, 2007). Narratives are stories told of oneself, others, the broader context, and the interrelationships between these; they are expressions of self which can reveal constructions about the narrator and the context by which they are shaped and, in turn, shape (De Fina, 2003; Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). In other words,

stories are constructed by a narrator who chooses from an array of events and orders them in a meaningful way – an order that reflects her own interpretation of that set of events. Narrative therefore is considered to be not so much a reflection of reality as an interpretation of it. (Dyer & Keller-Cohen, 2000, p. 285)

As Bamberg (2006) clarifies, the study of narratives is the study of talk. Through talk, individuals establish content and context – what the talk is about, and the interactive situation in which it takes place, between speaker and audience. Subsequently, by “relating the world that is created by use of verbal means to the here and now of the interactive situation, speakers position themselves vis-à-vis the world out there and the social world here and now” (Bamberg, 2006, p. 144). The bringing together of talk and interaction makes visible the speaker’s position, as a sense of self or identity (Bamberg, 2006).

The communicative tools used by individuals to tell narratives point to the ways in which identity is negotiated moment-by-moment, and to how the self and others are positioned relationally, as emergent through talk (Vásquez, 2007). According to Holmes (2005), individuals may tell different kinds of narratives concerning their professional selves and experiences: for example, these can include relationally-focused workplace anecdotes, as well as stories which orient more “to workplace business than to relational goals” (p. 675). Nonetheless, as Holmes (2005) notes, the distinctions can be ‘fuzzy’, in that “workplace narratives are often subtly multifunctional” (p. 677).

Identities which emerge through narrative may be complex and not necessarily unified in a discursive sense. Rather, emergent depictions of professional self through talk can capture complexity and contradiction (Holmes, 2005). Although *narrative possibilities* arise through the contextual circumstances which are available to interlocutors (Amadasi &

Holliday, 2017), personal factors impact the ways in which individuals interpret and reproduce features of context. One such factor is the degree of experience that an individual has within a professional field. According to Vásquez (2007), experience may impact the confidence with which narratives are imbued and identities made stable and internally coherent. Furthermore, while experienced professionals may manage contradictions in professional identity and practice confidently, and construct a compelling and unified narrative irrespective of internal complexity, novices are more likely to construct narratives which point to identities which are in flux and under negotiation (Vásquez, 2007). As novices are in a state of transition, their narratives may reflect this transition and instability (Vásquez, 2007).

### **The study**

In this article, we focus on a case study of one novice ALL advisor. At the time of data collection, the participant, who has been assigned the pseudonym *Lydia*, was employed as an ALL advisor at a large university in Australia. She had been working in the role for approximately one year. Lydia undertook a semi-structured interview, conducted by one interviewer, to explore her understandings of and initial experiences with the advisory role. The interview questions prompted her to reflect on what the role entailed, her expectations of the role prior to commencement, students' perceived expectations and understandings of the advisory role, interactions with discipline-area academic teaching staff, challenges experienced in transitioning into the role, and any hypothetical changes that she would make to the role to better fit her understandings of effective practice. The interview was conducted over Skype and ran for approximately 40 minutes.

Throughout the interview, Lydia both positioned herself and reacted to the subject positions suggested by the interviewer's questions. As sociolinguists adopting a poststructuralist approach to interaction, we recognise that the interviewer was an important participant. Furthermore, the interview itself, as a particular kind of communicative event, set parameters for the positioning of the participant and interviewer (De Fina & Perrino, 2011; Wortham, Mortimer, Lee, Allard, & White, 2011). In recognising the interviewer's involvement, and acknowledging the features of interviews as sites of interaction, we seek to avoid association with the 'myth of objectivity' (De Fina, 2011). As Amadasi and Holliday (2017) note, questions asked by interviewers are not

objectivist information gathering tools that keep them at a methodological distance from the people they study. Rather, they are instruments to help mould a conversation so that meanings might begin to emerge – but, importantly, in such a way that the people they study can also produce meanings that are unexpected and not dominated by the researchers. (p. 256)

The interviewer, one of the authors of this article, worked in languages education at the tertiary level and shared some of the participant’s professional experience. Even though they had no contact prior to the interview, both interlocutors were ‘insiders’ within Australian tertiary education with firsthand and theoretical knowledge of the field of ALL advisory practice. In line with Amadasi and Holliday’s (2017) objective, in order to not ‘dominate’ the interaction, the interviewer attempted to maintain the conversation as an open forum for reflection on advisory work and, particularly, on the participant’s experiences and understandings. Nevertheless, the interviewer’s *insiderness* likely had some bearing on the interaction.

We analysed the interview transcript to identify key stories which Lydia told about herself, her work, and the individuals with whom she interacted in her professional role (cf. Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). In this article, we have chosen to focus on small stories as our key unit of analysis. This is because small stories were salient in the data; they were a prominent way in which Lydia responded to questions and provided illustration. Small stories research broadens the criteria for what constitutes a narrative, and represents a move away from prototypical narrative features – such as the temporal sequencing of events – to create “room for flexibility and versatility” (Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 259). To quote further from Georgakopoulou (2015), small stories can have the following features:

- **Non- or multi-linear unfolding events sequenced in further narrative-making**, not linear sequencing of past events.
- Emphasis on **world-making, i.e., telling of mundane, ordinary, everyday events**, not world-disruption and narration of complications.
- **Co-construction of a story’s point, events, and characters between teller and audiences**, rather than sole responsibility resting on the teller. (p. 260, emphasis in original)

Georgakopoulou (2015) emphasises that small stories may also emerge as ‘counter-stories’ which flout expectations of “who the tellers should be and what stories they should tell” (p.

263). They may reveal inconsistencies or apparent contradictions in telling, allowing for “performativity, incompleteness, and fragmentation of people’s identities” (Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 264).

In the following sections, we draw out a number of small stories told by Lydia during the interview. As will be discussed, these small stories combine thematic elements that belong to micro-level professional identities – negotiated moment-to-moment, across different spatiotemporal events (such as consultations with students or a discussion with a friend) – as well as macro-level ideological stances underpinning Lydia’s overarching narrative, or ‘big story’, as an educator (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006).

### **Findings and discussion: Small stories and layered identities**

As data, we present a number of small stories to capture Lydia’s negotiation of her professional identities at two levels:

- Within the consultation
- Within the institution

#### *Within the consultation*

During the interview, Lydia told several small stories which recounted her experiences with one-on-one, thirty-minute consultations conducted with students. The short consultation is a prevalent format for teaching amongst ALL advisors across institutions (Evans et al., 2019). As is increasingly well-documented, and as Lydia reinforced, consultations are layered and challenging to negotiate. Students often present multiple areas of concern; subsequently, advisors are compelled to ‘triage’ – i.e. decide on the priority order in which student needs are to be addressed in the short time available (Crabbe, Hoffmann, & Cotterall, 2001; Woodward-Kron, 2007). Student needs may concern understanding the requirements of assessment tasks, reading and using source material, academic integrity and referencing, academic writing, time management, and study skills, amongst a plethora of others (Reid & Roberts, 2014). Furthermore, students may come with vague requests or may not have clear understandings of how advisors can assist them; as such, “students often get something more than or different from their original request” (Reid & Roberts, 2014, pp. A-73).

The small stories presented here reveal Lydia's views on what is needed and what is possible within the timeframe of the thirty-minute consultation. In addition to addressing academic matters, Lydia reinforced her sensitivity towards students' identities. Lydia discussed the ways in which she positioned herself during consultations in order to reassure students, while managing their understandings of the support that she, as an advisor, was able to provide. We present three small stories which highlight the ways in which Lydia dealt with these challenges in specific situations, paying careful attention to various aspects of students' and her own layered identities – including age, gender, and professional experience.

In the first story, Lydia provided an overview of the demands that consultations present. She summarised the typical trajectory of a consultation as follows:

*Sometimes students come to the door, and they know they need help with what they are doing, they are bamboozled with the requirements of an assignment, they are not quite sure what to expect of me other than they've come for help, and sometimes I find it useful, not always, I point out that I am studying myself, so I know what they're going through, and I've got a long memory and I remember what it's like when I started to learn, in tertiary education, and I often use that as a way to reassure people, Rome wasn't built in a day and as long as you have the will to learn, and it may not come easily at first but- and you keep, sort of plugging away, it will happen.*

In this small story, Lydia reinforced the importance of reassuring the student and normalising difficulties by drawing on personal examples. Her repeated use of the first-person pronoun (*I*), and sharing of her own experiences with study, situated her at the centre of the hypothetical consultation and invoked two identities which she held simultaneously: advisor and student. While some tension is acknowledged in these strategies – “sometimes I find it useful, not always” – they functioned to reduce the perceived distance between herself and the students she supported. In attending to affective aspects, such as apprehension and confusion, Lydia positioned herself, as ALL advisor, as a boundary-traversing professional who deals with relational, emotional and academic matters simultaneously.

In another small story, Lydia retold a difficult consultation in which she emphasised several interplaying issues – age, gender, experience and perceived ability. Here, Lydia's multilayered identities in the advisory role are depicted sharply, and in a more problematic way, reinforcing the multi-directionality of identity negotiation (Tracy, 2011) between her and the student. In this situation, she was working with a mature-aged student who struggled with aspects of returning to study, including technology. Lydia emphasised the ways in which

the student's identity as a capable person may have been challenged by both her positioning as the advisor – i.e. an educator with some authority and expertise – and by the perceived ease with which his younger peers managed technology in their studies.

*Perhaps being faced and sitting down with a middle-aged lady, that put him off. He was younger than me, he would be perhaps early forties? Hum, and he was quite adamant, he didn't understand this computer stuff. He's obviously quite an able person, but you know he had trouble getting into the system and understanding the uni-specific systems ... it was maybe a bit humiliating to have to, hum, be shown that stuff when all your younger peers are happily working on tablets and stuff. So anyway we talked, I got him sort of started into the system and I talked him through the system, how you start various things.*

...

*I was aware of our relative ages, and also the fact that I was female, and I wondered if that was a bit off-putting.*

She returned to this student at a later point, recapitulating on how age and gender differences may have shaped the consultation:

*I did find that one male a bit of a challenge because I felt the disparity in our age and the difference in sex, might have bearing on his resistance you know to take on the challenge of new ways of learning.*

While Lydia showed empathy for the student, their identities were more explicitly polarised. Gender and age differences were positioned as potential barriers (or, points of friction) interrupting the learning. She also drew out emotional aspects of the interaction (*put him off, adamant, humiliated, happily*), emphasising again that the consultation extended beyond academic or technical matters.

In a third story, Lydia recounted a consultation with a different student struggling to understand the requirements of higher study. She described the student as experiencing significant amounts of stress and looking for assurance. In response, Lydia took a 'softly-softly' approach, although she was somewhat unsure about the efficacy of this. She later noted that, while he did not return to see her, the student did consult again with other advisors; she took this as evidence that her approach may have paid off.

*... but the other thing he said which really dismayed me, he said, 'all I want is a textbook', 'give me a textbook on this subject'.*

*I think, after he'd gone and I sort of reflected a bit on it, I thought because he was anxious about it and tense and he was having a whole lot of things thrown at him, not by me, but by the fact he was enrolled, I sort of took a softly-softly approach to that and I said, you know, times have changed, delivery of curriculum and also assessment, also work, you know you have to think about what you're learning, you're not just having to regurgitate stuff, and I took such a softly-softly approach to that.*

Again, emotional and relational aspects of the consultation are foregrounded in the story through key terms and phrases (*dismayed, all I want, anxious, tense, thrown at him, softly-softly*). Furthermore, Lydia explicitly distanced herself from institutional practices which were perceived as causing the student distress – “not by me, but by the fact that he was enrolled” – to position advisors as a half-way point between the university and the student. This is a different kind of ‘third space’ to that which has been drawn out in previous research, and is a thread running through Lydia’s stories. It characterises advisory practice as being somewhat more facilitative (of student success, institutional agendas, or both) than determinative of effective approaches to developing academic literacy.

In a fourth small story, Lydia highlighted another challenge: the need to negotiate the identities of students who had established themselves as successful professionals, but were compelled to grapple again with a student or novice identity. She referred to a mature-aged international student enrolled in postgraduate coursework who was an experienced health professional, but had opted for further study to facilitate a career change. When he consulted with Lydia, the student was struggling to identify assessment criteria and meet expectations. Lydia partly attributed these difficulties to his developing understanding of academic literacy conventions endemic to the Australian university context. However, quite apart from dealing with assessment challenges, Lydia described the student as intent on highlighting his past academic successes during their interaction, thereby foregrounding his apparently contradictory identities:

*He said he did his training overseas, he didn't specify which country, he said, I used to get a 100% for my, you know assessments. Fair enough, but I said, for this you are being asked to describe how, you would need to show how you would devise interventions for men's public health.*

Here, Lydia reinforced her responsibilities as an advisor to communicate requirements for study – “fair enough, but I said...” – and chose to focus on the perceived ‘gaps’ in the

student's academic skills, attempting to put the question of professional identity to one side. However, she later returned to this story and acknowledged that the student's need for support extended beyond the reach of the individual consultation:

*... I could see that that person needed a lot more teaching and learning than he was going to be able to get from me in that time, or indeed by anybody.*

Overall, these small stories did important work in Lydia's interview. They index factors which Lydia chose to bring to the fore in constituting her and students' identities – age, gender, professional experience, perceived abilities, and expectations – and highlight the various ways in which the outcomes of consultations were co-created by both participants (advisor and student). They also captured tension and variation in Lydia's negotiation of the advisory role. She was aware of the limitations of the role, particularly during these short consultations; nonetheless, she actively grappled with the extent of support she was expected (and able) to provide. Furthermore, a complicated relationship was apparent between her identities and those of the students. Intersecting identities were variously perceived as facilitators and barriers to learning and interaction. As a fellow student, Lydia drew on her shared experiences to show empathy; as an advisor, she worked to communicate institutional expectations. Age and gender were noted at various points, particularly as potential barriers to interacting with students. In addition, these stories strongly characterise the support needed to assist students as relational, rather than just academic, in nature, bringing to the fore the more invisible psychosocial side of advisory work.

#### *Within the institution*

In addition to recounting interactions with students, Lydia told small stories positioning advisory work within the broader institutional context. In this section, we present two small stories which foreground her professional identities in interactions with peers and colleagues.

In the first story, Lydia relayed a conversation with a friend about her role. Her interlocutor, who was unfamiliar with the role, had referred to advisory work as 'remedial teaching'. Lydia was quick to point out that the ALL role is not remedial, while also understanding why her friend may have thought this:

*... I said no no no, if they come to university they are not in need of remedial teaching, you know whatever that means, but I understood her, her response, she*

*really didn't understand it ... The dual problems of the multiple needs, which must be fleshed out, and the limited time in which to do so, present a dilemma.*

She returned to this dilemma at a later point:

*I certainly have the impression with some of those consultations, because you get people at all levels from all over the place ... and it's a bit like, am I doing enough, can I ever? Can I ever do enough? ... and what help can I give this person in the course of a half hour phone conversation?*

Here, Lydia drew out a prominent challenge: how to address the issues which arise during consultations in a more sustainable way, while having little control over formats for interaction with students. Later, Lydia told the interviewer that she had spent time reading recent research on advisory practice; she was therefore aware that the individual consultation was one amongst an array of teaching formats: *"I have read a bit about this, I know there is an argument for embedding these sorts of skills, within academic areas and that does seem to me to be a good thing"*. This referred to advisors working closely with discipline staff to embed academic literacies within the curriculum. There has been much discussion of embedding academic literacies instruction within disciplinary study (Wingate, 2006, 2018). Referring to studies she had read about the implementation of such programs in other universities, Lydia reflected on the value of this approach. Drawing on similar experiences in her previous roles, she commented that challenges can sometimes be attributed to institutional factors, and to the difficulties of collaborating between professional groups.

In summarising the discussion, Lydia recapitulated that, in spite of difficulties, advisory work is valuable and has potential to make a difference to students. However, she was cautious in presenting these possible differences, and minimised her impact. Her choice of words – *little bit of help, bit of a nudge, bit of discussion* – in the excerpt below is indicative of this diminution:

*It's hum, it's good that people can be successful given a little bit of help at the right stage, as I have said earlier, often people just need a bit of nudge in the right direction, or a bit of discussion or a bit of teasing out of what they know and what they don't know, and that's enough to set them out on a path, and they're off and running. I think it's probably tragic if people give up and become disheartened (...) simply for want of a, you know that little bit of a help, bit of a boost. So there.*

In sum, these small stories come together to build a picture of Lydia as a reflective and analytical professional. However, the aim of these stories extends beyond her ‘impression management’ of an independent professional. Interwoven in them, there is evidence of a further layer: her moral stance as someone who values education and sees it as transformative. Within this, her view of the important role played by educators, is evident.

### **Conclusions: Focusing in on advisory identities**

In this article, we have explored the ways in which Lydia, a novice ALL advisor, negotiated her professional identities by drawing on small stories shared during an interview. Overall, Lydia’s small stories can be read as constructing a strong underlying identity: she is a critical professional who values education and perceives its transformative potential. Furthermore, they show confidence, albeit cautious, in the positive impact she could make in her role.

Simultaneously, there was some expression of doubt (internal inconsistencies); while the work presented opportunities for advisors to work productively and effectively with students, Lydia perceived dilemmas with no strategic solutions. She recognised some of these challenges as inherent to the contemporary university and beyond her power to change; at the same time, she commented on the positive impacts of even short interactions with advisors – i.e. “a bit of a nudge in the right direction” – to establish beneficial outcomes for students.

Lydia’s small stories also index various aspects of her and students’ identities, including gender, age and experience, which came to the fore differently in each interaction. Notably, Lydia showed concern for the marginalisation of students (as beginners, or as unaware of requirements), but did not explicitly address the marginalisation of advisors within these interactions. Furthermore, Lydia’s stories reveal a prominent relational aspect to advisory practice that cannot be isolated from learning needs and interventions. Her stories underscore students’ identities as shifting and somewhat fragile as they enter a changing and, in some cases, culturally and/or linguistically different education system. Maintaining awareness of this psychosocial aspect of the role can present challenges, both at the level of the consultation and the institution.

We have sought here to acknowledge both broader factors as well as individual agency in determining advisory practice and identity negotiation (Harré et al., 2009). We see social worlds as jointly constructed by social actors (Harré, 2001), and individuals as ‘powerful particulars’ capable of action (Harré, 2001; Varela, 2001), albeit constrained by

structural factors. As a result, “Social worlds are not reducible to the aggregate states or dispositions of individual social actors; nor indeed are individual social actors reducible to individual organisms” (Harré, 2001, p. 23). Lydia’s sense of professional agency adds a valuable perspective to the existing literature exploring ALL advisors and their practice. It complements structural analyses highlighting marginalisation of, and challenges experienced by, this group of professionals. Furthermore, perspectives such as Lydia’s may strengthen group identity of ALL advisors through recognition of their boundary-crossing expertise and contributions to institutional functioning at multiple levels. Additionally, the findings we have presented have potential to inform how novice ALL advisors may experience the transition into their role. In such a politically complex landscape, ‘training’ may need to address less of the nuts and bolts of the work (i.e. how to triage students’ academic needs), and more about negotiating larger challenges related to the functioning of the institution, and the ways in which advisors and students are positioned within institutional milieu. These issues also have implications for the ways in which students negotiate their own identities, and how they come into contact with those of advisors.

It has been our intention with this article to open a new space of inquiry concerning advisory identities and agency through a sociolinguistic lens. We encourage further case studies using similar approaches to capture identity negotiation amongst other ALL advisors, and to illuminate perceptions of group vis-à-vis individual agency and identities. In addition, we recognise that there is further work to do in analysing the role of the interviewer in co-construction of positioning, particularly when interviewers are ‘insiders’ in a professional context as was the case here. Interviews create space for new negotiation of identities and experiences (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017), as interviewer and interviewee grapple with their respective positioning. Furthermore, it is important to note the multiple layers of narrative which interviews draw out: interactions can capture small stories depicting particular events, as well as larger narratives communicating ideological stances, inevitably caught up in the dynamics of commenting on one’s professional practice in response to interview questions. Addressing these areas of inquiry through a sociolinguistic lens will build stronger understandings of the ways in which professional identities and practices are negotiated moment-to-moment, and interaction-to-interaction.

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