

# ***Critical thinking* and employment readiness:**

## **The role of semantic waves in preparing students for life after university**

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# Outline

- Context
- Aims of project
- Theoretical framework: Legitimation Code Theory
- Today's focus: Semantic waves in high scoring texts in social work & business
- Implications

# Our focus:

## Critical reflection as a form of critical thinking

- lifelong learning, active citizenship & employment readiness for working in 'knowledge economies' (Maton 2014)
- associated with research-, theory- and evidence-based praxis (Fook 2002) across a range of applied disciplines
  - (e.g. nursing, **social work**, health sciences, teacher education, early childhood education, internet and technology education, psychology, psychotherapy, design, **business**, finance, management education)
- often associated with *problem-solving* and *decision-making* and is assessed as a skill (in authentic, 'real-life' scenarios, e.g. teamwork, case studies, reflective journals) (O'Connell & Dymont 2010: 47)

# So what's the problem?

- 1) issue of *transfer* & deficit discourses: critique of unprepared graduates (Birrell 2006) & students' lack of critical thinking skills (Mills 2008)
- 2) lack of consensus over definitions of critical thinking
- 3) knowledge-blindness: knowledge construed as *knowing* (Howard & Maton 2011, Maton 2013, 2014) & focus on *knowers* (Maton & Moore 2010)
- 4) widespread adoption of pedagogical approaches and assessment tools to target students' critical thinking skills in HE despite the lack of conceptual clarity

# Knowledge & the ‘genericist – specificist’ debate

- valuably brings knowledge into the picture
- critical thinking as *either* generic (Ennis 1985, Kuhn 1991) *or* subject-specific (Atkinson 1997, McPeck 1992, Moore 2011)
- abstract philosophising vs. empirical descriptions of surface features (for a review see Hatton & Smith 1995)
- in a state of ‘impasse’ (Moore 2011)

# Moving forward: Our Critical Reflection project

(Szenes, Tilakaratna & Maton)

## Aims

- to explore the nature of knowledge practices comprising critical thinking and reflection in UG student assignments in social work & business (focus on knowing *what*, i.e. analyses of the *forms* of knowledge itself)
- to move beyond normative discussions on what critical thinking or reflection *should be* in order to examine what it *actually* is and what comprises as evidence of their successful realizations in student writing
- to inform academic literacy support programs that enable *cumulative* knowledge building and learning & aim to equip students with *transferable* critical reflection skills

# Moving forward: Our Critical Reflection project

(Szenes, Tilakaratna & Maton)

**Data:** high scoring 3<sup>rd</sup> year UG critical reflection essays (3,000 words) published in the field of social work & high and low scoring 2<sup>nd</sup> year UG business reflective journals (1,000 words)

**Text analysis** based on LCT & SFL

- Semantic profiles & waves
- Genre structure & linguistic resources

Theoretical framework

# **Legitimation Code Theory**



# LCT concepts for analysis

<u>Principle</u>	<u>Referent relations</u>	<u>Concepts</u>
Autonomy	external	positional autonomy, relational autonomy
Density	internal	material density, moral density
Specialisation	social-symbolic	epistemic relations, social relations
Semantics	meaning	semantic gravity semantic density
Temporality	temporal	temporal positioning, temporal orientation

(Maton 2014)

# Semantic gravity

- degree of context-dependence of meaning
- may be stronger (+) or weaker (-) along a continuum of strengths
  - weaker = less context-dependent
  - stronger = more context-dependent

weaker SG



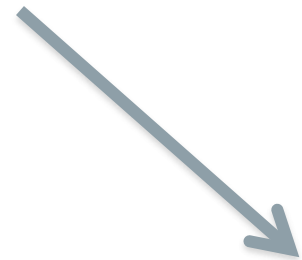
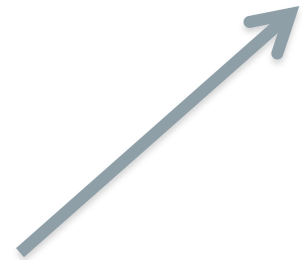
theories of historical  
causation

The 1917 Russian  
Revolution

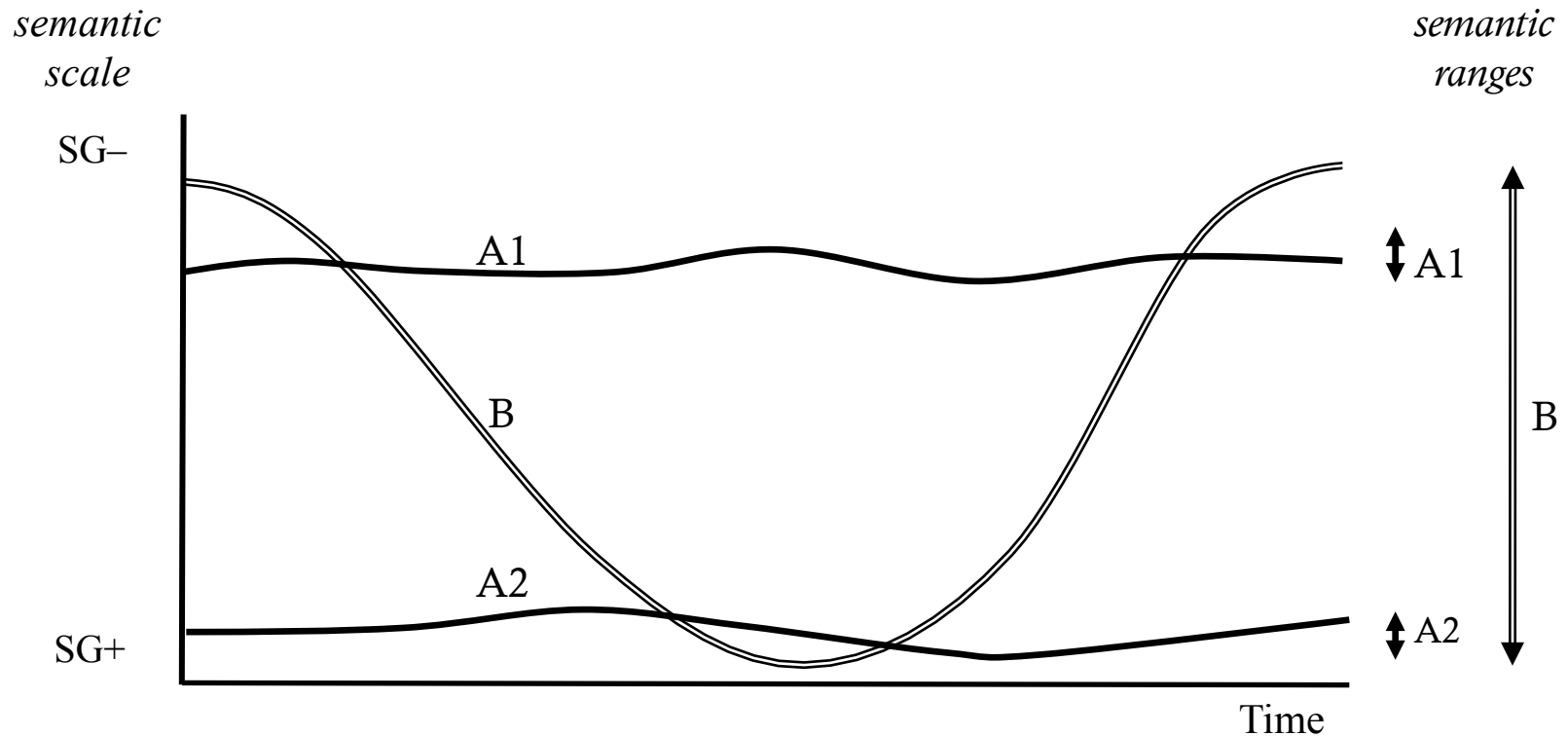
stronger SG

# Semantic gravity

- *weakening* semantic gravity
  - e.g. drawing generalising principles from the minute particulars of a specific context or case
- *strengthening* semantic gravity
  - e.g. moving down from an abstracted concept to specifying delimited examples



# Semantic profiles and ranges



Key: SG = semantic gravity; + = stronger; - = weaker

Source: Maton 2013: 13

# Today's focus:

## Reflective practice in social work & business

- **social work:** evidence of critical reflection is expected to appear in the form of questioning and deconstructing dominant assumptions in assignments (Fook 2002) and *reasoning about decision-making* based on 'broader historical, social or political contexts' (Hatton & Smith 1995: 41)
- **business:** critical reflection is often equated with the 'business skills' of *problem-solving* and *decision-making* highly valued by employers (Carrington et al. 2011, Facione 2010)
- What *forms of knowledge practices* are expressed in the essays as evidence of critical reflection?

Semantic profile of a high achieving  
Critical Reflection Essay in social work

# The assignment

## Aim of assignment:

- to uncover one's own assumptions about social work practice
- to develop '[students]' emerging identity as “new graduate social workers” about to enter the workplace' (Pockett & Giles 2008: xiv)

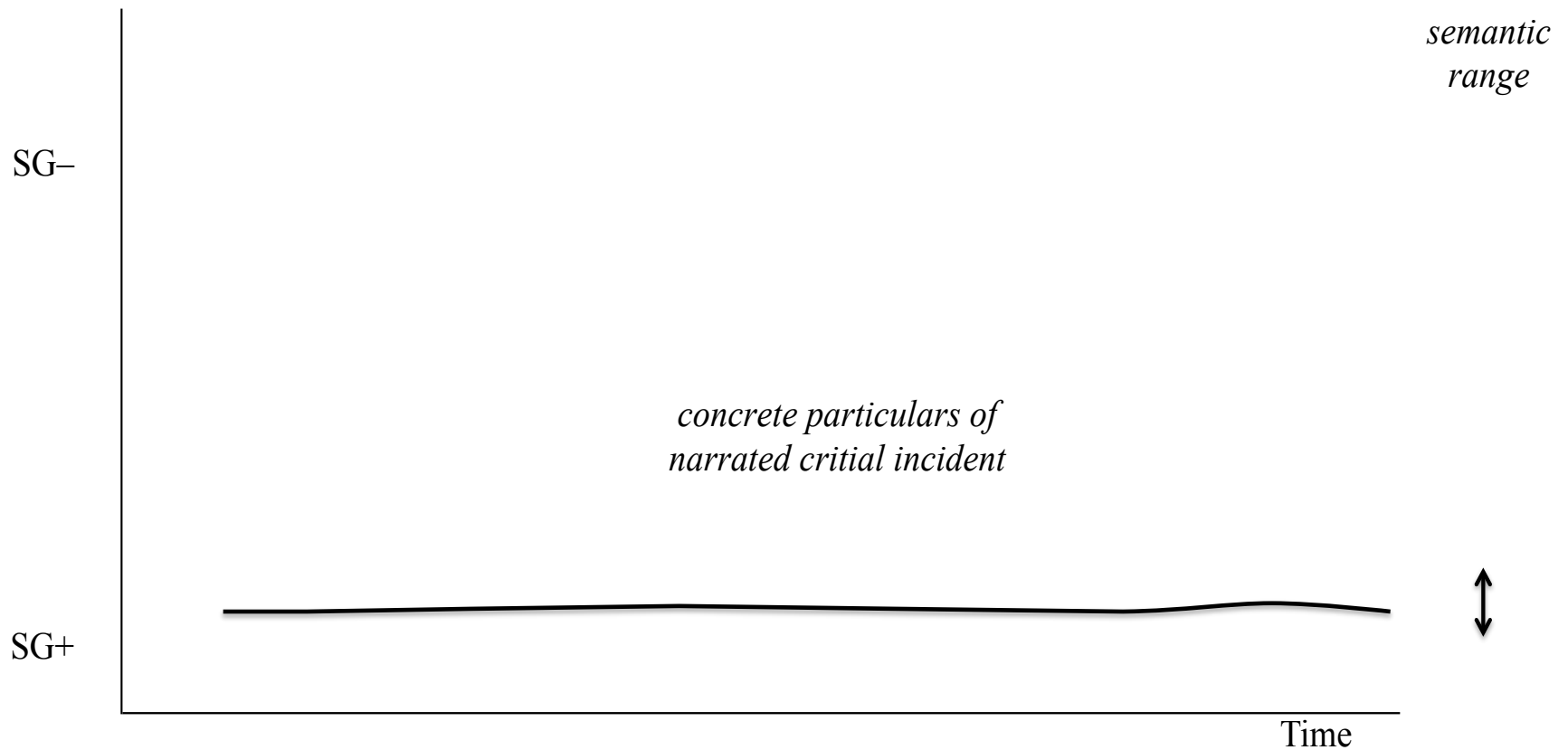
Students were required to select a *critical incident* from their field placement & critically reflect on their learning based on Fook's (2002) model of critical deconstruction and reconstruction.

# Critical Incident: a narrative flatline

It was in this unit that my critical incident occurred...I thought as I had established some rapport with the clients previously; I could get them involved [in preparing lunch]. I entered the lounge room where two of the boys were playing a video game. As I approached Jared, I asked 'Jared, could you please give us a hand in the kitchen?' The answer was simple and encapsulated my critical incident: "I will if you give us a kiss".



# Critical Incident: a narrative flatline



## Transforming knowledge: relating practice to theory

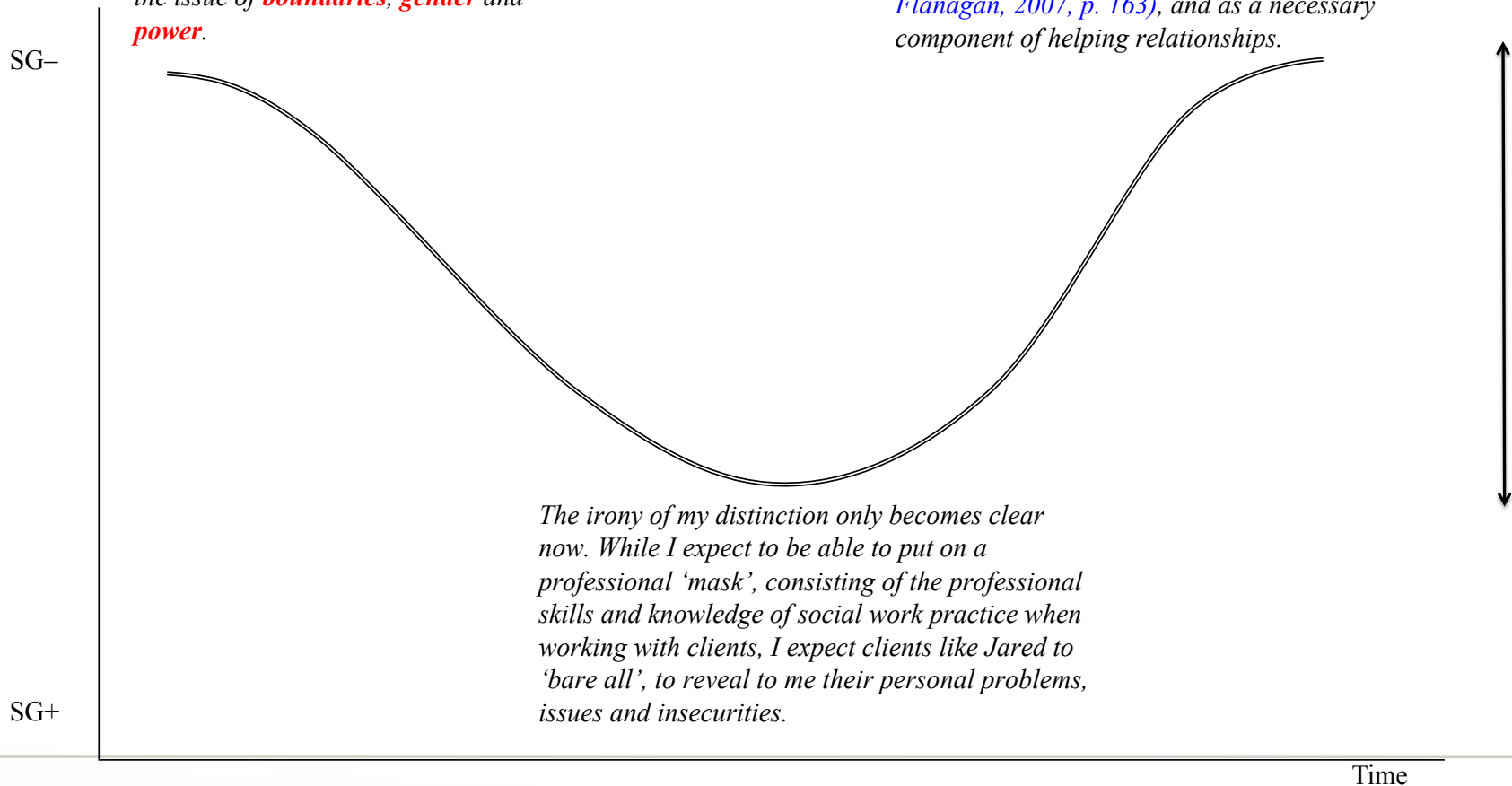
In my incident the emerging themes that I believe warrant further investigation relate to professional practice, namely the issue of **boundaries**, **gender** and **power**. The irony of my distinction only becomes clear now. While I expect to be able to put on a professional 'mask', consisting of the professional skills and knowledge of social work practice when working with clients, I expect clients like Jared to 'bare all', to reveal to me their personal problems, issues and insecurities. Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2007) refer to this concept as '**one-way intimacies**' (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, p. 163), and as a necessary component of helping relationships.

# A semantic wave in social work

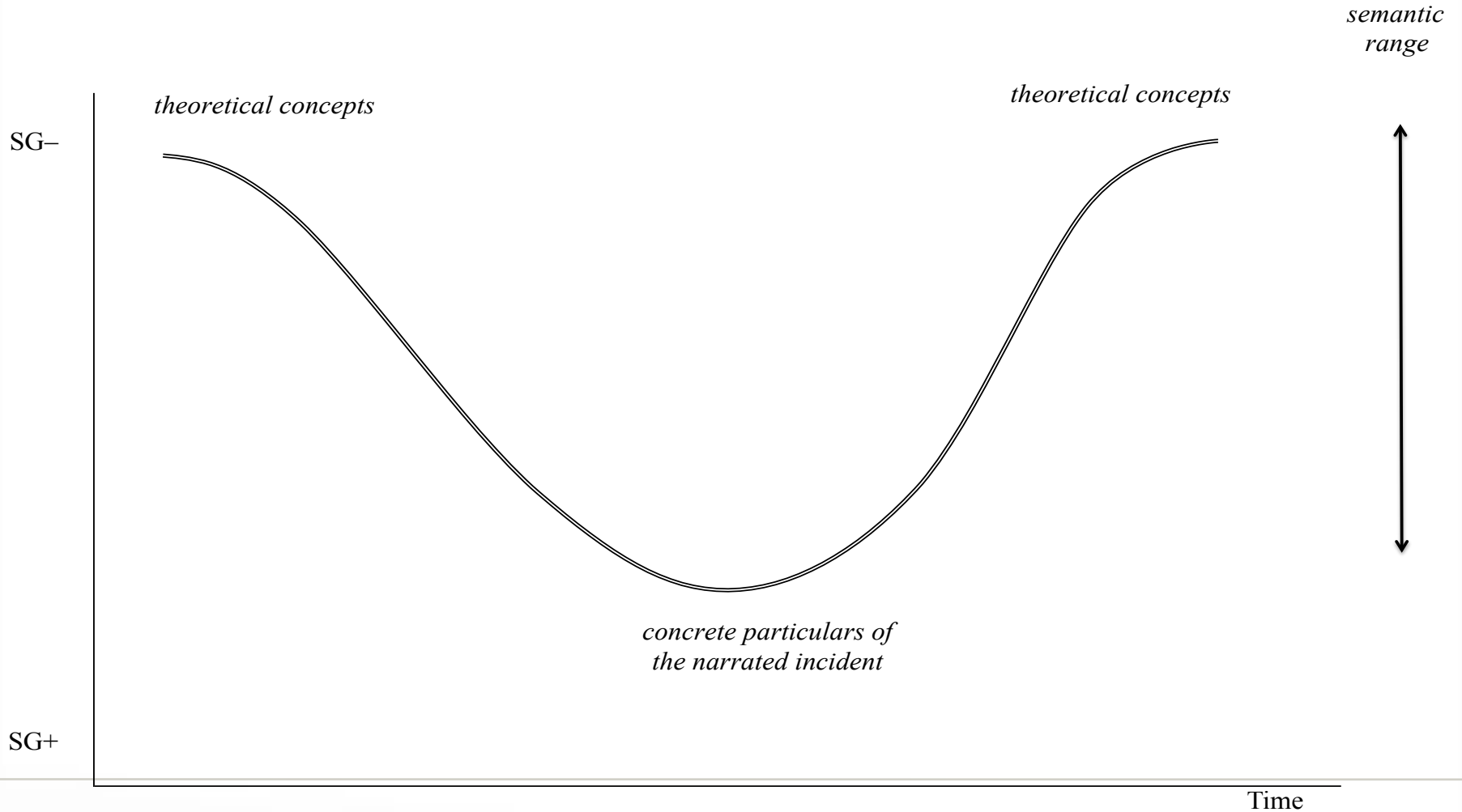
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*semantic range*



# A semantic wave in social work



# Semantic gravity in the social work essay

## The essay

- successfully weaves together meanings of greater and lesser context-dependence, concrete examples specific to the particular case and theoretical concepts.
- ‘*waving*’: brings together different forms of knowledge (subjective & objective) to *transform* them through theorising concrete examples and exemplifying concepts.

Semantic profile of a high achieving  
reflective journal in business

# The assignment

Aim of assignment:

- to develop students' reflective practice and their intercultural competence

Students were required to critically reflect on their experience of multinational teamwork by examining their visible and invisible values, beliefs, assumptions and behaviours based on Solomon & Schell's (2009) model of intercultural competency.

# Uncovering 'hidden' values

Australia's **history** plays another role in Australia's core culture through its history of immigration (Encarta Encyclopaedia 2009a). [...] Some of Australia's national **heroes** are also responsible for developing **individualism**. Sir Donald Bradman who is arguably the most famous sporting hero in Australia was made famous for his outstanding individual cricket batting record (*ESPN cricketinfo* 2009). **Individualism** has consequently evolved from two main areas of core culture, its **history** and its **heroes**.

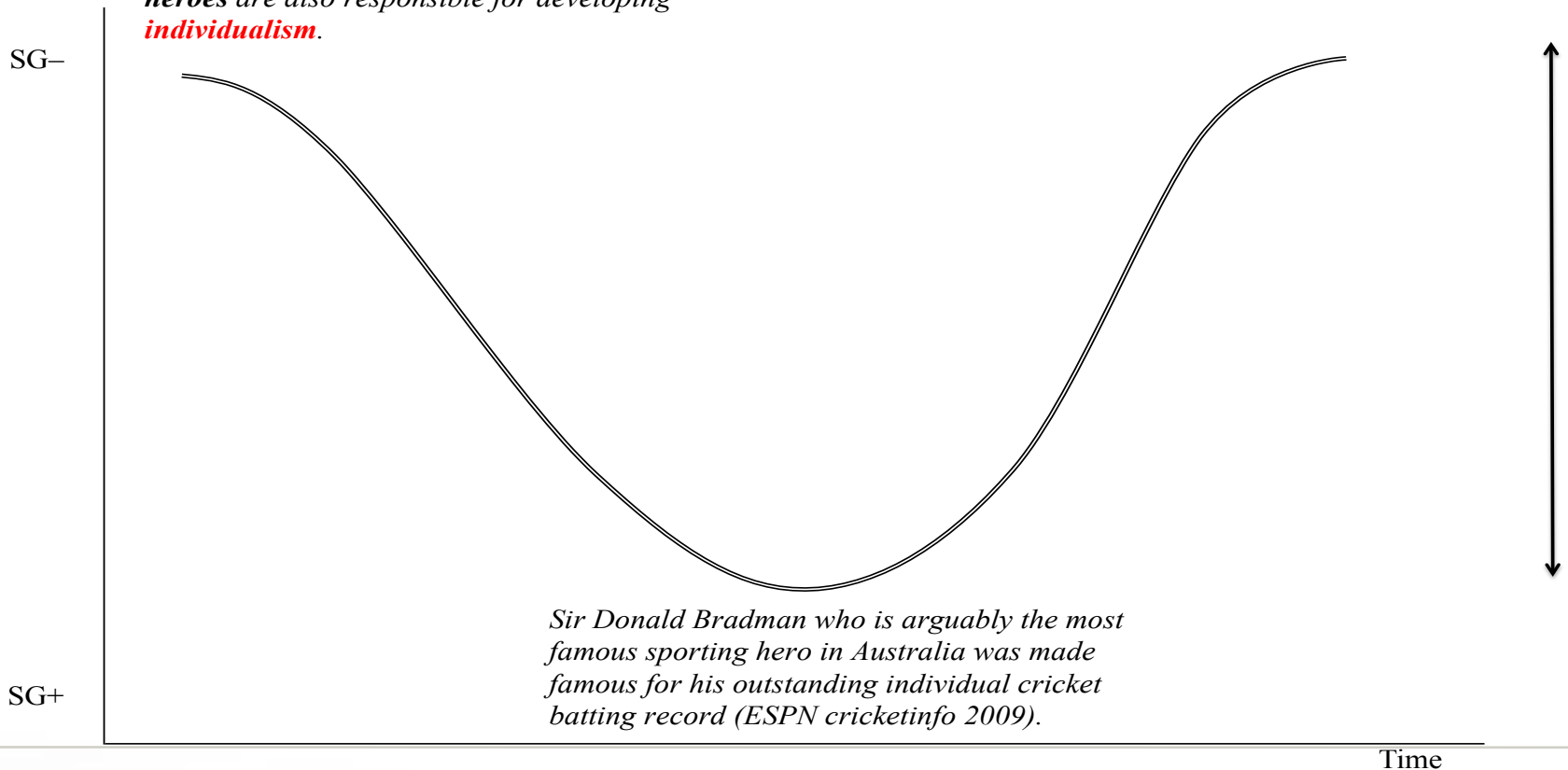


# A semantic wave in business

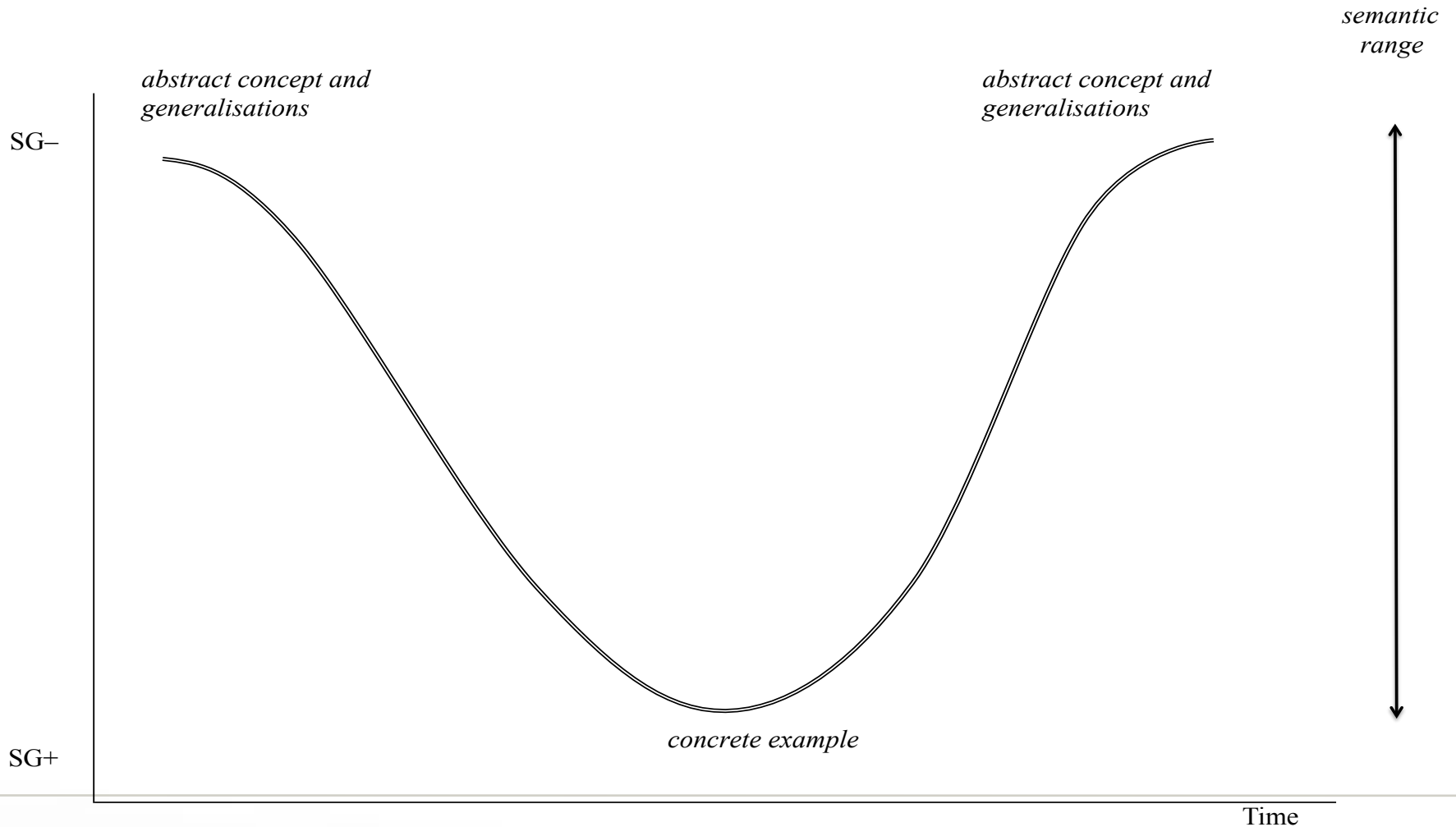
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semantic  
range



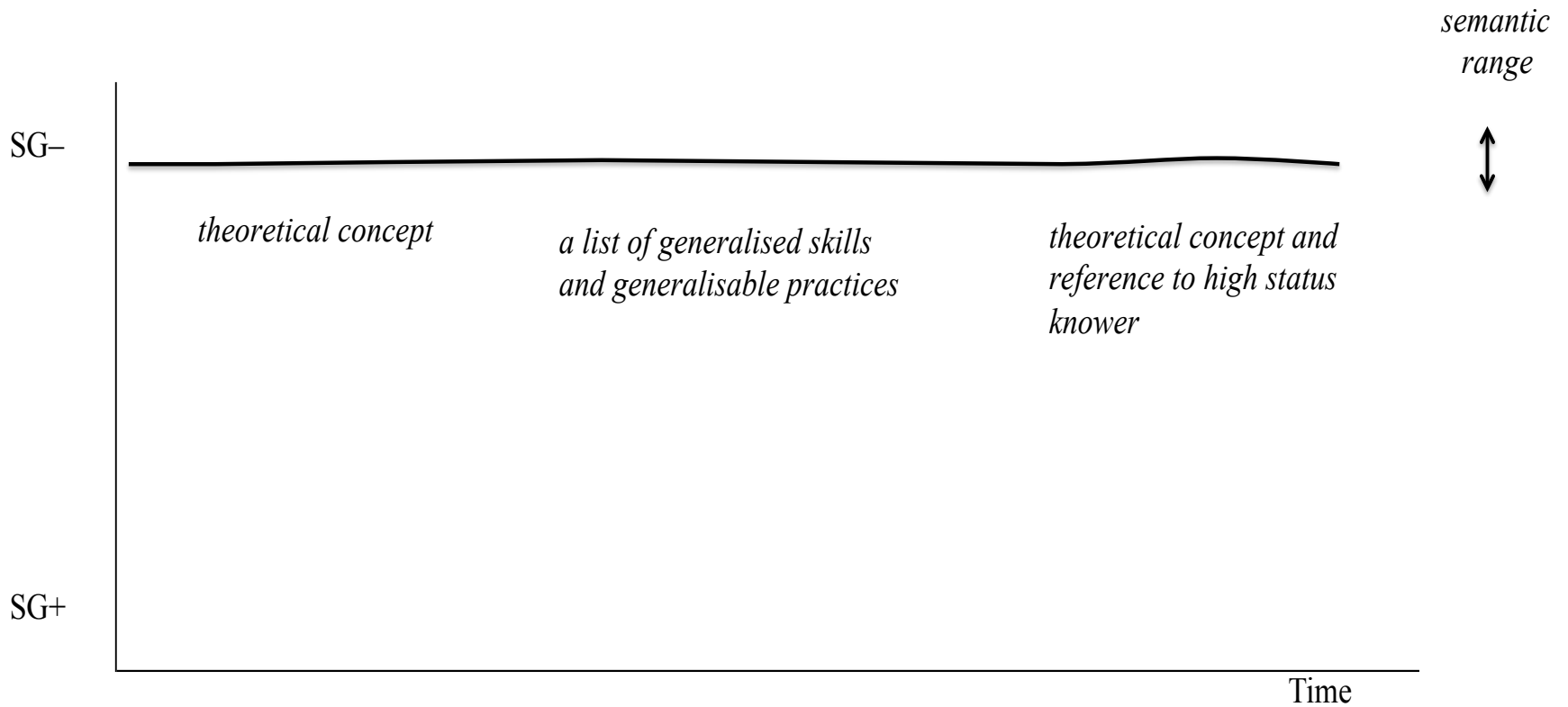
# A semantic wave in business



# Transforming knowledge: rules for future practice

**The development of intercultural competence** is the key to overcoming my detrimental behavior in a multi-national team situation. I must acquire **cultural knowledge regarding the preferred communication style, values, beliefs and even the core elements of their culture** to ensure **team cohesion** (Matveev & Milter 2004, p.106). [...] I must cease discounting behaviour and embrace **the full potential a team can offer** by facilitating all of the group ideas. Team members with even fundamentally different core cultures can work together in harmony and achieve far more than any individual if **intercultural competence** is embraced which is the view held by [Associate Professor of Management Richard Milter \(Matveev 2004\)](#).

# Transformation: a high semantic flatline



# Semantic gravity in the business journal

## The journal

- weaves together & transforms different kinds of knowledge, but through a differently staged structure
- *a wide range of semantic gravity*: interweaving abstractions with concrete cases

# Implications:

## Forms of knowledge in critical reflection

### 1) **Generic attributes:** *transferable* critical thinking skills

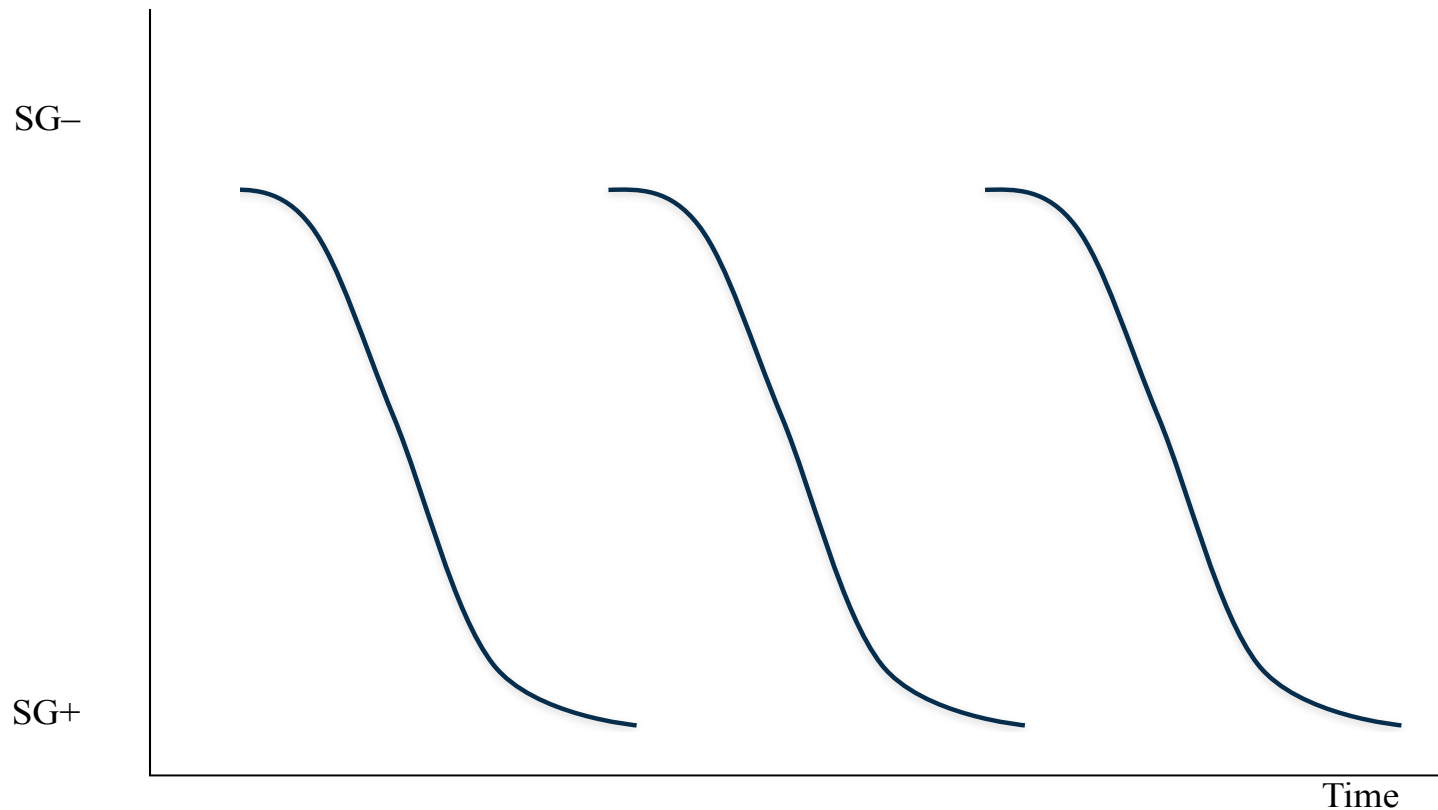
- *mastery of semantic gravity* and the capacity to create *semantic waves* (basis of achievement)
- weaving together *different forms of knowledge* (personal & professional experience related to theoretical frameworks to construct the identity of the self-reflective practitioner)

### 2) **Discipline-specificity:**

- The overall profile traces a different shape: potential *subject-specific differences* for further research
- Low narrative flatlines are valued in the discipline of social work, while in business the waves of semantic gravity appear earlier and are followed by a high flatline

# Implications for ALL: Teaching students how to 'wave'

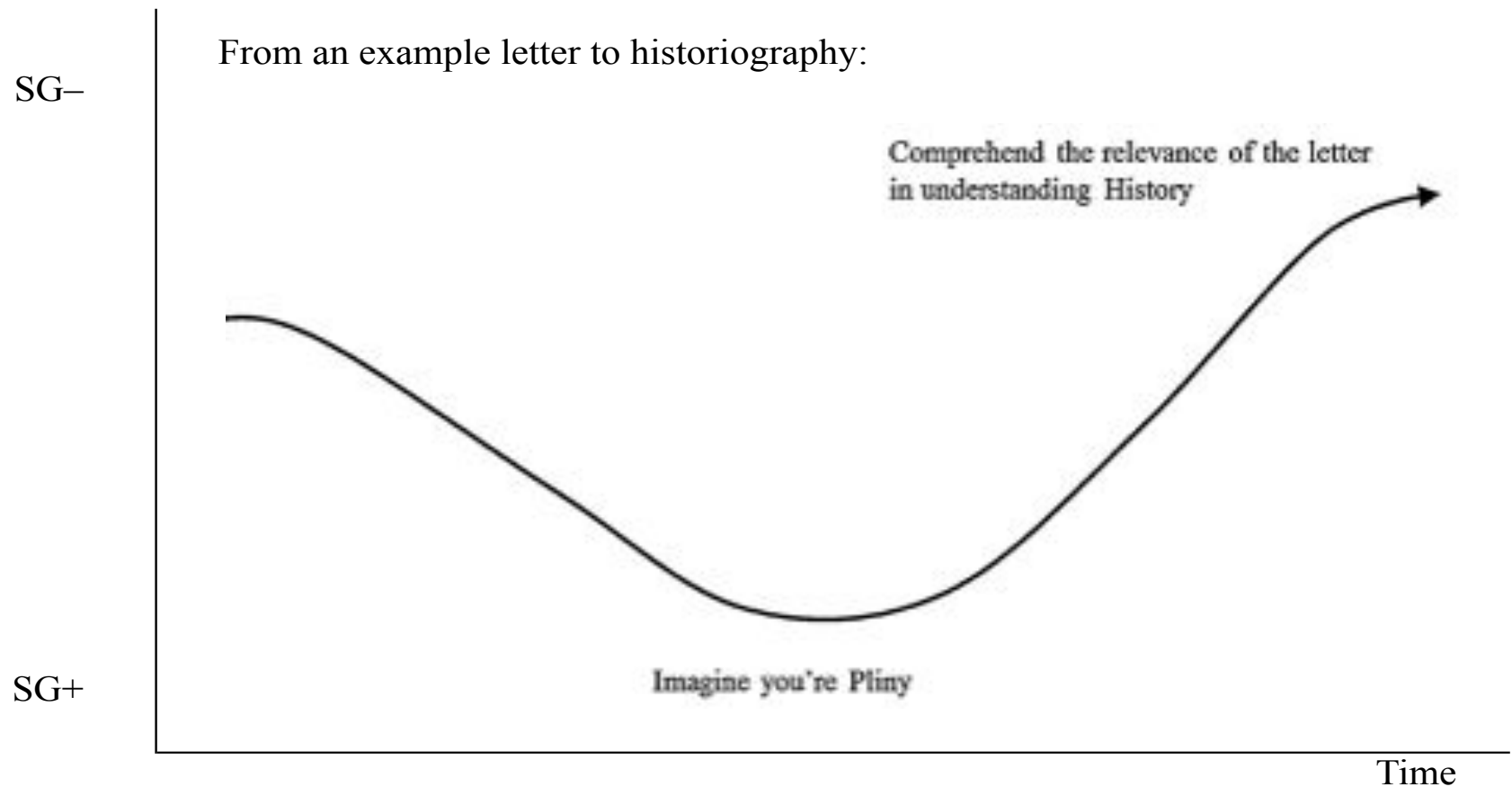
From 'down escalators' ...



Adapted from Maton, 2013: 14

# Implications for ALL: Teaching students how to 'wave'

... to semantic waves:





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