

Enquiring into writing development across research degrees: a new generative model.

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Abstract: this paper reports a UK Higher Education Academy funded study aimed at exploring research students' perceptions of what helps them develop their academic writing. Recent graduates and students from across disciplines were asked questions around four themes: (a) supervisors' feedback; (b) training; (c) cohort experiences; and (d) personal strategies for writing development. This paper builds on the interim results discussed at BERA 2012 and presents a new generative model of research students' academic writing development. The model includes the factors influencing this development and captures the dynamic processes that affect higher level thinking. The model may be used as a discussion tool to build a shared student-staff understanding of effective feedback for academic writing across research degree providers globally.

Introduction

This presentation extends the discussion of the interim results presented at the previous Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association (Odena & Burgess, 2012). This paper draws on a UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) funded study aimed at exploring postgraduate research students' perceptions of what helps them develop their academic writing (Odena, with Burgess, 2012, HEA Grant Ref. FCS 664). Today we will be discussing a new generative model of research students' academic writing development, which includes the factors influencing this development and builds on recent research on professional doctorates (Burgess, Weller & Wellington, 2011). The rationale for such an enquiry lies not just in the importance of academic writing for employability but on developing learning strategies to overcome the writing blocks reported by research students (Chiappetta-Swanson & Watt, 2011). We hope that offering insights in this area of enquiry can assist the development of enhanced support mechanisms for research degree students.

Literature review

A comprehensive review of the available literature highlighted the need to approach this topic from the students' viewpoint (e.g. Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Phillips & Pugh, 2010). There is an expanding body of publications on developing writing skills with a focus on undergraduate (Fairbairn & Winch, 2011) and postgraduate students (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). These publications tend to frame any advice on the tutors' viewpoint, offering recommendations on how to 'choreograph the dissertation'

(Phillips & Pugh, 2010). However, when providing advice on academic writing most suggestions tend to emerge from the experience of the authors as supervisors, rather than from the students' perception of what works best for them. This paper focuses on the students' voice, a term originally coined for school-based enquiries (e.g. Leitch, *et al.*, 2007). The students' voice remains an aspect relatively under-explored in research education. A few enquiries have focused on experiences of supervision and learning journeys (e.g. Määttä, 2012; Wisker *et al.*, 2010). In the UK the HEA Postgraduate Research Experience Survey regularly reports scores on student support, but provides limited qualitative analysis of the students' reasons for the scores.

Within academic literacies research scholars have focussed on a number of additional areas including: students' acquisition of linguistic skills needed for academic study (Fairbairn & Winch, 2011); and doctoral and Master theses writing, in relation to specific as well as across disciplines (Owens, 2012). This study sits within the latter area and aims to extend the knowledge available with original insights by research students on what helps them in learning to write their theses.

Methodology

Participants were invited following a purposive sampling approach, using student, supervisor and alumni networks, to ensure 'maximum variation' across disciplines (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The selection criteria was that participants had to be current research students or recent graduates willing to share their experiences, and their theses had to be in English (all were studying towards or had completed a doctorate within the previous eight years). This resulted into 22 respondents from Social Science subjects and 15 from Technology, Engineering and Life Sciences. Participants were asked questions around four themes: (a) supervisors' feedback; (b) training; (c) cohort experiences; and (d) personal strategies for writing development. Interviews were fully transcribed and to obtain a balanced sample only 15 out of the 22 Social Sciences interviews were included in the analysis, totalling over 400 double-spaced pages. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis with the assistance of specialist software (*NVivo*). This process consisted of repeatedly reading each transcript until all relevant text was categorised and all themes compared against each other (Odena, 2013).

Discussion

Fifteen themes emerged, four of which are discussed in detail next due to their relevance: 'supervisors' feedback', 'personal organisation', 'English as Second Language' and 'support networks'. We hope that by discussing some quotations contained in these themes we can illustrate facilitating learning strategies for thesis writing. To maintain anonymity pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

Supervisors' feedback

This theme contained all the interviewees' comments on feedback received, revealing the personalised and diverse nature of effective feedback processes. Whereas extended feedback helped best at the beginning of the doctorate, sometimes brief suggestions were all that was needed towards the end: *'I had literally 5 minutes with my supervisor...she just made a few comments and that was enough. Supervisors are great to de-clutter your brain just enough for you to be able to see the way'* (Hayley, 4th year PhD candidate). Supervisors' most useful feedback appeared to be aimed at helping students learn how to learn by themselves, supporting the development of their critical thinking and writing. The diverse supervisory feedback processes outlined appear to be tailored to the students' learning needs, which vary as their projects develop. This developmental nature concurs with Wisker *et al.* (2010) study of doctoral learning journeys, in which the supervisory relationship was identified as one that changed over time, gradually increasing the autonomy and ownership of the project by the candidate, and one that developed into a relationship of equals. Effective support comprised a combination of mentoring and advising, including managing the

doctorate in terms of deadlines alongside intellectual challenges, reading and networking guidance. All this support was aimed at facilitating the final viva exam and subsequent emancipation of the students as independent scholars. However, how much students benefited from the supervisors' support appeared to be linked with their personal organisation, which is considered next.

Personal organisation

This theme included the participants' comments on the way they organised their time to work efficiently on their projects. Examples of advance planning and personal resilience abounded. Most interviewees could detail stories of producing chapters within tight deadlines, and working around job and family responsibilities. There was a sense of accomplishment in their writing experiences, as well as an understated feeling of devotion to their research that allowed them to invest time regardless of personal circumstances. This included writing early in the morning or during the night:

I would always write at night as during the day I was either at work or looking after the children. When the children were not at home, I would often go to the university at 10pm and return home about 4am... there is something about writing in the early hours. (Louise, PhD in Health Promotion graduate)

I would get up at quarter to five so I could get some writing done in the morning...maybe four days a week. (Tanya, PhD in Education graduate)

Participants consistently showed high levels of resilience. In other creative activities such as music composing and improvising, accounts of sustained work appear underpinned by motivation and emotional engagement (Odena, 2012). Motivation is something that interviewees had in abundance, as well as emotional engagement with their chosen research topics. There is no reason to believe cognitive processes around their writing were different from other creative endeavours. While engaged in focused studying, highly motivated students' perception of time was minimized, a situation described in the literature as being in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Overall, advanced planning was evidenced in order to set aside time for their doctorates, balancing (often juggling) research, profession and family responsibilities, which aligns with similar findings from previous studies (e.g. Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012).

ESL learning strategies

An interesting finding that we did not expect was the particular strategies used by ESL students compared to those who had English as their first language. Writing at doctoral level requires a conscious effort from any student. For the ESL student the challenge of writing and reviewing their work to improve both content and style was sometimes a difficult and arduous process. The efforts made to express their writing in coherent and fluent English comprise a range of strategies and ideas that could prove valuable for many other doctoral students. As Myles (2002, p.1) argues, 'writing involves composing which implies the ability to tell and retell pieces of information in the form of narrative or description'. Some of the student's ideas for improving their writing are very simple while others are more complex and require input from the supervisor:

I had a notebook only for academic writing so I would add things on that so I developed my writing vocabulary...I divided it into sections. The first one was, if you want to write an introduction or an abstract which are the expressions that you use....When reading articles I would underline expressions that the authors used and copied them in my writing. (Georgia, ESL doctoral graduate)

Reading is very good practice, because without input we can't output...I copy the structure as well and those of supervisor feedback. (Emiko, ESL 2nd year doctoral student)

Writing at doctoral level for ESL students brought many challenges. Some of these challenges related to the difference in the cultural context for learning and education, some related to style in the way that language is used. Being able to take a step-by-step approach to writing was also important:

Before doing any writing I make sure I have read a lot and familiarised myself with the topic and have ideas. The first step is to put my ideas on a mind map. After knowing structure I start writing each part of the text. Having my knowledge structured motivates me to write, also I like when I need to write recommendations or conclusion putting down my own ideas...[It helps] sharing writing experience with peers and figuring out one's own technique. (Oksana, 1st year ESL doctoral student)

Previous investigations into doctoral students' academic writing indicate there a number of challenges ESL students face. Cadman (1997) outlines the problems of Chinese students in terms of coming from a learning culture where they are not taught to write critically. Communication verbally can also be a problem if students have not been taught correct pronunciation of words. Other issues that were outlined by ESL participants were the need to develop clarity in grammar and that writing was often painfully slow.

Support networks

This theme contained all the interviewees' comments on social support networks, including other students in the same and in different universities, as well as the personal support provided by university staff, friends and family, or a combination of the above:

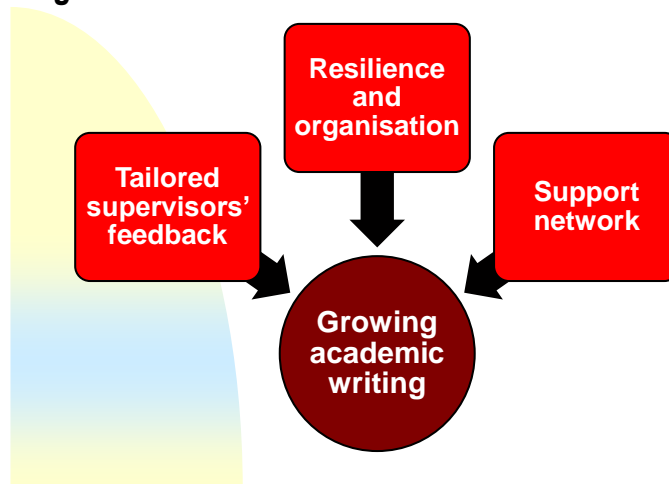
I've become very close friends with a number of PhDs...We have a Facebook group and try and get together once every six months or so (Sarah, 4th year doctoral student)

I have a partner who's very very supportive and if I say Sunday afternoon sorry I'm going to write...my partner's quite happy to say fine and do something else. I have a lot of support from my colleagues at work...that helps me to dispel the negative voice about this isn't any good and to connect with the voice that says yes actually you can do this (Peter, 5th year doctoral student)

Conclusion

A generative model of academic writing development emerged from the analysis of transcripts and is included below. The model contains three elements that appear to be indispensable for doctoral students' academic writing development: (a) tailored and supportive supervisors' feedback to scaffold independent thinking development; (b) personal resilience and organisation (even within chaos!); and (c) a support network. The model contain ideas from across a number of themes and is broadly defined to enable it to work across disciplines as well as with ESL and non-ESL students:

A generative model of doctoral students' writing



This enquiry builds on previous studies on academic literacy and doctoral education, supporting previously found supervisory patterns and styles, and extends this area of knowledge by evidencing the salience of personal characteristics and preferences. A continuum of supervisory approaches are used in the different phases of a doctorate, starting with enculturation, followed by critical thinking growth, emancipation and relationship development after completion. Students and graduates interviewed reported facilitating experiences and strategies that can be located along this continuum. A number of facilitating strategies reported by ESL students may be of interest to others. For example, organising ideas and creating a mind map and being clear about the structure of the writing before the start. Considering the above strategies may be of benefit to students who will be investing a great deal of time learning 'new ways with words' as they enter the discursive practices of their disciplines (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). Academic writing learning is not a compulsory element across doctoral education, which often implicitly assumes such learning will develop unaided. But for students with prior work or knowledge different from their chosen doctorates, there will be the need for subtle leading into the academic expectations of the new discipline by supervisors.

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