

ICED 2020 proceedings:

PhD support beyond teaching: The need to communicate effectively in (research) writing

Lynn McAlpine¹

*Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford UK OX2 6PY*

Abstract

PhD writing support is not typically something that academic developers have engaged in, so I begin by describing why I think this is something we should consider doing. I then explain the research basis for the suite of research writing workshops which we have piloted in an Erasmus+ grant (<https://www.researcher-identity.com/>), as well as their general design, and examples of slides and handouts for three workshops. I end by considering the value of integrating support for PhD writing into broader academic development offerings. My hope is that you will be convinced of the value of taking up this idea in order to enhance PhD progress and potentially graduates' supervisory and teaching practices if they take up academic posts.

1 PhD research writing: An academic development responsibility?

In preparing PhD students for their futures, the focus of much academic development has been on teaching, an important component of traditional research-teaching posts. And if, like me, you consider supervision a form of teaching, then incorporating supervision practices into teaching programs seems natural. So far, so good, I hope; but I want to argue further. If we are to indeed prepare PhDs for future academic work, there is another area in which we can support them: effectively communicating in a range of genres, particularly research genres (Beaufort 2000), such as abstracts, research papers and grant proposals. These are different forms of writing which PhD students need to develop if they are to be successful academics – and potentially supervise students themselves².

You might ask: Why should academic developers take up this work? While universities in North America often have dedicated writing centres that support PhD students, in Europe and elsewhere such support is relatively rare. Yet we know that PhD students often experience writing as emotionally challenging, and that support leads to greater confidence and success (Badenhorst et al. 2014). Concurrently, many supervisors may not feel capable of promoting writing skills³ (Aitchison et al. 2012), either because they also find writing challenging or because while successful writers themselves they are not able to articulate how they achieve success. So, the short-term goal of incorporating writing support into our PhD teaching/supervision programs can be to support PhD progress; the long-term goal is to better prepare PhDs who remain in the academy to both supervise and teach, and in the process to use their expanded writing expertise to help their students be more successful learners and writers.

¹ Lynn.mcalpine@ctl.ox.ac.uk; lynn.mcalpine@mcgill.ca

² Also, since more than half of PhD graduates work beyond the academy (Neumann & Tan 2011), non-academic forms of writing (Bhatia 1999) may also be pertinent, but are not the focus of this paper.

³ Supervisory support of writing is a complementary strategy – and I have provided one example of such a workshop below.

2 *Research basis for suite of workshops*

There is considerable research on the experiences of PhD students as writers, as well as on research writing generally. I will focus on three themes constant in this research – much of which supervisors may not know about and so cannot teach their students unless they have development opportunities to engage with this research. A key issue is the often negative emotionality associated with writing (frequently based on prior experience), which can lead to procrastination. So, a focus for support is helping students to recognize the effect of such emotion and facilitate the development of more positive emotion and confidence in themselves as writers (Aitchison et al. 2012; Kamler and Thomson 2008).

Linked to this is valuing feedback: seeing it as vital and productive in the process of becoming a successful writer – if well used. This is because we write for others and we need to know what sense they make of our writing (Aitchison and Lee 2006). Unfortunately, many PhD students have had earlier experiences of feedback that are negative, which again may lead to avoidance strategies: not seeking and then using feedback.

Lastly, individuals often lack evidence-based information related to the range of factors influencing effective writing. To illustrate, students may not recognize the different purposes embedded in genres and how these purposes should guide the writer (Swales 1990); for example, the purpose of the abstract is to “seduce” the reader into reading the paper. Further, students need to understand how to use the moves (segments in a text, each with a specific purpose) within a genre effectively (Beaufort 2000). So, for instance, for those writing a monograph dissertation, understanding its unique moves (Kamler & Thomson (2006) can help to instil a sense of mastery. With this as background, I turn now to the workshops we have designed.

3 *General workshop design*

The workshops vary in length, from an hour or two to a couple of days to a term. Nevertheless, they are consistently designed to introduce three themes: (a) value and use emotion effectively; (b) value, seek and use feedback; and (c) expand evidence-based knowledge. Of course, each workshop varies in emphasis. But a key element in all workshops is creating the conditions for individuals, individually and in pairs (sometimes small groups), to explore how their past experiences may be making them less confident and productive than they might be, and then to learn about and practice new ideas/ forms of knowledge. For instance, they may be asked in pairs to compare their individual timelines of the highs and lows of a particular writing experience in order to analyze the impact of different elements of the writing process on their sense of progress. Or they may be given a research proposal summary and asked to find the moves in pairs.

To provide a sense of how we have designed these workshops, here are three that were given at an event in Helsinki October 2019 – two for PhDs and one for supervisors: <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/seminar-for-early-career-researchers-and-doctoral-supervisors/workshops>

- *Who and how am I as a research writer?:* For any early career researchers regardless of stage
- *Towards post-doctoral research – Preparing a research grant proposal:* For final stage PhD students as well as recent PhD graduates
- *Supervising research writing:* For supervisors with any level of expertise

4 Integrating writing into overall academic development programming

Finally, I want to consider how best to integrate support for writing into present institutional academic development offerings. I say this since while it is useful to offer writing support directly, there may be value in integrating such support into other programming. My starting point is, of course, that supervision is an aspect of teaching. Further, a key feature of PhD progress is successful communication in writing, with the expectation that the candidate will ultimately submit a monograph or a series of publishable papers that make a contribution to the field. So writing becomes core to helping PhD students progress in their degrees; and they need to understand how to draw on and use as much (supervisory) feedback as possible.

Further, while writing may not seem so central in teaching, in fact it still plays a role in that teaching involves constantly assessing and giving feedback to students on their academic writing. So, any writing expertise the PhD student develops will be of use in teaching undergraduates as well as graduates. In other words, my belief is that while academic developers can offer useful writing-focused workshops, what might be equally effective would be to integrate writing (the role of emotion, feedback, and writing knowledge) into present teaching and supervision workshops, since ultimately writing is central to all higher education student learning.

References

- Aitchison, C., Catterall, J., Ross, P., & Burgin, S. (2012). 'Tough love and tears': Learning doctoral writing in the sciences. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 31(4), 435-447.
- Aitchison, C., & A. Lee. (2007). Research writing: problems and pedagogies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(3), 265-278.
- Badenhorst, C., Moloney, C., Rosales, J., Dyer, J., & Ru, L. (2014). Beyond deficit: graduate student research-writing pedagogies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(1), 1-11.
- Beaufort, A. (2000). Learning the trade: A social apprenticeship model for gaining writing expertise. *Written communication*, 17(2), 185-223.
- Bhatia, V. (1999). Integrating products, processes, purposes and participants in professional writing. *Writing: Texts, processes and practices*, 21-39.
- Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2006). *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*. London: Routledge.
- Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2008). The failure of dissertation advice books: toward alternative pedagogies for doctoral writing. *Educational Researcher*, 37(8), 507-514.
- Neumann, R., & Tan, K. (2011). From PhD to initial employment: The doctorate in a knowledge economy *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(5), 601-614.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.