

Writing the doctorate

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Published version

MCGRATH, Lisa (2023). Writing the doctorate. Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University.

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Writing the doctorate

Writing the doctorate is hard. I am reminded of this of late, as four of my doctoral students are in the mythical writing up stage. I say ‘mythical’ because we all know that students don’t just ‘write up’ once the data analysis is done and dusted. My students have been writing continuously over the course of their doctorates in myriad genres: research notes, transcriptions, abstracts for conferences, posters, RF1s, RF2s, drafts of chapters, progress reports and so on. Let’s face it, writing is thinking and thinking entails writing (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Doctoral students, like all academics, are writers.

Even though doctoral students write all the time, we know from research and experience that writing ‘issues’ can delay or prevent our doctoral students from finishing their theses. And we know that supervisors are so important in ensuring that their students develop good writing habits (Kamler & Thomson, 2014) and are inducted into the writing of their discipline. How does this writing apprenticeship occur? For the most part, through enthusiastic and diligent feedback on multiple drafts which, while well-intended, can be demotivating and even exhausting for the doctoral student (as my own doctoral students will tell you). It seems to me that supervisory practice when it comes to writing needs to go beyond giving feedback. And I think it takes some planning.

I like this quote by Kamler and Thomson (whose book on helping doctoral students write I heartily recommend):

“It is imperative for supervision pedagogies to be designed rather than remain as Ward (2013) says ‘accidental’. [...] Ward suggests that it is in fact that pedagogies are not attended to which creates anxiety and failure for doctoral candidates. Supervisors of course understand this at some level. They do know that they don’t just chat with doctoral students and that there is a pedagogical intent in the supervision conversation. However, the lack of institutional and disciplinary attention to the pedagogical features of supervision leaves supervisors with relatively few educational resources to call on, other than their own experience of being supervised” (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. xii).

The first thing that strikes me here is the reference to the supervisory conversation. While there are numerous important (and enjoyable!) conversations to be had around writing, they are often in response to the written artifact – the draft chapter that the student has produced. But writing is a process as well as a product. With this in mind, I have introduced “writing with Lisa” as part of my supervisory practice. I meet my student once per month for an hour and together we do some writing on the thesis. She talks, I type. I mostly type what she says; sometimes I type something else. I have been astonished by the richness of the discussion that this has prompted, the realisations that my student has come to, and the insight I have gained into some of the ‘issues’ she is experiencing.

The second thing that strikes me in the quote is the emphasis on pedagogy. Supervising is teaching. And when we teach, we scaffold, often through tasks. But how often do we set ‘tasks’ for our doctoral students to do when they are ‘writing up’? Task is a slippery term, especially in my field of research, so as an aspiring role model for my doctoral students, I am going to provide a definition. “A task is creative work undertaken that is both the culmination and application of a set of distinct, sequenced, goal-directed activities aimed at rhetorical consciousness raising, the acquisition of genre skills, and meaning-making and preparation

for an anticipated or emerging socio-rhetorical writing situation.” (Swales & Feak, 2023). In other words, a task is a series of planned and purposeful activities that we ask our students to do to lead them to successfully write what they need to write.

Let’s look at a couple of examples: your student is about to tackle the theoretical framework chapter. A natural thing first step is to suggest looking at examples of theoretical framework sections (an activity). But what is she looking for? If instead, a genre analysis task is set, the activity becomes writing pedagogy. For instance:

- 1) Read the theoretical framework sections of two example theses in your area. As you read, consider, what is the purpose of this section? What is the writer trying to do?
- 2) Look at the overall organisation – what sections are there, which order do they come in, and how do they contribute to the overall purpose?
- 3) Look at the references – who is cited, to what extent and how? Can you find any examples of how the student signals their stance in relation to the literature using reporting verbs or other linguistic means?
- 4) Where in the chapter does the student make reference to their own research project? Why?
- 5) What do you think is done well? What could be improved?
- 6) What insights gained from this task can you apply to your own writing? What will you now do?

Another student might be daunted by the literature review. So, tell them planning a literature review is like planning a wedding reception (Kamler and Thomson use the metaphor of a dinner party, which also works). You have a limited budget so can’t invite everyone, and you have to decide who sits where and with whom. Ask your student to plan out the round bistro tables and start seating the guests (the literature). Who will get along and have a lot to talk about? Seat them together. Are there some aunts and uncles who like talking politics but come from different ends of the spectrum? Fine, seat them on the same table, but maybe opposite not next to each other. Who will sit closest to the top table? The people closest to the happy couple. Seat the older and less exciting guests near the bar...your student will not only map the field but will start to think about the connections and debates that are emerging.

Writing the doctorate is hard. There is no silver bullet. But ‘pedagogical’ rather than ‘accidental’ is probably the way to go.

Dr Lisa McGrath is an Associate Professor in Educational Linguistics. She has published widely on academic writing, doctoral writing and writing for publication. She is currently editing a special issue of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* on innovation in L2 writing task design.

References

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