

RESEARCHARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## FROM WRITING TO DOCTORAL WRITING-THE JOURNEY AND THE SUPPORT

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### ABSTRACT

Origin of research defies any deliberate attempt to date it. It is pre-historic and man's curiosity has existed since time immemorial. But academising this element of curiosity and the urge to find something new is what concerns us here. Research and research writing are logically distinguishable but are they also empirically separable? Representation of research has always been an area of concern in the universities world over. While policy-making bodies have mandated publication of research for academic elevation, published original research has also been proving to be the knowledge capital of a nation owing to the 'commodification of knowledge' (Neave, 2002:3 in Amaral, 2003). The academic currency possessed by research globally has placed emphasis on academicians and institutions of higher education to invest in not just churning out quality, cutting-edge research but also in representing it to the world. This paper focusses on the kind of support available for doctoral writing, one of the modes of representing research, in the universities across the world. (160 words)

**Key Words:** doctoral writing pedagogy, community of practice, writing as social practice, knowledge currency, writing groups, academic literacies.

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### INTRODUCTION

Origin of research defies any deliberate attempt to date it. It is pre-historic and man's curiosity has existed since time immemorial. But academising this element of curiosity and the urge to find something new is what concerns us here. Research and research writing are logically distinguishable but are they also empirically separable? Representation of research has always been an area of concern in the universities world over. While policy-making bodies have mandated publication of research for academic elevation, published original research has also been proving to be the knowledge capital of a nation owing to the 'commodification of knowledge' (Neave, 2002:3 in Amaral, 2003). The academic currency possessed by

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### Research Writing: Individual's Pursuit or Community Agenda?

The impetus for imparting research writing abilities at graduate school programmes in universities across the globe is so imperative that institutions have had to respond to the need immediately. Many studies have highlighted the importance of research writing in doctoral

instruction. Among them are Aitchison and Lee (2006) who observe that the 'business as normal' stance is no longer sufficient if graduate programmes want, in earnest, to improve the research writing abilities of their students. Unfortunately, development of and attendance to department wide research writing goals may face resistance on a variety of fronts relating to organizational workload, time management, institutional policy and planning. Yet educators who insist on staying within the present boundaries of the institutional system are naturally locked into its prevailing practices, and thus limit the writing potentials of their students.

While systemic constraints and prevalent parasitic practices downsize research writing for Aitchison and Lee, Barbara Kamler and Pat Thompson (2006) see research writing as an institutionally-constrained social practice. It is about meaning making and learning to produce knowledge in particular disciplines and discourse communities. It is not simply about skills and techniques that can be learned in a mechanical way. The concept of *Community of Practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) can be evoked to describe dynamics within the social systemic network within which research writing takes place.

Lave and Wenger (1991) present a Vygotskian inspired model of Community of Practice (CoP), in which learning environments are viewed as sites for 'legitimate peripheral participation'. In academic communities specifically, movement within a CoP is characterized by increasingly adept manipulation of various knowledge-building tools, including academic language. Many of the same textual artefacts (e.g. books, journal articles, scholarly association web pages) that experienced researchers rely upon when they craft research writing are available to novice writers in graduate classes as well. However, because novice writers in graduate level courses do not normally function within the same social networks as experienced researchers, the classroom space might more aptly be termed a 'practice community' a term applied by Barab and Duffy (2000). In a research practice community, writing is normally undertaken as a learning exercise, a means to prepare for

communication within authentic research communities in the future.

#### **Doctoral Writing: A Present Absence**

Brian Paltridge (1997) shares concern about the conspicuous dearth of programmes to address thesis and dissertation writing for ESL students. Unless the students understand the nuances of research writing, they will continue to have difficulties in meeting the required standards in research writing. Paltridge also states that research writing is growing up to be a gargantuan genre only of late as seen in the writings of James (1984), Dudley-Evans (1986, 1988, 1989, 1994), Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988), Ramani (1988), Richards (1988), Swales (1990) and Shaw (1991). Jenkins, Jordan and O'Weiland (1993) and Belcher (1994) have discussed the analysis and teaching of various aspects of theses and dissertations across a number of different disciplines. Davis and Parker (1979), Mauch and Birch (1989), Madsen (1992) and Preece (1994) have discussed the design and development of thesis proposals. Helgeson (1985), Huckin and Olsen (1994), Stewart & Stewart (1992) discuss writing proposals for funding research.

Paltridge's concern is shared by Aitchison and Lee (2006) who feel that writing has remained significantly under-theorized within research degree programmes in universities. Writing is often seen as a problem for the educating of researchers in doctoral degree programmes. With linking of research training to research policy, greater accountability and tighter time frames for completion of doctoral programmes, writing becomes increasingly visible as a point of tension in research contexts. Writing is the practice as well as the site of the production and exchange of knowledge (Barthes, 1977). Writing, in research education, is believed to be central to research (Lee, 1998; Scott & Usher, 1999; Richardson, 2000; Maclure, 2003). As an explicit pedagogical category, research writing is often separated from pedagogies of supervision and research learning and taken up in highly circumscribed settings such as learning support units. This has led to a noticeable absence of a set pedagogy for writing in most research degree programmes and also there is an increased dependence on clinical intervention by language or

writing advisers at the point of crisis. Writing, either commonly or deliberately, is seen to be autonomous or separate from the work of knowledge production or by default and neglect, always remains subordinate to the main work of thinking and of knowledge production (Street, 1984). Linda A Fernsten and Mary Reda (2011) define academic writing as a process that can involve struggle and conflict for many, especially when genres and/or discourses are new. They try to connect writing and thinking by looking at writing as a means of 'thinking through' a question or problem; it is the performance of knowledge. Writers are people trying to communicate in a particular form; writers are people who write-a practice not bound by profession or discipline. For Rowena Murray (2012), academic work involves different types of writing, and many higher education cultures assess academics' writing in terms of publications and research grants. The competencies required for this advanced academic writing can be defined in terms of literacy (Lillis & Curry 2010), behaviour (Murray et al, 2008), motivation (Moore, 2003), peer support (Lee and Boud, 2003) and working in community research practice (Murray 2012).

It is surprising and interesting that we have invoking of Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice in the development of research writing abilities by Kamler and Thompson (2006) on the one hand and suggestions from recent research that the ability to disengage from other tasks and engage with academic writing is a characteristic of successful academic writers, on the other. It is said that individuals who constructively disengage themselves from other tasks can invest their positive energy in academic writing and meet the standards required of them by specific disciplines. It's not sufficient if individuals alone engage in writing tasks, but institutions must engage themselves in such tasks too and give them their quality time by acknowledging the role of writing in academic work. Institutions should realise and promote the centrality of writing in academic development.

#### **Writing Groups**

Need for doctoral writing support issues from Paltridge (2002) and Hood (2005) and special issues of the Journal of English for Academic

Purposes (2002) and the special issue of the Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics (2003) who point to the increasing importance research writing is gaining in the EAP research and pedagogy. Writing groups became an important feature of university culture in the late eighteenth century in North American universities, in the absence of a structured curriculum to address the needs of research writing and were established in other countries as well. These groups differed in their approaches, though they shared the unilateral mandate of addressing the perceived performance gap in translating the policy statements into realities with reference to research writing. Aitchison (2003) takes a language-oriented perspective of research writing groups while George et al (2003) take a theoretical perspective of the same. These writing groups focus on the specific requirements of writing, ignoring the romantic notions of writing as a solitary pursuit (Grant & Knowles, 2000; Moore, 2003). The groups believe that writing evolves in the specific contexts characterised by a network of social, institutional and peer relations-of readers, reviewers, teachers, examiners, editors and publishers. Such writing groups with research mandate function as nodes in a network of heterogeneous and dispersed socio-rhetorical purposes, goals and strategies.

Another study in the line of socialising research comes from Cuthbert & Spark (2008); Kamler & Thompson (2007); Lee & Boud (2003) quoted in Gillian Fergie et al (2011) who cite a recent research that suggests a sociable space for discussion about reading and writing; an opportunity for introducing new ideas and more generally for airing academic concerns and successes. For many PhD students, the challenge of writing their theses (and thus developing an academic identity) is undertaken without a great deal of guidance. While supervisors provide insight into crucial subject debates and advice on research design, they do not always create a space in which to discuss and engage with issues of reading and writing, an awareness of which is critical during the transition from student to academic (Ivanic, 1998; Kamler & Thompson, 2007 in Gillian Fergie et al, 2011).

Since the late 1990s, research into academic writing in higher education in the U.K has been influenced by a "writing as social practice" approach, promulgated by, among others, Lea & Street (1998) in their academic literacies framework (Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001; and Lillis & Scott, 2007). In this approach, writing is viewed as an ongoing pursuit that student writers must constantly develop, particularly when they enter a new learning context, such as postgraduate study. This "writing as social practice" approach is a critique of a generic study skills model of writing development, which is still a feature of the U.K. higher education. The generic skills model presupposes that writing is a fixed skill that can be easily transported across boundaries, with scant reference to the context in which the student is operating.

The academic literacies approach to writing (Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott, 2007), on the other hand, takes into account disciplinary, institutional and even cultural conventions, and it acknowledges that writing is bound up with issues of identity and power. Writing is thus seen as a social act informed by practices of departments, subjects, and institutions. It is worth observing that much research into writing in higher education has taken undergraduate work as its subject, with rather less focus on postgraduate writing, although PhD writers have attracted increasing attention more recently. As Badley (2009) has suggested, the lack of focus on PhD writing in research is almost certainly due in part to the assumption that students at PhD level do not need to address writing development explicitly. George S Y and J Kantaridon (2007) in their survey of ESP/EAP situation conducted between 1997 and 2003 among many European universities strongly recommend the intervention of the administrative bodies in introducing a compulsory course in the last four semesters dedicated to topics like writing research papers, presentation skills, etc.

Commenting on the higher education support system in the UK, Ursula Wingate (2012) labels the system as error-stricken since it divorces writing from thinking (Mitchell & Evison, 2006 in Wingate, 2012). Another weakness of the system, she says, is its failure to recognise that both native

and non-native speakers of English are novices to academic writing. Wingate concludes that raising critical awareness among novice research writers can certainly wait and should rather be preceded by an analysis of discipline-specific texts.

#### **Writing or Writing up?**

There is also a shift in recent research in student writing away from the idea of 'writing up', which implies that writing is done only in the final stages of a dissertation, and towards thinking of writing as an important part of the research process from the start. Kamler and Thompson (2008), in particular, promote the shift. They suggest that universities should prioritize writing cultures and adopt an approach which "recognizes that research practices are writing practices and that all university staff and students benefit from systematic attention to writing" (pp. 177).

Kamler and Thompson (2006) in Susan Carter (2011) insist that doctoral writing creates the author at the same time as the text and they address supervisors as the source of doctoral writing sustenance. The genre of the thesis is highly marked, with generic requirements that must be met in addition to discipline-specific conventions. More generic support for doctoral candidates is provided as governments and universities buy into the idea that we live in a knowledge economy; the original knowledge of a doctoral thesis is a rich resource. Though extending generic support to doctoral writing assumes conventions of thesis writing to be uniform across the genre, each thesis will still demonstrate its '*thesis-iness*' which will make writing support delicate and challenging.

Thesis showcases textual generic performance. Its task is multiple, including creating and occupying a gap in existing knowledge, making an original contribution that is accepted by its community, demonstrating an internationally recognisable standard of presentation and transforming its author from novice to licensed practitioner. As a form of literature, it weaves its social identity, while weaving its new knowledge into existing knowledge. Each doctoral thesis emerges from the discourse that it inherited, 'productive of that by which (it) is produced' in Helgerson's (1992, p.13) terms. It is even more

apparent that the research thesis is a genre demanding such interweaving and demanding that it be demonstrated. Since thesis is a text produced for examination, it is particularly marked as a genre with generic expectation spelt out as essential criteria. If they are not met, the thesis fails as a performance and as a thesis.

The doctorate is a genre strikingly marked by its defensiveness. Genre dictates its length, its formality, its drive to persuade, its defensiveness and the moves that it makes in demonstrating its establishment of new knowledge.

Swales (1990, 2004) quoted in Wendy Bastalich (2011) attempts to look at research writing from the language perspective wherein he highlights the overwhelming role of English in the dissemination of research globally and the relationship of evolving text types and patterns with research conventions in English. These include specific moves from for instance, topic, problem and solution and include author positioning, inter-textual practices and use of tense. Different research processes give rise to different writing forms, ways of presenting argument, rhetorical personality and modes of engaging readers (Hyland, 2000, 2002). In introducing students to the research genre and its variations, teachers also introduce them to the social context within which research is produced. In this sense, teaching research writing is about more than just writing, it makes procedural and ethical aspects of the research process, traditionally passed on informally, an explicit part of instruction.

Petersen (2007) in Cally Guerin (2013) talks about achieving 'academicity' in writing research and developing academic and researcher identities. Academic and researcher identities are demonstrated in how one speaks, reads, writes, behaves and *thinks* about research, teaching and administration (Brew, Boud&Namgung, 2011; Petersen, 2007). These demonstrations can be observed:

- in seminars, conference presentations, lectures, tutorials and laboratory demonstrations;
- in reading critically, and in what one chooses to read;

- in how one writes, for which audience and where it is published;
- in how one gives and receives feedback on ideas on writing;
- in how one interacts with and behaves towards peers, supervisors, and other academics (that is, in terms of collegiality and autonomy);
- in how one establishes and defends knowledge claims, in what questions are considered worth asking and the answers worth having; and
- in one's relations to inanimate objects, such as computers, books, library access cards, lab equipment, room keys, etc. (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Kamler & Thompson, 2006)

A complete 'immersion' in research milieu is what gets the researcher research behaviour, research vocabulary, research etiquette and researcher identity. It is well established that PhD students learn a great deal from their peers (Boud & Lee, 2005): candidates in interdisciplinary programmes often rely on the knowledge of their peers as an important supplement to faculty advisers (Gardner et al, 2012) and writing groups provide an important forum in which academic identities can be forged (Lee & Boud, 2003). One can see that there is a constant emphasis by many scholars from various parts of the world on the formation and working of writing groups to foster research writing.

Kamler and Thomson, 2006; Parry 1998; Rose and Mc Clafferty (2001) in Lynn McAlpine and Cheryl Amundsen (2011) feel that very little explicit attention has been paid to writing development in doctoral education. Aitchison and Lee (2006, p.266) note the 'absence of a systematic pedagogy for writing in most research degree programmes and commenting on the relative scarcity of well-theorized material about doctoral supervision and writing, they suggest that 'doctoral writing is a kind of present absence in the landscape of doctoral education'.

An over-simplified account of the writing process might assume that the writer invents or collects material for her argument, arranges that material in the most appropriate order, and finally

polishes the whole into an acceptable and effective style.

Pare et al (2009) consider the dissertation as an example of a successful and robust genre in academic work, and that's because it does something the community feels needs doing. Although there are important variations across disciplines, the dissertation genre remains remarkably durable across fields of study, national boundaries, and time. Doctoral students across the campus and across the world write a substantial paper as their final display of student ability, and, in many cases, as their initial display of professional scholarly work. The textual features, vary, to be sure, but include tables of content, abstracts, acknowledgements, statements of the problem under investigation, research questions, literature reviews, descriptions of methodology, reports of findings, and concluding discussions. And within fields of inquiry, the students' choices regarding invention, arrangement, and style are governed by convention. To appreciate the textual object at the heart of this social action-the actual dissertation-it is necessary to consider the repeated activity that surrounds it; the entire repeated action, not just the document, is the genre.

#### Writing Vs. Research Writing

Bijork Raisanen (1997) in Carmel M Diezmann (2005) distinguishes scholarly writing or academic writing from other writing by evidence of critical thinking about the content, scholarly references, the adoption of a particular style of formatting and a recursive writing process that supports the development and communication of ideas. Additionally scholarly writing represents a valid contribution to the knowledge base (Cooper et al, 1998). Hence scholarly writing is both a process that facilitates the thinking about ideas and a product with which to communicate these ideas. In addition to the generic aspects of scholarly writing, there are discipline-specific differences that represent the practices of a particular community such as in mathematics education research (Cooper et al, 1998). Thus scholarly writing in a particular field or a community involves appropriating the writing practices of that community. The most striking feature of scholarly writing is that it is

recursive and not linear or unidirectional. Cooper et al (1998) in Diezmann (2005) feel that the importance of this iterative process for effective communication is captured in the adage-"Hard writing makes easy reading. Easy writing makes hard reading".

Given the need for the majority of postgraduate students to learn about scholarly writing, students' difficulties with this academic genre should be considered to be the norm and not an exception.

Cooper et al (1998) identify three major categories of errors in scholarly writings:

- Mechanical errors; e.g. unsubstantiated claims
- Errors in the microstructure of writing; e.g. related to the flow of argument within and across paragraphs (e.g. connectives) and inconsistencies in writing (e.g. in sequencing)
- Errors in the macrostructure of writing; e.g. in the quality and clarity of purposes.

Gibson and Killingworth (1996) suggest formal writing courses and reading lists, writing activities and peer writing groups to support postgraduate students to become scholarly writers.

The role of writing in the production of student as the research graduate of the university needs to be reconceptualised to take into account that writing and subjectivity are relational, social and interrelated aspects of becoming an authorised research writer.

Although dissertations might resemble or, in some cases, include recognizable academic genres-the book, the journal article, the bibliographic essay-they are marked as different from each of those by the specific needs they respond to, the relations they establish between and among readers and the consequences they are shaped to produce. It might look like other genres, but the dissertation does something unique; and dissertations in different disciplines might look like quite different, but they do something very similar. The five canons of classical rhetoric are invention, arrangement, style, memorization and delivery; the final two point to rhetoric's birth as an art of oral

persuasion. In the reinvention of rhetoric that supports the contemporary study and teaching of writing (Berlin 1987; Harris, 1997a; Ede, 2004), emphasis has been placed on the first three canons, particularly invention. In fact, as both a learning genre and a research genre, the dissertation responds to multiple needs, anticipates multiple readers and situations, and has multiple objectives (Pare et al, 2009).

Many universities across the globe are responding to this need by offering various need-based courses in writing research as part of their graduate and undergraduate programmes. Such courses operate in the framework of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with a well-defined focus on the lexico-grammatical features of particular academic discourse. The Graduate School Writing Center in the University of Maryland, English Language and Writing Support in the University of Toronto, Writing Support Center in the Western University, London, Academic Writing Online Courses in the University of Edinburgh, Graduate Resource Center in the University of California, Writing and Publication in the University of California, Student Success Centers in the University of Calgary, Thesis and Dissertation Support Services in the Graduate School of North Carolina State University, Dissertation Write-up Services in the Michigan State University, Support Services and Research Resources in the Victoria University of Wellington and The Writing Center in the Loyola University of Maryland are some of the support programmes being extended to the candidates to represent their research in writing. There are some online public discussion fora and information repositories about research writing available for doctoral candidates. The *Doctoral Writing SIG blog dedicated to the development of academic writing skills for doctoral candidates began* in April 2012 in Adelaide, Australia, as an offshoot of the deliberations of the Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) Conference. *The Thesis Whisperer* is a blog newspaper dedicated to the topic of doing a thesis and is edited by Dr Inger Mewburn, Director of research training at the Australian National University. *The Research Whisperer*, a blog dedicated to the topic of doing research in academia talks about finding funding, research culture, and

building academic track-records. This blog is managed by Jonathan O'Donnell and TseenKhoo from the Graduate Research School, Melbourne, Australia.

#### Conclusion

That's our quick cruise through the support available for doctoral writing in universities the world over. There is a common call by most of the practitioners for an upsurge in the facilities extended by universities to address research writing practices through appropriate pedagogical and policy interventions. The comment made by Aitchison and Lee (2006, p.266) that "doctoral writing is a kind of present absence in the landscape of doctoral education" mirrors the kind of treatment being meted out to the genre of research writing, spells out the dire need for its redressal mechanisms and sums up the whole idea of doctoral writing support in a nutshell. The awakening of universities and institutes of higher education across the world to the significance of representing research is certainly not a sudden and an unfounded development, but rather a phenomenon backed by adequate awareness that research is a global agenda and original research is any day the knowledge currency of a nation. It would also be interesting to observe how the Third World countries are responding to this rising awareness of the importance of the genre of research writing, with particular reference to India. We will attempt that in the next paper.

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