

Group Discussion V12 Raglan Friday 7 December 12.00-12.30

Creating dialogic spaces: developing doctoral students' critical writing skills through peer assessment and review (0163)

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This presentation reports on a project in which part-time doctoral researchers were involved in a process of peer assessment and review over a sustained period. The aim was to support the development of students' critical writing skills. Our strategy was to create dialogic spaces within which students could work together within a postgraduate community. The presentation considers the students' perceptions of how their long-term involvement in the project impacted on their ability to write critically. We draw on data from three phases of interviews:

- Phase 1: Before the start of the project
- Phase 2: After the first stage of the intervention
- Phase 3: Two years later.

Doctoral students are frequently told they need to be more critical, yet it is not necessarily made clear to them what this means. We suggest that critical writing needs to be addressed 'in an explicit...way' (Ryan 2011, 99). This entails encouraging students to 'question and analyse their work' (Lee and Murray, 2015: 560), and to 'question and develop themselves' (ibid). This approach is based on the belief that support and dialogue are more helpful than pathologizing students who struggle with critical writing as somehow deficient and in need of special support (Badenhorst et al 2015).

Developing criticality involves the affective as well as the cognitive domain (Wellington 2015, 85). Before we devised the project, we had become aware that affective barriers seemed to impede some students' willingness to accept and heed supervisory feedback, and that we needed to take account of students' emotional and relational needs. We set out to devise 'explicitly relational pedagogies' (Done and Knowler 2013, 1332) that would help to develop students' readiness to accept critical feedback, as well as the confidence and understanding to provide constructive feedback to peers. By 'relational pedagogies' we mean more than 'simply the explicit, direct experiences that are planned for students by tutors (seminars, lectures etc)' (Pratt et al 2015, 46). Relational pedagogies can include 'actions or events...which provide the potential to learn' (ibid) and around which relationships are generated. We sought to deepen students' understanding of critical writing. We saw the potential offered by peer assessment activities in terms of providing students with opportunities to give and receive constructive critical feedback, building confidence and raising students' awareness of how to develop criticality in their own writing.

The research questions guiding the project were:

Which relational pedagogies are effective in

- supporting the development of students' critical writing skills?
- encouraging and facilitating students' positive engagement with formative feedback and peer review?

The intervention

Phase one of the intervention began with a three-day critical writing residential. The ten EdD students who volunteered to take part in the study were at different stages of the programme.

All worked in education, and all phases, from early years to Higher Education, were represented. Pseudonyms are used throughout the presentation.

Prior to the residential, participants were asked to email a draft piece of work (up to 2,000 words) on which they would like to receive some formative feedback. Each draft was then forwarded to two other participants, who were asked to read and comment on the work. A pro forma was sent out to help participants to structure the feedback.

Day one

In the morning we introduced and explained the project. Participants were able to chat and get to know each other over lunch. The after-lunch activity took the form of a roundtable, during which each participant gave and received two sets of oral feedback on the draft work. The feedback was shared publicly with the group.

Following the roundtable session participants were asked to reflect on the feedback they had received and to identify a small number of issues to work on in their own writing, enabling them to draw up personal action plans.

Day two

There were three workshops on day two. The first, 'Positive Criticality', focussed on what is meant by 'criticality'. Emphasis was placed on criticality as synthesis of ideas, discouraging the view of criticality as a deconstructive process focussed exclusively on 'proving' arguments to be 'wrong'. We stressed that critical writing involves communication rather than just deconstruction. It entails combining ideas in novel ways to offer new insights. We argued that developing ideas is a slow process that happens gradually and takes time.

In the second workshop, 'Developing Clarity and Criticality', the focus included the form as well as the content of writing. Prior to the residential we had sent out an article to students and asked them to prepare for a discussion by reading the paper and commenting on, for example, structure, use of language, use of literature, clarity of message, use of data and quotes, and how improvements might be made. The students had made notes and annotations on the paper. The discussion focussed on the elements of good, critical writing with reference to concrete examples in the article. The workshop culminated in another opportunity to engage in peer assessment, this time explicitly focussed on the form of the writing.

In the third workshop of the day, we prepared students for the stage two of the intervention, in which they were to form an editorial board and set up an online journal for and by EdD students. We explained that at this point we (the tutors) would withdraw and be available only to consult, as the participants now took the lead in establishing the board, the policy and the strategic plan for the journal. The rest of day two and the morning of day three were given over to the participants to work together. The residential ended with the editorial board giving a presentation in which they explained their plans for the journal with details of dates and deadlines.

The journal ran for over three years, entirely led by the students who were engaged in writing, peer reviewing and editing. We report in this presentation on the students' perceptions of how their long-term engagement in the project impacted on their understanding of critical writing.