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Contortion, loss and moments for joy: insights into writing groups for international doctoral students

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The idealised internationally mobile doctoral student is often presented as seamlessly transitioning across space – translating and neutralising themselves within globalised higher education. However, for those positioned as ‘international’, writing can be experienced as a site of disconnect. This paper considers international doctoral students’ experiences of research writing within a writing group to exemplify how teaching in the multilingual university produces neoliberal pressures, linguistic challenges, and cognitive injustices. Data from 19 semi-structured interviews and a focus group with international doctoral students revealed accounts of the contortions involved in continuous acts of translation and its resulting sense of ‘othering’ and dislocation. Alongside these revelations emerged feelings of loss in terms of perceived ‘mastery’ over language and the experience of the writing group as a space for both joy and vulnerability. Consequently, we argue for the importance of doctoral writing groups that subvert and reinvent dominant narratives of writing, writers and the ‘international’.

Full paper

The doctoral journey and attendant writing practices constitute multiple transitional and contested spaces. Being positioned as an

'international' doctoral student produces additional disconnections in terms of the required identity shifts and consequent acts of translation required. A perceived loss of 'mastery' over language can contribute to international doctoral students and their writing being imagined as 'other'. This is shaped by the spatial disparities in the globalised knowledge economy (Bilecen 2013) in which Western bodies, knowledges and languages dominate. This paper focuses on the experiences of international doctoral students to enhance understandings of what transition moments and writing relations are produced in and by the multilingual university.

19 semi-structured interviews and one focus group were conducted with international doctoral students across two UK universities. These qualitative encounters explored the experience of becoming and being 'international' doctoral writers. Two theoretical provocations were central to our analysis. We were first inspired by Barnacle and Dall'Alba (2014) who discuss mastery of doctoral writing as that which is assumed to fall within a neoliberal, rationalist, and normative tradition of 'command and control' (1140). Relatedly, Singh (2018) argues that coloniality continues to shape academic knowledge and writing practices – through the ways we are disciplined as thinkers and then discipline the texts we read and the students we teach - resulting in linguistic othering and cognitive injustices.

Findings

Three dominant themes emerged from our data: experiences of students feeling 'othered' through neoliberal and colonial research practices; the affective and linguistic challenges of international writing as a form of 'loss' and the possibilities for re-thinking writing pedagogies via doctoral writing groups.

1. Contortion and Othering

International doctoral students reported feeling 'othered' and engaging in consequent acts of linguistic contortion. In pursuing legitimacy and credibility through their academic writing, international doctoral students engaged in continual acts of embodied translation that drew on dominant discourses of 'what it is possible to do and think' (Barad in Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel 2018, 10-

11). For example, Tamara indicated that:

As an international student I've spent a long time just understanding bits of the language or humour, things, and it takes a while. Because it's so different culturally there is also I think ... There is ... You feel othered. So there is this very ... It's ... I think it's subtle. It's not as inclusive.

One of the key challenges, as expressed by Thandeka, was the pressure of having to '*converge so many cultures*' and to present these in an '*academic way*'. This reflects Singh's (2018) recognition of how coloniality continues to shape academia, through how we are disciplined as thinkers, the texts we regard as authoritative and our approaches to knowledge production.

2) Ventriloquism as loss

Participants spoke of a sense of the 'continually unfamiliar' as they experienced new ways of writing and researching. The affective impact of working through these linguistic and cultural transitions involved 'managing a fractured multiply-layered reality'(Carter, Smith, and Harrison 2021, 284). Participants writing across languages conveyed feeling caught between spaces:

For me it is confusing to be an international student working across languages and cultures, because I don't know where my location is. The first problem that appears to me and has affected me in my writing, is that I am in the middle of these two worlds, and in my head, they are super different. (Roberto)

What emerged was a trade off in an exchange where personal narratives and languages must be 'lost' to secure 'legitimacy' in return (Thesen and Cooper 2013).

3) Moments of Joy

Our doctoral writing group became a 'joyful' space to explore these tensions of contortion and loss by permitting and valuing affect. Using Singh (2018) and Barnacle and Dall'Alba (2014), we recognised how the normative expectation to produce 'mastered' texts silences diverse and multiple ways of knowing and of

representing knowledge. Our specific feminist pedagogical framing (Danvers, Hinton-Smith and Webb 2019) foregrounded affective possibility (e.g. that it was okay to struggle) and epistemological freeing (e.g. that knowing is a situated and contested practice).

Conclusion

Writing groups do not provide a panacea to the tensions of the multilingual university which privilege certain ways of being and knowing over others, but our research indicates that they have the potential to create environments which speak back to singular, normative paradigms. Consequently, we argue for institutional writing support that recognises the entanglements of texts with the complex identities of the students themselves and makes space to legitimatise the specific intensities experienced by international doctoral students constituted as 'other'.

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