

## **The myth of ‘writing it up’ (0106)**

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### **Outline**

#### **Conceptual framing**

A common characterization of the role of writing is represented in the often heard phrase - ‘writing it up’ – evoking the sense that the doctoral inquiry is first done and then the task of describing it in text begins. This phrase overlooks the powerful, embedded integration of thinking, writing and learning, a relationship long championed by those in genre studies (e.g., Kamler & Thomson, 2006). Yet those of us more generally researching doctoral student experience have not necessarily embraced the centrality of writing in terms of being and becoming an academic, particularly its integral role in developing the intellectual and networking strands of individuals’ academic identity-trajectories (McAlpine, Amundsen & Jazvac-Martek, in press).

#### **Context and purpose**

In two comparable longitudinal research programs (in Canada and the UK), we collected a wealth of data from doctoral students. Our hope was that being longitudinal in nature the data might provide greater insight into the day-to-day experience of doctoral work. An initial analysis of the Canadian (Jazvac-Martek et al, 2009)<sup>1</sup> has been enhanced by a more recent comparable analysis of the UK data. This paper builds on the Canadian data highlighting how the UK data enhances the robustness of the earlier findings: evidence that demonstrates the embedded and day-to-day, often invisible, reading and writing processes that constitute doctoral experience and are central to growing sense of academic confidence.

#### **Participants, data collection and analysis**

In both Canada and the UK, social science doctoral students who provided data were at various stages in their doctorate; they completed a biographic questionnaire, weekly logs of academic and related activities once a month for several months, and an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted by a researcher. The data from fifteen UK doctoral students was read by at least three researchers and through discussion themes developed. These were verified through a return to the data at which time representative excerpts were also noted.

#### **Emerging patterns**

To get a sense of the regularity of reading and writing, we report initially on the logs. In looking across 300 Canadian weekly logs, writing of some kind represented one-third of all reported activities (Jazvac-Martek et al, 2009). Of the 109 UK logs analyzed, writing represented 27% of all reported activities. The combined evidence reminds us that in talking about ‘writing (it) up’, we are overlooking the regular and embedded integration of thinking, writing and thus learning.

A second finding in both the Canadian and UK logs was the frequency with which reading was reported, in fact, as frequently as writing. This was particularly surprising given that we have not seen this addressed in either genre studies or doctoral education more generally. The prevailing myth of ‘writing (it) up’ at least makes writing visible; what remains invisible is the intimate integration between reading and writing, that reading is the way in which one finds an intellectual home and ‘parentage’ for one’s writing.

And, the third finding in both the Canadian and UK logs and interviews was the intersection, in fact, integration of reading and writing. There was a clear connection, a moving back and forth, between reading and writing that was essential to the development of clarity and progress in thinking – and this took time.

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<sup>1</sup> These data were similarly analyzed by a team, Marian Jazvac-Martek and Shuhua Chen.

What the evidence suggests is that reading and writing are an iterative developmental process over time of seeking and locating yourself with others historically and contemporaneously, that is, finding an intellectual home and discourse through networking with authors who may no longer be alive as well as with contemporary researchers. This means that the dissertation is a product representing just one point in time in this ongoing process, one that will continue on afterwards. If the dissertation were written at a different point in time, it would look differently. In fact, the science model of the dissertation, a series of papers demonstrating development of ideas and research over time, better represents the integration of the thinking, learning, making meaning process than the dissertation as monograph.

Bazerman (2007) has noted the challenge for academics to communicate about the writing process since they lack a vocabulary for doing so; we would add as well the lack of a vocabulary about the integration of reading and writing (for recent work on this, see Dixon et al, 2010). Thus, although supervisors have been successful in writing their own dissertations and other published papers and proposals, they often lack (through no fault of their own) an ability to articulate how reading, thinking and writing are interconnected and how one writes oneself to meaning, to understanding. This may explain the origins of the prevailing view of 'writing it up' - representing in text the study. Yet, this characterization constrains the ability of supervisors to better help students, and may help explain why students in our studies did not always find feedback helpful. Still, students generally reported valuing feedback and seeking it from a range of sources and venues, e.g., at conferences, non-academic experts, professionals in the field, family members, etc. The students described "good feedback" as applying not only to writing but also to direction and guidance on reading. Further, the Canadian students also described student writing groups in which they had powerful and positive experiences of receiving feedback; interestingly, the UK students rarely referred to such groups.

## Significance

The present discourse of 'writing it up' misrepresents the role of writing in academia; further it also overlooks the importance of reading. We suggest the evidence emerging from our research calls for a thoughtful re-examination of doctoral pedagogies surrounding writing and reading. There is a clear need to help both doctoral students and their supervisors develop a discourse for talking about the reading-writing process, particularly guidance as to the way in which to give and receive meaningful and constructive feedback. And, any strategies and policies need to go beyond a focus on the dissertation since there are other academic genres (e.g., research proposals, journal papers) students need to learn to construct, particularly journal papers given the increasing need to have published prior to graduation.

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