

Developing doctoral students' critical writing skills through peer assessment

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Introduction

This research builds on a previous project which focussed on peer assessment in doctoral research methods training. That project highlighted the positive benefits for students of engaging in peer assessed activities. The purpose of the current project is to engage doctoral students in peer assessed activities to develop critical writing and peer reviewing skills.

The project involved ten students registered on the Doctorate of Education programme (EdD) at the University of Leicester. The EdD is a part-time, professional doctorate designed for full-time teachers, headteachers and other education professionals who combine full-time work with part-time study.

The experience of undertaking a professional doctorate of this nature differs considerably from the more traditional, campus-based, full-time PhD route: research tends to be undertaken in the context of the students' workplace, and contact with other doctoral students can be minimal. There is therefore a need to find ways to engage students meaningfully in a postgraduate research community that offers a space for mutual support and collective reflection on contextualised research. This peer assessment project sought to support students by providing the basis for that meaningful engagement in a researcher community.

Critical writing is challenging for most students: it requires the ability to adopt diverse perspectives on the same topic, to read, assimilate and evaluate complex concepts and to step outside of one's daily work to view what can be taken-for-granted assumptions through a critical lens. This project afforded students opportunities to develop their thinking and writing about research as well as to develop peer assessment and review skills through their involvement in a research community.

Two key ideas on which the project was based are the notion of 'research as writing', which emphasises that the process of writing is integral to thinking, meaning-making and developing research understanding, and 'writing as a social practice' (Kamler and Thomson, 2006). The emphasis was on writing as a collective endeavour.

The aims of the project were to develop effective pedagogies so that students:

- ◆ develop an awareness of what critical writing is
- ◆ practise and develop their own critical writing
- ◆ develop an understanding of peer review
- ◆ provide and receive constructive critical feedback via peer review to/from other students
- ◆ becoming integrated into a research community in a meaningful way
- ◆ develop 'researcher resilience', that is, the ability to accept reviewers' comments as constructive, unhindered by affective barriers

Approach

EdD students were invited to volunteer to take part in the project, and ten took up the offer. In the first phase of the project, students were interviewed by the research assistant, and provided concept maps of their understandings of critical writing and peer review. An intensive critical writing residential weekend was organised. Prior to the residential weekend, students submitted a sample of their writing for others to review. These were distributed amongst students, such that each student prepared a review of two other people's work

The three-day intensive writing weekend comprised a number of elements:

- A 'round table' at which each student received feedback from other students on their own work, and in turn, gave feedback to others
- Workshops led by Joan Smith and Phil Wood on 'Positive Criticality' and 'Writing Clearly and Critically'
- An open-ended challenge to create, develop, plan and execute a sustainable online journal as a vehicle to develop postgraduate researchers' critical writing and peer review skills. Individual and collective tasks included: creating a strategic plan for the development of the journal and assigning roles and responsibilities; creating the online presence of the journal; convening an editorial board; writing papers for the journal; peer reviewing papers.
- Activities designed to enhance the social cohesion of the group

Since the weekend residential, subsequent activities for students have included: writing, reviewing and editorial board activities; and running a workshop on peer review and writing for publication for other research students at the doctoral summer school (June 2014). In addition, the participating students were interviewed again after the weekend workshop.

Data captured for the project include:

- ◆ Interview transcripts (which have been entered into Nvivo and analysed into broad categories)
- ◆ Students' writing objects, including reviews and concept maps
- ◆ The journal itself, and the related summer school presentation
- ◆ Researcher field notes taken during the residential weekend.

Initial Conclusions

Although the project is not yet finished, and the data not fully analysed, a number of key issues are already apparent:

- ◆ The notion of criticality is complex and difficult for students to articulate pre-workshop. The ability to articulate this notion is substantially enhanced by this process
- ◆ Issues of skill are intimately bound up with issues of affect – there is anxiety, and issues of social etiquette and confidence are prominent in relation to face-to-face peer review

- ◆ That criticality involves the need to be self-critical. Critical review is not about negativity, but more about developing a position and justifying it.
- ◆ The residential weekend was a transformational event for many participants, involving overcoming personal barriers, feelings of liberation and the developing of confident identities as researchers/writers
- ◆ Confirmation of the position of the project that developing critical writing and peer review skills is a social learning process
- ◆ That this process is invaluable and should be a part of EdD programme

The individual impact is clear from the narrative accounts of participants in the interviews. This is expressed in highly positive comments, but also in the reported strong trajectory in the individual development of identity as researcher. Later, it may be possible to interpret this individual impact by seeking feedback from the supervisors of the student/participants.

The possible impact on the curriculum and learning activities within the EdD is under review. Whilst it would be favourable to make the residential writing weekend a regular feature of the programme, this has a considerable cost implication and this would need to be discussed with the Head of Department.

References

Kamler, B. & Thomson, P. (2006) *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision*. London: Routledge.