Fostering resilience, criticality and critical friendship: doctoral students' experiences and perceptions of peer assessment and review (0096)

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This presentation reports on an action research project in which we trialled pedagogies to facilitate EdD students' engagement in peer assessment, in order to develop their critical writing and reviewing skills. We draw in our work on Kamler and Thomson's (2006: 5) notion of 'writing as social practice' and Murray's (2015: 1) concept of 'making writing relational'. An important emphasis in our work is on the social aspects of learning and critical writing. This is to move away from the notion of writing as a lone activity undertaken in isolation from colleagues, to writing as a social activity.

The issues
A combination of issues led us to identify the focus for the project.

First, many doctoral students find it difficult to write critically, and many supervisors find it hard to help students to develop critical writing skills. We saw a need to be more explicit in addressing criticality, and to develop pedagogical strategies to support and empower students to develop their ability to write critically.

A second challenge for our EdD students can be that of accepting critical feedback on their developing work. In some cases formative feedback from supervisors had been interpreted as negative and hurtful, resulting in defensiveness, demoralisation and alienation of some students. Given the importance and centrality of peer review in academic life, we sought to support students to develop both their emotional resilience as researchers, and their capacity to heed and act upon constructive criticism. We wanted to be proactive in developing researcher resilience, so that engagement with critical review might come to be viewed as an integral and valuable part of the critical writing process.

Third is the issue of isolation. EdD students are full-time teachers. Often their only University contact is email or Skype tutorials with their lead supervisor. We wanted to find ways to engage students more meaningfully in the academic community, and to foster collaboration between students. We sought to foster a sense of belonging, and to facilitate students' engagement in critical friendships that would afford them opportunities for mutual support and development in sustainable ways.

Aims and purposes of the project
The aims of the project were:
- to develop students' understanding of criticality and their critical writing skills;

- to foster students' engagement in a research community founded on critical friendship;

- to develop students' ability to give, receive and act upon constructive critical feedback;

- to develop researcher resilience and overcome affective barriers to giving and receiving critical feedback;

- to equip students with the necessary skills to become effective peer reviewers and become inducted into the culture of academic writing.

The project
The project was launched with an intensive, residential critical writing weekend, in which ten students participated.

Before the weekend, participants were asked to send us a piece of draft work they would like to develop. Each draft was then sent out to two other participants, who were asked to read the work and prepare to provide critical feedback to its author.

On day one, students engaged in a formal roundtable discussion, during which they were required to feed back publicly on their colleagues' draft work. After the session, students were encouraged to take opportunities during the weekend to re-draft their work and engage in further exchanges of mutual review.

On the second day, three workshops were scheduled: 'Positive criticality', 'Writing clearly and critically' and "Preparing for the editorial board meeting'. In the third session we explained that the challenge for the rest of the weekend was for the ten students to work together to establish an editorial board and to devise an online journal, for and by EdD students. By Sunday lunchtime the students presented us with an impressive plan for the development of their journal, which is now well-established and self-sustaining (please see https://journaleducationalresearchinformedpractice.wordpress.com).

Interviews
Before the weekend, students were interviewed about what they understood by 'criticality' and what they hoped to gain from their participation in the project. After the weekend they were re-interviewed to establish what they felt they had learned or gained from their participation.

We draw here on the pre- and post-critical writing weekend interview data to discuss students' perceptions of the shifts in their understandings effected through their participation in the project.

Main findings
Interview one: pre-intervention
All of the participants had chosen to take part in the weekend because they felt they needed to learn to write more critically, although most felt that they did have some understanding of criticality already.

Most participants were open to receiving peer feedback on their work, but were less sure of themselves in providing feedback to others, expressing a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt. They reported feeling unqualified to provide critical feedback on the work of other students who were more expert than they in their field of study. Moreover there was a tendency to see feedback as potentially negative, destructive and hurtful, which added to students' anxiety. Half of the group reported having been hurt by feedback themselves, and this included feedback from supervisors. Whilst several drew parallels between peer feedback and giving feedback to their own students, feelings of anxiety dominated.

Interview two: post-intervention
Nine of the ten participants saw that their participation in the project had been transformational, constructively changing their thinking. Importantly, all participants reported that their approach to writing had changed. They understood more about what critical writing was and had become more aware of their own writing. This awareness empowered them to take control of their writing and develop conscious strategies to improve it.

All were positive about their involvement with the journal and the editorial board, and clear that this had been a valuable learning experience. All participants considered that the social aspects of the process, and a feeling of belonging to student community, were very important factors in their learning, and most felt that they had grown in confidence through their participation in the project.

Implications
Opportunities need to be built into doctoral training programmes in order to induct students into peer review and critical friendship, to develop researcher resilience, criticality and a self-sustaining postgraduate research community.

References
Kamler, B. & Thomson, P. (2006). *Helping doctoral students write: pedagogies for supervision* . Abingdon: Routledge.

Murray, R. (2015). *Writing in social spaces: a social processes approach to academic writing.* London: Routledge.