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The Temporalities of the Writing Experience of Part-Time Doctoral Students in Education (0248)

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years there has been the emergence of research focusing on the development of successful doctoral writing. Much of the interest has stemmed from a concern about completion rates (Park, 2005) and focuses on issues such as the development of academic language (San Miguel and Nelson, 2007), the process of writing and the role of the supervisor (Lindsay 2015). However, the temporal aspects of doctoral writing have generally remained of peripheral interest. As part of a wider pilot study on the writing experiences of part-time doctoral students in education, our research group asked participants to reflect on the temporal aspects of their writing.

Part-time doctoral students are an important group in UK-based Education departments as the subject attracts many doctoral researchers from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom are already in full-time, educationally related jobs and have returned to study, often after a period away from academia. This context creates particular pressures as students attempt to pursue their studies at the same time as having both full-time professional and personal responsibilities.

Approach

This pilot study wished to understand the writing experiences of part-time education doctoral students. This was investigated by undertaking unstructured, narrative interviews, utilising stimulated recall artefacts, with 6 part-time education doctoral students. Five of the six students were following a Doctor in Education (EdD) programme where the first two years of study are structured and have assessed assignments before entering into a three-year research period. The sixth student was a part-time PhD student.

Before the students were interviewed they were asked to draw a line graph of their confidence in their writing over time. They were told that they could go as far back in time as they wanted but must include the period of their doctoral work as a minimum timespan. They were also asked to annotate the completed graph in any way they thought relevant. They were then asked to draw a sketch of their preferred/perfect writing space.

The artefacts produced by participants were then used as stimuli for the unstructured narrative interviews which gave participants opportunity to reflect upon and discuss their experiences of writing both before and during their doctoral studies. Once the interviews were complete, transcripts were interpreted through the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis to understand the richness of experiences of participants.

Several themes emerged from the analysis, this paper focusing on two related themes, the spatial-temporal and ethical aspects of the writing experience.

Initial Insights

The results of the analysis were considered through the lens of rhythm analysis (Lefebvre, 2004; Chen, 2007; Alhadeff-Jones, 2016). This theoretical frame understands time as being experienced through the natural rhythms within activities and hence attempts to understand those activities through this conceptual lens.

In all participant narratives there was a strong sense of cyclicity in their doctoral experiences with feelings of improvement and regression in sync with cycles of assessment of their work. This constant referral to confidence and assessment led to a feeling of both anxiety and performativity in relation to writing.

As the EdD students moved from their taught phase to the thesis stage, they began to adopt a strong rhythm in their writing. Writing became a weekend activity, with the week as 'set-up', arranging and managing the doctoral process ready for a focus on writing, predominantly on a Saturday. This led to an associated pattern in spatial activity. The work undertaken in the week was spatially flexible, utilising small periods of time wherever they were available,

If I'm on the train during the week, I might edit a paragraph, I might double check, sort of, how things are flowing...they're the sort of things I can do anywhere.' (Sarah)

In contrast, writing at the weekends were carefully spatially choreographed. All students had specific spaces in which they chose to write, and in some cases, if these spaces were not available it impacted on their writing experience.

Rhythms were not only apparent on a weekly basis, but also within the weekend writing period itself. All students talked of needing a period at the start of their writing day to go through various rituals before writing. We identify this as a form of 'temporal liminality' where students are shifting from a polyrhythmic environment during the week to the monorhythmic experience of focused writing.

The temporal aspects of writing were not only apparent in relation to rhythm, but also related to how students saw the act of writing in an ethical sense. The interpretive phenomenological analysis afforded the opportunity to understand the student experience through an affective register. Here, we saw deep ethical dilemmas amongst the students in relation to how they saw the time they were making for writing. Some saw the time for writing as being stolen from other activities,

'You know, you are stealing, essentially, from your personal life, you're stealing from your social life, you're stealing from your regeneration period after work.' (Simon)

As such, the time given over to writing appears to be seen as an ethically dubious activity, one which should only occur if other activities are not impacted upon.

Implications

The research briefly reported here suggests that the participants experienced a complex set of rhythms of writing development over time. The rhythms they adopted were strong but ultimately left a feeling of 'emptiness' as the writing journey became increasingly performative in character rather than one which was to be enjoyed.

Participants were all experienced teachers, and there is evidence that they have a strong ethic of care for the students they work with. This appears to link to the feeling some had that they were stealing time from other activities to write. As such, this opens up the potential importance of studying the links between ethics and time in higher education in both writing contexts and beyond.

References

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