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Behind the textual: considerations of knowledge challenges in postgraduate students' planning, researching and writing of theses

Abstract:

Research into academic literacy demands on postgraduate students, particularly at the doctoral level, has increased significantly in the last decade or so. Academic literacy is often configured in relation to students needing to understand the conventions of the discourse community and being able to respond to the challenges associated with the practices, skills, and particularly the text forms associated with it. While this is of value in guiding pedagogical support and interventions, it must be complemented with an understanding of the students themselves: what they bring to the community and learning context in terms of prior knowledge and expertise, what they personally find challenging in knowledge terms, and how they respond to the challenges. This requires us to 'go behind the textual'. A productive framework for this analysis is the work of Eraut (2000, 2003, 2004, 2008), which encompasses a view of discourse community or group membership, considers challenges arising from transitions to different communities or situations, and focuses on how knowledge demands shift and change. This paper presents data from international students representing knowledge transitions and challenges in masters research study, as the students plan their research, write about (or 'codify') their planning, and write about it in the form of a thesis. As the data shows, challenges and successes in these transitions impact on a student's developing identity as a researcher, and also on the likelihood of successful completion and aspirations to engage in further research.

Biographical note:

Dr Margaret Franken has had a long-term involvement in supporting the academic literacy development of postgraduate students in a number of universities in New Zealand. Initially specialising in second language writing, she is currently developing the Academic Life Histories project in the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The way in which postgraduate research students undertake their dissertations or theses is very different in New Zealand, Australia and the UK in comparison with the USA, where students are enrolled in coursework as part of their postgraduate degree. That coursework effectively scaffolds research practices and research writing for students. However, in our context, students are suddenly expected to become researchers and write like researchers, as soon as they transition from undergraduate study or postgraduate coursework. This coursework may have little direct connection to their postgraduate dissertation or thesis topic area; and may do little to prepare them for the skills required of a researcher and a research writer. The imperative for writing researchers, practitioners and supervisors in these contexts is to understand the nature of the transition from coursework to research work, and the challenges it presents for students, and to find a way to effectively support them.

There has been extensive documentation of challenges faced by postgraduate students, both domestic and international. Studies have detailed the difficulties relating to writing certain parts of the thesis (see for example, Dudley-Evans 1886; Paltridge 1997). Some research has moved beyond the textual in that it has sought to explore the experience of research and becoming a researcher. Most of this has been at the doctoral level, (see for example, Bieber & Worley 2004; Brew 2001; Cadman 2002; McCormack 2004; Paltridge & Woodrow 2012). Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) provide a particularly insightful ethnographic account of challenges faced by doctoral students arising from and within community membership other than the academic. This study seeks to contribute to this research, focusing on students at an earlier stage of a research trajectory – that of being a masters student; and by focusing, not on the textual in terms of the thesis per se, or the personal, but on the knowledge challenges within the context of academic community transitions. This entails a transition perspective.

A transition perspective

An academic literacies approach (Lea & Street 1998; Lillis & Scott 2008; Prior 1998) is useful in understanding challenges facing postgraduate students in that it makes explicit the expectations of the participants, lecturers and students alike, in higher education contexts regarding the practices, skills and text forms deemed to be appropriate in such contexts. In Lea and Street's study for example, students' understanding of the different literacy practices were explored, and lecturers' expectations and requirements, as well as their ways of making these explicit, were documented. This study focused on undergraduate learning while Prior's study involved a postgraduate student. Cadman (2005) speaks of AAL (Advanced Academic Literacies) to capture the research and pedagogy of academic literacies at postgraduate level.

An academic literacies approach usefully acknowledges that disciplines and fields of study differ, that the practices, skills and text forms are not always clearly known by lecturers, and that they are contested and dynamic to a degree (Cadman 2002, 2005).

Such an approach also centrally positions students in such contexts as participants in its literacy practices.

While it offers us substantially more than an 'academic socialisation' approach in which 'the task of the tutor/adviser is to induct students into a new 'culture', that of the academy' (Lea & Street 1998: 159), an academic literacies approach still sheds most light on literacy practices, skills and text forms of the new 'culture', and less light on the students themselves. Franken differentiates a transition perspective from an adjustment one, which arguably covers both academic socialisation and academic literacies:

> An adjustment perspective focuses on the need for students to come to know the codes and conventions of the academic community which they wish to become a part of. A transition perspective takes into account the assumptions made about students by the host institution, what students bring to the learning context, and how this can best be integrated with the teaching and learning of new knowledge and skills. In this view, the academic community with its codes and conventions does not predominate – the students do (2012: 846).

A focus on students should include a rich picture of their socio-cultural contexts and the communities they belong to. Cadman (2005), while in the domain of AAL, includes this dimension. Members of a group or community interpret knowledge gained in a group context within 'a personal context and history that has been shaped by experiences in other groups, both prior and contemporary' (Eraut 2003: 56). Therefore, a consideration of the many differing communities students are a part of and how such community membership impacts on students' developing sense of themselves as researchers and research writers is essential. Tobbell et al. (2010) argue that for postgraduate students, this has been little explored. The present study considers community membership within the academic domain.

Identities, transitions and reconciliation

International students, like all students, are members of multiple communities, but possibly face challenges to become participants of ones that are more unfamiliar. They move from their countries, their families and also their professional or academic communities to a new country, social context and academic community. There are shifting patterns of community membership once they begin their academic studies. They transition from taught papers to research thesis. In their role as researchers for their thesis, they return to once familiar communities to collect data, and then return to the country of study to complete the documentation of the research process and the findings of the research. Once completed, they go back to their home communities and maybe, but not always, their professional communities. Considering student membership of communities past, present, and imagined, and the identities entailed in this multi-membership, is a way of appreciating postgraduate students' experiences as they transition into postgraduate research work and research writing. As they work to become researchers and research writers, multiple transitions are experienced, and these

transitions represent 'shifts in practice, within and between communities coupled with identity transformation' (Tobbell et al. 2010: 266).

Wenger's notion of 'identity trajectory' is a useful metaphor allowing us to see students' change and development in a 'research life history' sense. Trajectories are not unilinear, and nor are they always moving forward. Movement into new communities, and back onto old, affords identity development but also regression and uncertainty. Transitions entail reconciliation as, in those transitions, challenges are experienced. Wenger comments, 'The work of reconciliation may be the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another' (Wenger 1998: 113).

One of the most important areas of reconciliation is knowledge. Eraut's analysis of types of knowledge, which he uses to analyse transitions from academic study to workplace contexts, applies equally well in analysing transitions within the academic trajectories experienced by postgraduate students. Postgraduate students transitioning into research bring with them personal knowledge – 'aspects of personal expertise, practical wisdom and tacit knowledge' (Eraut 2008: 42). The knowledge that students need to gain is made explicit through the statements of learning outcomes, the written assessments, the course texts and other textual artifacts. Knowledge which has been made explicit in this way is referred to by Eraut as 'codified knowledge' – knowledge which is 'embedded in texts and databases and the cultural practices of teaching studentship, scholarship and research' (Eraut 2003: 55). Students themselves are expected to codify knowledge which they do as they write their course work assignments and engage in other tasks associated with knowledge display or 'knowledge representations' (Anning 2001). It is not only the personal and codified distinction that is useful. Eraut also talks of personalised knowledge, which again can be codified. Research, involving planning, conducting and writing up research, demands that codified knowledge from postgraduate coursework is integrated with personal knowledge. In other words, it is 'personalised', 'tuned to the context by the personal experience of the 'owner' (Eraut 2003: 62). Seeing writing in relation to knowledge in this way, allows us to look 'behind the textual'.

From Eraut's model of knowledge, we might anticipate particular points in the research process where students need to integrate the personal, the theoretical or other forms of codified knowledge, and where they may need to 'tune' this to the context. This paper seeks to validate the notion of knowledge transitions by presenting a selective range of statements offered by the students as they began and proceeded along their research trajectory.

Methodology

The study involved three cohorts of international students, all of whom who had received scholarships to study a Masters of Education in a New Zealand university. The group has over time consisted of students from the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Vietnam, and one from Malaysia. All are identified by pseudonyms fairly similar to their

own, mostly English, names. All were practising teachers, principals, or managers in educational organisations.

The data was collected in two ways: the context of a semester long not-for-credit workshop programme, and from interviews before and after students engaged in data collection in their own countries, and at the point of near completion. The workshop programme was to support the students to write a proposal that would allow them entry into the Masters of Education, a programme requiring them to write thesis of between 30 and 40,000 words. Students were not required to attend, although all did on every occasion. Each week the students and I met and discussed the aspects of the research process that needed to be represented in their proposals. In the weekly two-hour workshops, we shared the emerging proposal texts as they were produced, students raised questions about aspects of the research process, clarified their understanding and offered responses to the questions of their peers. All workshop sessions and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Observations and discussion of knowledge transitions

Developing a proposal for a thesis is a complex task. It requires the transformation of multiple and different types of knowledge (knowledge from previous experience, previous professional work, and knowledge from new theoretical learning) into the 'practice' of research. This section presents data from students commenting on these knowledge challenges and successes as they occurred in the context of initial planning for research, codifying that planning in textual form (as, for example, interview schedules, questionnaires), enacting research practices, and again codifying this as they wrote the thesis. The section concludes with comments about research dissemination.

Planning for research

The initial planning for research requires a topic area to be identified. The first knowledge challenge for students is to identify a place or space for their research. Topics need to be located in a place that is both personally and professionally significant. Students like Stan and Lara expressed this by alluding to their previous experience and knowledge, as well as their professional contexts.

> I've worked in this field and it is an emerging field in my country. There is a great need of research to be carried out in order to address issues regarding inclusive education and disabilities in PNG (Stan, workshop).
>
> I have worked with an organisation that deals with people with disabilities and we enrol students into mainstream schools and from my observation I've seen that most teachers in mainstream schools, they cannot [...] or they don't have the skills and knowledge on how to cater for the needs of special children, especially the deaf students (Lara, workshop).

Having evaluated her place in relation to other research, Ria could express a degree of personal significance in relation to it. She stated:

> There was only one study done by a person who was looking at, the cultural practices that include inclusive education but mine is going to be on inclusive education experiences (Ria, pre data collection interview).

Ana advocated that students should think about personalising research carefully, when she was asked for suggestions for the incoming cohort of students:

> I think that my advice would be they should be thinking carefully; just thinking a lot and maybe they can come up with some ideas and then think carefully between among them which one is the best, which one will interest them the most. For me – this is just personally, I'm not sure if they will find it the same – but I would like to do something new. I don't want to replicate – that is more personal (Ana, post data collection interview).

Personalising research, as Ria's quote shows, needs to be informed by and integrated with other research and theoretical work. Stan, who was not successful in progressing with his masters, made the observation that he lacked sufficient knowledge to do this:

> I found it a bit difficult to focus and I thought that I had no proper content knowledge. So that could be one of the reasons why I was not focused, so then I made the decision and I switched into doing papers (Stan, interview).

Ana on the other hand could make use of such knowledge from course work, and in fact, as her second quote shows, she could evaluate the usefulness of related theoretical material – an example of being able to re-tune to context.

> Actually, the sustainable leadership, I got it from one of my papers, yeah, so I think it's really good that the coursework, the papers I studied, those papers regularly provided me with some understanding about leadership. I like it because the sustainable leadership is a new concept for me. Distributed I know already. It's popular in the west but it's a little bit hard for Asian cultures. Sustainable is more easily accepted. (Ana, post data collection interview).

Codifying research planning

Codifying research planning in the form of an ethics application and its concomitant information sheets, consent forms, documented data gathering tools such as interview schedules, are the results of drawing on codified knowledge sources such as research methods sources and readings, as well as interactions with lecturers. The documentation of an ethics application, in particular, presented challenges for a number of students. Pita expressed this and commented that even his supervisor was somewhat demoralised by the process:

> I had really lost hope ... because the topic I'm doing, my research is very, very sensitive – I'm doing it on violence against girls, sexual assault, rape, you know – so that's why the

> Ethics Committee was very [...]. She [supervisor] was also feeling down but she kept on saying, 'This is a very difficult topic that you have chosen so that's why you have ethical issues. You must be very, you must address it very, properly and then you will see the rewards of doing that' (Pita, pre data collection interview).

Having a successful outcome from the ethics process, however, affirmed Pita's sense of himself as a researcher:

> As soon as I got a response I realised that's good, yeah. Because they shape me … to be a good researcher, that's what I realised (Pita, pre data collection interview).

The tools of research such as the information sheets, consent forms, interview schedules, questionnaires are codified knowledge or 'research artefacts' which clearly will afford better data generation if they are personalised and tuned to context. Pita anticipated that his research tools would do this:

> Regarding my questionnaire and the interview questions, I'm doing a semi-structured; I think they will find it very good. But the people out there, I don't know [...] because I've been there, I know their culture, I know how to get to them, the approach, and on the other side I have some good questions to capture good data so I think I should be ok (Pita, pre data collection interview).

Ana similarly felt positive as she reflected on the design of her on-line survey:

> I like it [on-line survey] … [Lecturer] recommended it and then I learn, I just play around (Ana, post data collection interview).

Thomas expressed slightly more cautious anticipation, while acknowledging that he had personal knowledge of the context.

> Yeah, this will be my first time so ... I mean, working with teachers is not new; I mean, and all these things so it's not really new I mean, I get into contact with these people but actually conducting the formal interview ... maybe it would be a challenge (Thomas, pre data collection interview).

Enacting research practices

The task of collecting data 'in the field' presents salient and sometimes critical challenges to identity. The student who has been working on codifying aspects of the research thesis such as the proposal, the ethics application, and maybe sections of the literature review, must now enact the research in reality. Instead of being the student researcher in theory, they need to become the researcher. A researcher like a practitioner is required to work at actively 'integrating, tuning, restructuring theoretical knowledge to the demands of practical situations and constraints' – that is by 'fusing theory and experience' (Bromme & Tillema 1995: 261). Lene reflected on her questioning of participants. She drew on the codified knowledge of her research methods textbook as she sought to explain why her questioning did not seem to go well.

> When I transcribed, I heard myself, I told myself… some of the questions I asked were too long and I shouldn't have. I read my textbook and it said you should keep your questions short and simple and sometimes I found I got my participants confused with my long questions and I think it was because I had to explain it again in Pijin as some of the participants didn't really understand. And I found one particular one was the one asking them to define the nature of academic English … I myself had to find how I would ask the question (Lene, post data collection interview).

Ana on the other hand experienced success, and the fact that her on-line survey was positively received by her participants, appeared to have a significant effect on her identity:

> It made me feel like very professional. [laughs] … and when I send it to my participants they also feel like it's a good – like, they didn't know – they were not aware much of the online stuff like that so one of my participants said, 'Oh your data collection is very impressive', something like that (Ana, post data collection interview).

Codifying the research process

Different parts of the writing of the thesis challenged students in particular ways but also affirmed their identities as researchers. Students spoke of the literature review as a transition point in their thesis writing, and expressed this at times in spatial metaphors, as Thomas and Pita did.

> I started not to get focused but I [...] it's broad so how to actually get focused. But every now and then I just follow what you tell us, try to focus on the research question, that's where you need to be (Thomas, pre data collection interview).

> I think I have more idea, knowledge about the issue of gender violence. So I think that's... through the literature review I have realised and learned some things that I had no idea. So through this topic, the original [conception] has changed as I, you know, move into the research (Pita, pre data collection interview).

Pita's experience with the writing of the literature was affirming in knowledge terms, and like all good literature reviews, it shaped the thesis.

Not all students successfully managed the transition. Matt attributed the fact that he had not made progress on his literature review to his supervisors deciding should not continue with his thesis.

> So then that was the main reason [for not continuing], I got stuck in there [the literature review]. So they said, 'Oh well it's looking … it's a bit late for you now' (Matt, interview)

Uncertainty about the nature of the literature review was expressed by May. This suggests that she was not fully aware of the knowledge function of the literature review – to lay the ground and argue the case for the research questions.

> I was just thinking if it, the results of the research change the direction of the research? For example, I am investigating on this topic but during the collection of data I have unearthed something else, which is actually the issue, unbeknownst to me ... So if that happens would I go back and do another literature review? (May, workshop).

The codifying of the findings, discussion and to a lesser extent the conclusion, is another significant transition point. A number of students expressed the view that the findings, discussion and conclusion sections of the thesis were where they felt that they had achieved personalised knowledge – their comments suggested that they felt they 'owned' the data they had generated, and had something to say about that data.

> After you've finished the results chapter. For me that's the time that I really understand what I'm doing (Suzi, post data collection interview).

> Actually chapter four and chapter five [findings and discussion] are supposed to be the most important parts of my thesis, yeah. Because it's something […] about me what I found from my thesis by my findings and conclusion, more of my voice; yeah, so that's why it's considered to be more important (Ana, post data collection interview).

Ana went on to talk about the caution she felt as she wrote her discussion chapter with a personalised audience in mind, that of her colleague participants.

> That's why I wanted my chapter four [findings] quite good before I move to chapter five [discussion] because – and now I won't do it too fast, just slowly and carefully blend so that I can write chapter five in a reasonable way because I know that, as you mentioned, the leadership is sensitive so I should be careful, especially as it is right at my university (Ana, post data collection interview).

For Emma, the discussion section marked a transition in which she could operate autonomously as a researcher, and not be tied to the work of others. The second quote suggests it marked a transition into her new identity, as a researcher in the future.

> What my supervisor told me is that if … it is a new area you are exploring so you are likely to have those findings […] not going with your literature. At first I was really worried… and I said am I going to go back home and collect data? All these things I am having these feelings in me; I kind of felt very low. [My supervisor said] don't worry you can discuss these findings on its own, it doesn't need to relate to the literature (Emma, post data collection interview).

> Yes. I want to do more research but we'll see how this one goes, the one that I'm working on but I'm confident now to do research, to go out there and collect data, data collection and analysing was challenging. But it was interesting at the end of the data analysis and when it comes to discussions now it's very interesting, I find it interesting and I'm confident to go on and do more research, yeah (Emma, post data collection interview).

Katznelson, Perpignan and Rubin (2001) talk of how identity can be a 'by-product' of writing, and in terms of writing a thesis, researcher identity appears to be afforded at particular points in the writing trajectories.

Disseminating research findings

It could be argued that the desire and perceived ability to make use of and apply research findings and understandings in the students' professionals lives is an indication that they had traversed the last and perhaps most significant knowledge transition, that of re-tuning their work to the contexts they were to return to. Both Ana and Pita express this in the quotes below, but neither overstate the potential impact of their work, speaking of it as something to 'reflect on' or as a way to 'raise awareness'.

> My aim, my main focus is to know more about […] this university in particular. So I think that I will contribute some understanding to first the [leaders] at this university because when I come back home I will submit my thesis to the library and I think that other leaders, […] my participants will read that, yes, and because I have some recommendation and some discussion I have, that will give them some food for thought, yes, for them to reflect on (Ana, post data collection interview).

> I can't guarantee that I will minimise violence and like I've said, my project is academic for the Masters paper but secondly, I mean I'll definitely … establish links with the principals and especially the education advisor and send a summary of the findings, … a summary of the report and that might help create awareness, because I am sure that at the end of my report it will be the practices, the best practices I employed to address and raise awareness of violence by the school leaders (Pita, pre data collection interview).

Lisa also expressed the desire for her own experience to encourage others to go on to do further study.

> Like sometimes when people go for studies and come back and you try and implement something new, I think sometimes like other people will see [a different] perspective or view of how they see myself but ... I'd like to do some changes, like just from the research I've done, some changes ... What I would like to do is, I'd like to help other woman teachers … leadership so I would like to help those teachers that would like to go for further studies or would like to upgrade their qualification, I'd like to help those. (Lisa, post data collection interview)

Conclusion

Wenger comments that:

> We experience and manifest ourselves by what we recognise, and what we don't, what we grasp immediately and what we can't interpret, what we can appropriate and what alienates us, what we can press into service and what we can't use, what we can negotiate and what remains out of reach (1998: 108).

Essentially, Wenger is describing reconciliation work, and he is doing so in knowledge terms. The comments offered by the students as they progressed through planning for research, codifying that planning in textual form, enacting research practices, and again

codifying this as they wrote the thesis provide us with insights about the significant reconciliation work that students need to engage in.

What use should we, as writing teachers and supervisors, make of such insights? First, what comes to the fore through a consideration of codified knowledge is the writing we often do not pay attention to—the writing of ethics applications, questionnaires, interview schedules, etc. Second, the students in this study were involved in a workshop programme in which they co-constructed the proposal, and engaged in a number of interviews with me as they progressed through their thesis work. These experiences provided a context in which students could express what they found difficult in knowledge terms, and in which they could seek to negotiate and reconcile new knowledge with what they already knew. Many students have few such opportunities for 'explicit deliberation' (Edwards 2005). If we adopt the perspective that a researcher is a practitioner (as defined by Bromme & Tillema 1995), these experiences represent a type of 'boundary zone' (Edwards 2005) in which contexts can be reconciled. 'Building relationships between domains and extending the learning context beyond specific sites … creates a pedagogic zone in its own right, a hybrid space of in-between contexts' (Edwards 2005). Third, through a commitment to documenting students' experiences over time – the past present and imagined, we come to appreciate their researcher life histories.

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