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Directive feedback in Honour's or Master's degree research

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Introduction

The honours and masters students we deal with in the field of social work are probably typical of many: practice-focused workers wanting to improve the areas in which they work. Our students typically have a one to two year timeframe to carry out the essential tasks, often while in a concurrent clinical placement or, in the case of fully fledged practitioners, contiguous with a busy practice. Practitioners will inevitably be carrying out research activities in evenings and weekends. Few will have significant support from employers.

As a consequence these students are time poor and understandably distracted by the demands of clinical practice. Carrying out the research is intellectually and emotionally demanding. For such students, the thesis-completion timeline is viewed across a busy calendar of paid work, the day job and personal commitments. 'Writing up' comes at the end in this task-dominated view and so, in the early stages, writing is not in the forefront of the students' thinking.

Their dissertation or thesis comes at the end of a professional qualification or is undertaken as professional development. The research may be clearly located in practice problems, for example, a qualitative study of the experiences of women who have reported intimate partner violence to health professionals, or an examination of the barriers to social inclusion in a community welfare organisation. The broad aim of such projects is to explore a phenomenon

in a practice setting, identify factors of success or failure through exploration of actions or narratives and to make recommendations for change at the level of practice. D’Cruz and Jones (2014, p.9) suggest that an impact of social work research is its ‘capacity to invigorate and inform’ professional practice. Practitioners undertaking research for professional development are highly motivated, but may be ‘rusty’ in their writing and need to rediscover their academic voice. Writing is something they also may believe they have mastered, having generally met accepted standards in their previous academic work. And yet in our experience it is the writing that is often a major challenge of master’s and honours research. In this chapter we offer some ideas for addressing feedback and support for this academic writing.

In our role as supervisors we begin our work with a new student project from a place of experience. We know that seeking ethics approval takes several months. We expect recruitment and data collection will pose challenges and that transcription is time-consuming. Because we anticipate problems that will challenge the students' ambitious and often rose-tinted timeline, we urge students to complete good early drafts.

We typically ask for a literature review before ethics approval is sought, while writing a methodology chapter sits well alongside preparing the ethics application. The process of seeking ethical approval entails decision making. How many participants and how will they be recruited? Precisely what questions need to be asked and in what sequence? What are the risks? What might arise as 'incidental findings' and what steps might be taken? The ethics application is important writing under agenda deadlines pressure. It courts prompt directive feedback and starts student writing productively. Thus three separate pieces of writing begin the research project and are linked to thinking. Supervisors must balance three factors: the timeliness of task completion, ethical yet rigorous data collection and the production of a well-argued thesis. All require attention to writing, feedback and some degree of direction. Our stance is that feedback starts from receipt of the research proposal, as by the time a thesis is in a full draft it is too late to address writing clarity.

Clarity about the purpose of our feedback on writing is part of relationship building with students. Adcroft (2011, p.406) argues that feedback is ‘a social process, where the fundamental points of analysis are the human relationships involved’, rather than merely a technical process where the focus is on tasks and technique. While our feedback is by necessity framed by the task focus of the project, our aim is still to enhance learning.

Here we address this challenge in terms of three main features of feedback on writing: a writing focus from the beginning, prescriptive feedback, and support that encourages the development of an academic voice.

Part One: Keeping Writing in Focus from the start

Setting expectations from the start

From the outset of discussions with a potential thesis student we outline our approach to supervision, providing a framework for the diverse tasks involved in researching and writing a thesis; the deadlines of the research process; and how feedback will be provided along the way. Most importantly, we are clear that the writing must start from the beginning of the research journey. Most postgraduate programmes expect potential students to develop a short version of a full research proposal prior to enrolling and this submission will be discussed with the student, providing the first opportunity to experience specific feedback from their potential supervisor/s.

At this point it is important to also discuss the process of giving and receiving feedback. It can be helpful to disclose a little about what your feedback style is like... 'As a supervisor I can often come across as a bit blunt, without necessarily attending to the convention of the 'feedback sandwich', a technique of noting a strength in the writing, then adding a constructive criticism, followed by another compliment'. An invitational conversation enables the student to get to know and what they might expect from your feedback. It is equally important to ask the student how they respond to feedback. Naturally, given the power dynamics a student can feel obliged to respond to this question saying what they think we want to hear, rather than revealing their true feelings about how they react to critical feedback. We break the ice in this conversation by share our own experiences of receiving negative and overly critical feedback. The purpose of this early conversation is to acknowledge that we all have reactions to feedback, and to firmly locate the process of receiving both oral and written feedback as an integral part of the supervision landscape. Students need to understand how to work with and integrate the ideas from feedback to strengthen their thesis writing by the time they graduate: the writing feedback process is an additional learning opportunity the student encounters within the postgraduate space.

We find it helpful if thesis writing can be conceptualised from the start as an integral part of the research dissemination process. Writing up is an ethical responsibility as is communicating about the process and ideas associated with the development of the research. So we encourage students to begin research writing with a number of different audiences in mind: the research participants, the ethics committee, the examiners, journal reviewers, conference attendees and us as supervisors. To reap the benefit of multiple forms and sources of feedback before submitting the thesis for examination, we encourage candidates to find opportunities to write for different audiences throughout.

There are different forms of directive feedback that the student can receive. As supervisors we use both electronic tracked changes on documents, and handwritten comments on hardcopy drafts. There are pros and cons for each system. Electronic copies include legible feedback that can be tracked in terms of revision document control. One temptation of providing electronic feedback is to include ongoing document editing which is the student's work to do, or more worryingly, effectively change the discourse of the document through insertions or deletions that are easy to do electronically.

Writing for the ethics application

The ethics application requires significant writing effort in the first part of the masters or honours project. As noted above, the process of ethics application can happen alongside the production of the methodology chapter. Discussion of the ethical dimensions of research informs writing crucial to the success of the thesis and occurs in two significant texts during the research process – the ethics application which must be brief, clear and in plain English, and the methodology chapter which can be more substantive, being grounded in the research literature.

The ethics application functions as an important communication of the research intentions. It requires plain, jargon-free English which enables the ethics committee readers (who come from a diverse group of academic disciplines) to understand the research focus, questions and procedure. Research ethics calls for honest, scrupulous and careful writing of documentation, such as a consent forms and participant information that provide clarity and safety for research participants and gatekeepers. In our experience writing this documentation is more than just writing: it begins the iterative process that underpins many small but significant decisions about how the research will be carried out.

We spend a great deal of time discussing and providing feedback on writing about research ethics and indeed the methodological decisions which underpin the thesis project. In this particular writing, the student makes the thesis their own, unique, and very specific to their research question and design. While it will be informed by literature, the decision making and judgements are the students' and we often find ourselves making comments like 'whatever you decide, take careful notes as you will need to write a rationale or justification for your decisions'. At this stage, the writing is clearly at the developmental edge of the students' skills. For some, highly prescriptive or directive feedback may not be necessary. For others it will be needed to safeguard the project.

Part Two: Prescriptive Feedback

A rationale for prescriptive feedback

We aim to strike a balance between doing detailed edits and giving examples. In the 'show and tell' tradition, we find it easier to write small passages to demonstrate what is needed. For example, a student's draft literature review may contain a list of previous research, with numerous paragraphs starting with 'Smith and Jones (2006) argue /report/assert that...'. The beginning student has gathered their sources and systematically worked through them, taking careful notes in a linear manner. As a consequence, their writing privileges the authors not the ideas or findings that have emerged from the reading. We find it helpful often to re-write a paragraph by way of an exemplar, setting out clearly how to introduce the topic or theme of the paragraph and weave references to sources, demonstrating how to build the thematic map of the extant literature. We will then ask the student to rewrite the literature review in this manner.

We will also be directive about using a thesaurus to combat repeated words or phrases. The chosen referencing style may not be negotiable and this will require us to be prescriptive about such matters as the hierarchy of headings, captions and formats for tables and figures and the referencing style.

Addressing procrastination

Many tasks can get in the way of actually writing the chapters. At the outset there is much reading to do, and talking with others about the topic. Students often cite lack of

uninterrupted blocks of time and competing demands for not writing consistently. We have struggled with students who have had little writing to show after quite some time. With this in mind, we reiterate the importance of writing from the beginning of the thesis, with supervisors setting a target word or page length to be achieved between supervision sessions. While this course of action may seem overly prescriptive for this level of study, students do respond positively to such concrete expectations.

We aim to provide the student with the feedback within a week of their having submitted the work. This turnaround time models for the student that their writing is important to us and that we will contribute to the successful progression of the thesis by meeting our own deadlines. This level of organisation is reflected in the supervision session, where we set a clear agenda on how to expand on the written feedback given in the chapter, and discuss practical strategies for progressing and examining conceptual challenges that arise. At the end of each session we make a plan for what work will be submitted before the next supervision session. Students may also email short pieces of work between formal sessions to demonstrate how they have addressed the feedback about writing, a practice which enables students to actively work on their writing and receive frequent feedback along the way. This process also signals further to students that continuous writing towards the thesis is expected. The iterative process of providing comment helps generate a strong collaborative supervisory relationship between supervisors and students.

Part Three: Developing Academic Voice in a Short Timeframe

One of the suggestions we often make to students is to read a completed thesis. At the beginning of the research process this can helpfully demonstrate the structure and ‘feel’ of a thesis or dissertation. As the student begins to write up their findings, they are faced with another challenge: a very new form of writing, generated by them alone. Their previous reliance on a good engagement with the literature is insufficient here. The challenge is to support them to create a strong narrative reporting of the findings and significance of their research in their own voice.

Sword (2012, p.24) notes that our intentions in shaping students’ writing are often conservative: academics ‘typically preach stylistic caution; they want their students to demonstrate mastery of disciplinary norms, not to push against disciplinary boundaries’. This does not mean of course that we don’t encourage flair and style, but at masters and honours

level we do need to teach the basics conventions of research writing, which is often by necessity descriptive and explanatory rather than expansive.

Guidance is needed about disciplinary norms. There are many competing ideas about such matters and Sword (2012, p.28) found that nearly half the writing guides she analysed were positive about creative forms of expression, but some from each major disciplinary category warned against creativity in academic writing. By way of an example, the majority advocated the use of personal pronouns, but in each discipline, some cautioned against this. And indeed our preferences as supervisors offer guidance close to our sociological roots, valuing both precise and transparent writing for the description of the method, while also encouraging students to recognise and write about their own positioning in the research process.

Conclusions

Locating the writing process with an eye to time management is essential when supervising students completing Honours projects and Masters theses. Setting clear expectations from the outset about quality and quantity of writing outputs is integral to moving ahead to timely and successful completion. For us as supervisors providing constructive directive feedback is central to enabling the student to find and nurture her own academic voice.

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