

Developing doctoral authors: engaging with theoretical perspectives through the literature review

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The literature review is arguably the place in a thesis where doctoral authors convincingly engage with theory and theoretical perspectives underlying their research, situating their own contribution to knowledge in established and ongoing dialogues in the field. One difficulty doctoral candidates encounter in their learning to be researchers is articulating this understanding and engagement, how their work grows from literature informing and underpinning their research. Writing confidently at doctoral level in the discipline discourse, and breaking writing blocks are key features of engagement and articulation. Most research into academic writing concentrates on undergraduate writing development, while research on doctoral students looks at relationships with supervisors, communities and the doctoral learning journey. This research on doctoral writing in the literature review uses work on conceptual threshold crossings to identify ways in which doctoral students engage with and indicate their understanding of theoretical perspectives through successful doctoral writing.

Keywords: doctoral writing; literature review; writing blocks; conceptual threshold crossing

Introduction

A crucial part of initial conceptualisation and articulation, the literature review can mean for the student ‘the difficulty of writing as an authority when one does not feel authoritative’ (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 508) which affects the confidence of the language and security of identity. However, it is also expected to be crafted, conceptually robust, most likely a product of frequent, iterative re-writing. A good literature review shows the doctoral author moving between research activity, reading, interpretation of theoretical perspectives, the importance of conceptual and interpretive findings, and the actual processes of writing. Both the iterative processes and the articulation together enable and evidence development, which I argue can be seen as conceptual threshold crossing (Wisker, 2015; Wisker et al., 2010) expressing the contribution to understanding, meaning and knowledge.

Work reported and discussed here builds on earlier research with doctoral students on conceptual threshold crossings and work on identifying and overcoming writing blocks in academic writing (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009). It focuses in particular on where conceptual threshold crossings take place through understanding and using theory, situating and articulating new work in a dialogue with established knowledge in the literature review, seen as a place where the doctoral student’s own

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research is expressed through their own authoritative voice, entering the research dialogue in the field.

Informing literature

Most research into the development of academic writing concentrates on undergraduate students. However, research writing is a particular genre (Aitchison & Lee, 2006), and arguably the writing is itself a form of research (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 12) a 'situated social practice' (2006, p. 4) and a complex struggle entailing moving between different identities and discourses (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Kamler & Thomson, 2006).

Research on doctoral student learning considers supervision practices, communities (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009; Wisker, 2012), and latterly the crossing of conceptual thresholds at stages in doctoral learning (Kiley, 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Wisker et al., 2010), building on the theory of threshold concepts in the disciplines (Meyer & Land, 2005). Conceptual threshold crossings are seen to take place in doctoral students' work when they make learning leaps or breakthroughs in their learning, start to fully own the process and realise their contribution to knowledge and to conceptual understanding. Such crossings have been seen to take place at key points in the learning journey including identifying a research question, producing the literature review or theoretical perspectives chapter which situates their own contribution in the research dialogue, interpreting, theorising and developing findings from the data, and producing a sound abstract and conclusion.

Writing is crucial to the communication of how research engages with and furthers knowledge dialogues (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, 2008). Recent work (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009) concentrates on ways in which doctoral students and academic writers overcome stuck places in the writing process, particularly with regard to understanding theory, to move writing practices forward: an example of conceptual threshold crossing in writing, while Kiley (2009) also identifies moments when candidates move beyond being stuck, noting changed demeanour, and improved writing. Other work on good practice in academic writing offers strategies to support doctoral students (Elbow, 1973; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Murray, 2005; Sword, 2009). Part of the achievement of doctoral writing is a development of discursive voice (Maybin, 2001) as a product of struggle, a notion built on Bakhtin's work (1986), where writers enter the discourse community, making some of that expression their own but taking the history of the words used with them into their own writing. For Bakhtin, dialogue enables meaning-making, in a situated context, between people. Words exist for speakers in three ways, the neutral word of a language 'as an *other's* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance, and finally *my* word', 'imbued with my expression' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 88). He writes mainly about the verbal, but his comments have resonance for written texts. When you write a literature review, this is your own wording but also 'the word of authority, of constraint, of precedent' (1986, p. 88). Entering the dialogue, the conversation, in the literature review requires commitment, thoroughness and confidence to identify the discursive voice and your own voice and feel you have a right to speak.

New and re-scrutinised research reported here into conceptual threshold crossing in the construction and expression of the literature review suggests that at various stages in their learning journeys doctoral students can settle into working at levels

which enable them to produce theoretical, conceptual, critical and creative work in their own projects and discipline, expressed in confident, articulate writing. Doctoral students, supervisors and examiners offer evidence of conceptual threshold crossings, making breakthroughs, and the achievement of articulacy, confidence and sound expression in doctoral writing.

I argue that the specific indication of such breakthrough and articulation comes about in the iterative production of the literature review, which evidences conceptual threshold crossings in the dialogue between established and new knowledge and the accompanying development of ability to write confidently in an authoritative voice. Research reported here focuses on the literature review as an iterative process enabling learning, deepening of understanding and clarification through articulation.

Methodology and methods

In order to explore the experiences and perceptions of doctoral students and academic writers I employed interpretivist qualitative research involving both the re-scrutiny of earlier research findings, and new, specifically focused interviews, each concerning the literature review, theoretical perspectives, writing as articulation process and conceptual threshold crossing. The re-scrutinising and new interviews are combined to see whether, and how, they provide evidence of ways in which undertaking and writing of the literature review over time evidences the achievement of conceptual, theorised work and expression in academic writing in the doctorate. The research is in two stages:

- (1) Re-scrutiny of data from two earlier research projects:
 - (a) the ‘doctoral learning journeys’ and the ‘parallel project’ (2007–2010) into the learning journeys and conceptual threshold crossings of doctoral students in the UK across four discipline areas (n30, not science), and international doctoral students (n20, including science), supervisors and examiners (n20, n16).
 - (b) The ‘priceless-writing’ project (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009, n25) focusing on how academic writers, including doctoral students, overcome writing blocks and move through liminal spaces to express ideas, findings and arguments.

I began by re-reading and re-scrutinising (a) and (b) and found *under-reported* themes concerning the role of the literature review and engagement with writing as a dialogue experienced by doctoral researchers. Each earlier project was re-scrutinised paying particular attention to comments from writers on their experience of engaging with theoretical perspectives through doctoral and academic writing, writing development, support, and the achievement of articulating critical, conceptual and creative research work in a dialogue with other work, in the literature review. (*referred throughout as 1 followed by respondent number/letter*)

- (2) Building on the earlier work, I conducted new small-scale, highly focused qualitative research using face to face or email interviews with UK and international doctoral students and supervisors (n6). This explores awareness and

overcoming of writing blocks and the development of articulacy, confidence and voice in doctoral writing in the literature review, in the context of the use of theoretical perspectives, over time. (*referred throughout as 2 followed by respondent number /letter*)

The work particularly focuses on the construction and writing of the literature review as it has been identified as a key moment for the development and achievement of voice, confidence, articulacy and dialogue in expression of the research journey and understanding of how new research contributes to an ongoing dialogue. It begins to explore ways in which doctoral students move forward in their writing so that they cross conceptual thresholds and achieve voice, good habits, confidence and articulation of their work considering:

- (1) how conceptual threshold crossing is identified by doctoral writers and in particular in the engagement with theoretical perspectives as this appears in the writing of the literature review;
- (2) where, how and why articulate research writing takes place in the literature review and how both doctoral students and supervisors can identify whether and how that happens.

In this essay the focus is on doctoral students' understanding of theoretical perspectives and their conceptual threshold crossings to achieve conceptualised, articulate contributions to knowledge through writing in the literature review.

Research suggests that doctoral students are aware of moments when they break writing blocks and begin to develop articulate writing, particularly when engaging with theory and theoretical perspectives in writing and re-writing of the literature review. One supervisor commented about a student's development as a researcher as expressed in their writing:

you can see they've become more sophisticated in their thought process, they're more sophisticated in their analysis of what they're looking at and as to how they're thinking. (1:9)

The literature review and its place in research and growth

Advice on writing the literature review, including my own (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Murray, 2005; Wisker, 2001/2008, 2005/2012), suggests its two main features are establishing theoretical perspectives and critical engagement in the field. Literature reviews produced very early can however, be descriptive, partial, or comprehensive to the point of stagnation, with theory used almost cosmetically, not yet fully influencing and nuancing the work. At this stage, students have seen neither a full range of theories to inform their questioning, and interpretation, nor the range of work by others dealing with similar issues in similar theorised ways, in the field. If they keep reading, thinking, applying, interpreting and writing in an iterative fashion, work often grows in conceptual quality and confidence. Effective early literature reviews are evidence of doctoral students reading their way into the field and the theories which will help them ask the question(s) and then interpret data. But even effective early literature reviews are not fully-fledged. Indeed, such work is produced to fit nascent exploration and understanding, setting out a version of the field, and often has only a few glimmers of what needs to appear later.

Developing the literature review proper is an iterative process. As each element of the research is layered in, there is a return to new, deeper, more selective understanding of previous reading and newly discovered essential literature to both theorise and situate the work. A good literature review enables the clarification of a theorised lens cast on the research work, in the context of other work, and ongoing dialogues in the field. It nuances the discussion of the literature so that what is theorised, argued and proven is selectively focused on in the new work. It shows awareness of the field, the gaps and tensions and makes a case for ways in which the new work is engaged with and addresses these; it literally situates the new work in a dialogue with that which has been established. The iterative literature review develops along with the research and finally helps to emphasise the argument, the conceptual level of understanding, and new contributions.

The language with which to express this can itself be a barrier to be overcome for many writers – a learning development, an acquisition of and facility in using the discursive voice with confidence. Writing in a good literature review is informative, argumentative, analytical and engages with theories and questions. It can evidence a level of conceptual threshold crossing because it is in the very struggles with articulation, with the understanding expressed, that the author can show they have something to say about a breakthrough and a standpoint offered by their work, situated in ongoing conversations in the field.

Findings

Finding 1. Conceptual threshold crossings

Various themes emerged from the data analysis. From the earlier re-scrutinised work certain characteristics of conceptual threshold crossings for doctoral students were identified by students, supervisors and examiners, several of which are aligned to the production of a good literature review:

- New ways of seeing, understanding and of being in the world;
- Understanding exactly what their contribution to knowledge/understanding is;
- Deeply understanding the research process;
- Seeing their thesis as an integrated whole;
- Seeing themselves as a researcher/academic contributing to their professional field;
- Owning their research;
- Understanding who they are as a researcher; and
- Developing confidence with academic language and that of their discipline.

In this context supervisors look for:

A sense of ownership and some elements of independence in terms of their abilities as a researcher and in terms of driving their project; Being 'able to take lots of different perspectives on their work and be able to use that in a constructive way but essentially to begin to drive that themselves'. (summarised from the Doctoral Learning Journeys (DLJ) report, Wisker et al., 2010)

From rescruiting the data in the earlier projects and analysing data from current research, specifically focusing on articulation in the literature review, several

findings have been built indicating the relationship between understanding, engagement with theory and the expression of conceptual, theorised work in the literature review.

Finding 2. Writing struggles interlocked with struggles with theorists

Students reported early writing struggles, lack of confidence in their own right to speak, tension and compromise with the theorists. They realise the theorists and theoretical perspectives should help them focus on their problems and on data when gathered, but they often struggle to understand them, feel humble about interpreting and using them, and can either over-simplify in a cursory fashion or over-complicate. One asks about the right they have to do more than just rest on and use the work of the theorists:

Problem: Are the theorists sacrosanct? Can they be challenged? If challenged will the examiners or the accepted format of the Lit review allow it? Should this be so? Why not said or thought differently? (2:A)

This evidences the kind of discursal struggle explored by Bakhtin (1981, 1986) where the writer seeks both their own voice and the authority to show understanding of and even challenge the voices of authorities in the field. But the strain intellectually, conceptually and in terms of thoroughness sometimes becomes too much and they can fall back onto a more mechanical need to get the PhD over with. There is a basic issue here about conceptual thoroughness, quality, and what constitutes a 'good enough' PhD, even at this stage of engagement with the theorists. One comments: 'I just need to pass this thing!' (2:A)

Confidence and articulation in entering the conversation with theory, established work and the doctoral student's own work are two noticeable developments in the literature review.

Finding 3. The literature review as blockage and breakthrough

In both earlier research projects (2007–2010; 2009) metaphorical language to describe conceptual threshold crossing taking place was explored. Respondents used auditory, kinaesthetic and visual imagery emphasising the immediate felt nature of moments of blockage: 'I hit a brick wall'; 'I stopped moving'; 'I reached a plateau', and breakthrough in understanding and articulation: 'ding goes the bell'; 'it clicked into place'; 'a light went on'; 'the fog cleared'; 'a jigsaw piece coming together'; 'a good feeling, like an adrenaline rush creating feelings of pride that you are going to write a good PhD'; 'a peeling away of layers of arrogance'; 'getting through a mountain'; 'ideas coming together and learning to think more realistically'; and 'a narrative weaving a pattern' (1:various).

One respondent comments:

I couldn't abstract beyond what I was seeing ... whenever I sat down to actually do it, it seemed that I couldn't or wouldn't – like a child who doesn't want to do homework. Then I remind myself that it's not about 'discovering' the link and the argument, it is about me making it, constructing it, literally 'making sense' in the sense of bringing into being links and associations between concepts, theories and concepts ... for me it often is a matter of thinking very hard about what story I want to tell, what argument to make. (1:B)

This is evidence of conceptual threshold crossing, following writing blocks, and shows the writer realising their own sense of right to a voice (Bakhtin, 1986; Maybin, 2001) making links between theories, concepts and their own work.

In each of these examples the block of inability to grapple with theory and language gave way to breakthrough into understanding and articulation which we defined as conceptual threshold crossing, because of its leading to well-expressed, conceptual, critical and creative work.

Finding 4. Practices enabling writing

In the early work (Wisker & Savin Baden, 2009) on conceptual threshold crossing related to writing, we determined several practices which participants identified as enabling. They described key learning moments and leaps as occurring: when reflecting; developing confidence in the process of writing; broadening reading; grasping the philosophical underpinnings of their topic; conferences and network building; as well as carrying out work expected by the formal programme, such as completing upgrade papers, which include a version of the literature review.

Identified ways forward forming thinking into writing are: mimicry; reading to write; writing to write; managing the writing energy and multitasking. Mimicry (initially without understanding – then with understanding and ability to create) can form part of the development process, enabling students to become confident with disciplinary language and academic writing, as demonstrated in this student journal extract:

I read my friend's PhD after my upgrade and then wrote my own ideas in a similar format, for an introductory chapter, just to feel like I had something concrete. (1:B)

Reading and writing are key to enabling development, as strategies and processes students initiate and with which they engage to advance their learning. Difficulty in the reading process is described as a significant barrier, but as students grapple with complex theoretical perspectives they find ways of providing a basis for their own thinking and writing, what new elements they contribute a perspective, twist, turn or something problematising and contradicting received views. Theoretical perspectives are bedrock and jumping off points, the essentials of an engaged dialogue, which translates into writing:

So I'm kind of looking at those theories that underpin my question. The essence of the professional doctorate has to be related to practice so I'm hoping that using those underpinning theories I'll be able to bring up a theory of my own. (1:B)

This highlights a combination of factors contributing to successful threshold crossing, understanding and articulation.

Doctoral writers in the recent study showed they were becoming increasingly aware of ways of engaging with then articulating interpretation of theoretical perspectives, writing themselves into a dialogue with these earlier writers. One comments that they:

... read deeply and widely on a particular ... theorist you're interested in like Bourdieu or Foucault or whoever then it's not enough to read a couple of texts, you do need to immerse yourself, ... the next step to that would then be about trying to apply those ideas ... so not writing a whole chapter but maybe 2 or 3 pages to where you can attempt to apply the ideas and then you can use that as a discussion forum ...

... it's about using the ideas and that's often the hard part. So again it's about finding ways to scaffold that so there could be sort of different ways of trialling those ideas which you then use as discussion documents. (2:C)

This student understands the importance of wide, deep reading and of moving beyond a comprehensive record of reading to using ideas as discussion documents from which to develop their own ideas and arguments. Responses in both studies indicated gradual intellectual developments through skimming over ideas and concepts, revisiting them, thinking through ontological and epistemological positions and reading round them, engaging with the literature review more critically and exploring data within a theoretical context (Wisker et al., 2010, p. 10).

The developmental journey is marked by instrumental, personal and cognitive tensions/challenges, identifying what is appropriate and enough at different stages. The literature review enables a real engagement with conversation in the subject area in which students work, familiarisation with and developing confidence in the use of theories concepts, and the discourse. The articulation of their own ideas about their work, their sense of engagement in the dialogues in the already validated, peer-reviewed, often well-established texts, their sense of having the right to have a voice and to enrich the ideas and argument, form the early work. However, 'the roots of it are spindly and I feel like the roots need thickening up' (1:D).

Finding 5. The iterative process

The literature review is seen as a product of a particular stage, a stepping-stone to undertaking the research. However, reflecting on our own literature reviews, we probably remember that there was an initial stab at a comprehensive cover of the various theories, theoretical perspectives and critical work to establish understanding, and themes, and that as the research itself matured, we constantly returned not merely to update, but to deepen and enrich the literature review, so our own work began to be seen to appear from it, be situated in its discussions and then finally to contribute to these discussions with something nuanced, original.

Recognition of the iterative process emerges as a key finding of re-scrutiny and new research where conducting, contributing to and completing the literature review indicates maturing, and conceptual threshold crossings. Participant responses show that iterative visits to the literature review alongside interpreting data, defining findings deepens understanding, enhances articulacy, in a dialogue with established work, offering something new.

These breakthroughs in the re-visits to the literature review were expressed:

And then there are these wonderful moments where things just slot into place, but only after a long engagement and in-depth knowledge ... then suddenly all relates to each other, like my argument is revealing itself to me. Of course this isn't the case ... I can't really explain what happens, but it does feel like the pieces of my puzzle physically move towards each other. (1:E)

They return to written elements, improve and draw on them.

How the literature review is expressed is also important, as doctoral writers enter the subject discourse, engaging modes of thought, the literature and theoretical perspectives this discourse vehicles, and articulating their own engagement with and contribution to discipline understanding linking theory with discipline language in the literature review:

critical thinking and focus ... it is searching work, analysing, selecting, thinking, making breakthroughs and then finding the language to express the breakthroughs in and bringing the literature which helped the breakthrough, which underpin it and which validate it in the language of the discipline back in to do that validating and underpinning job – it also not merely time consuming but mind stretching – it can be done in leaps and bounds and in small dredged up drips after a lot of thinking and reading and then realisations and articulacy – academic factors such as learning to write in an academic style; language and cultural factors. (2:A)

This later respondent is aware of developing their own academic voice in the subject discourse and in a dialogue with the experts. Students develop an authoritative, articulate discursive voice, based on confidence in the conceptual work, their understanding and contribution. Bakhtin's comments are useful 'the authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power that it might have to persuade us internally (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342).

One respondent notes a:

marked shift in successive drafts where the writing becomes more authoritative, more bolder and what accompanies this is a reconfiguration of the self, the realisation that actually for a brief moment in time, I am actually the expert – this is the hallmark of advanced scholarship, it is a letting go of the supervisor and previous sense of self – a confidence, maturity. (2:A)

Finding 6. Examiners identify articulation of engagement with theory

Examiners in the early research comment on the importance of engaging with the literature and making a step up, saying they could see this in the successful theses. They identified interconnections between different areas of the field, transformation of ideas, illumination and revelation as key signifiers of threshold crossing seen in writing. This relates to Kellner's comments: 'the more perspectives one can bring to their analysis and critique, the better grasp of the phenomena one will have and the better one will be at developing alternative readings and oppositional practices' (Kellner, 1999, p. xii). One examiner implied that making interconnections between different areas of the field displayed threshold crossing, signifying movement into new understanding. Writing that showed 'deeper understanding of the issues' at a conceptual level and 'a step up in theoretical work' indicated 'students had crossed thresholds' (Wisker et al., 2010, p. 37). This is evidenced through technical and conceptual processes of PhD research, for example, 'a building on seminal work; selling, explaining and developing a concept' (2010, p. 37). Examiners discuss relating identity to the learning, and theories to students' work in the literature review/theoretical perspectives chapter, pointing out that we see conversations the student enters, where concept mapping becomes evident, understanding gleaned from reading is integrated with their own ideas and their direction emerges and is articulated.

One examiner recognised that writing in the thesis integrates analysis, theorising, development of a story and an argument, describing the achievement of doctorateness as a 'conceptual elegance of research design' with 'an interesting story attached' (2010, p. 38). Another indicated that learning shifts are incremental and most probably happen during the process of writing successive drafts. Knowing that the material presented might one day be published was one examiner's personal marker that significant conceptual crossing had taken place.

Conclusion

Developing a literature review is an iterative process masquerading as a foundational process. It enables and evidences conceptual threshold crossings, revelations, breakthroughs, transformed thinking and expression,

It is the oppositional practices and alternatives which seem to offer much of the greatest value within the review of literature where they offer me new insight. (2:F)

We return frequently to the literature review after using theories in questioning, analysis and interpretation. Revisiting the literature review integration of new work with underpinning theories, enabling doctoral students and their writing to become more confident and articulate. It all makes more sense at a higher level.

What was written a year before is more clearly understood a year on – in the hindsight of experience and added knowledge. (2:A)

A respondent in the later study notes the importance of the literature review in their developing thinking and articulation:

With some existential thinking, a belief in the nature of dialogue, postmodern eclectic matching of theorists and schools of thought, and a need for curiosity are vital in my definition of the purpose of literature review. ... I DO have a greater understanding now. The heavily defined schools of theory and the paradigms within which they are contextualised have girded the study and offered it reason, definition, meaning and purpose. That a 'quilt' of learning segments offering a variety of perspectives is building within the key chapters of the lit review and methodology has assisted me. (2:A)

Finally, research writing is seen as joining a conversation:

A big learning experience for me has been that doing a doctorate is not a search for the truth but is really just taking part in a conversation. I suppose that is also a learning experience in that when I sit with the 'learned' in a conference I feel confident in challenging them as I now see myself as a peer. (1:B)

The literature review is an essential part of the development of conceptual, critical and creative work through its engagement with theoretical perspectives, theory and a range of current work in the field. It is seen as joining the research conversation, having the right to speak, knowing your own research, recognising the unique integration of theories and previous work, upon which your work rests, from which it grows and to which it contributes.

Developing, returning to and completing the literature review is how and where doctoral writers work out this level of engagement with theory and theorists, this understanding of the worth of their own contribution to knowledge, their own articulation.

This work should make a valuable contribution to the development of academic writing amongst doctoral students as a means of helping them to develop their understanding of theory and theoretical perspectives and their ability to write as researchers.

Notes on contributor

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