

CHAPTER 16

MARKING THE BOUNDARIES: KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTITY IN PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES

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Writing is a central feature of all aspects of the doctoral process. Students are engaged in textual activities such as the taking of notes, the keeping of research diaries, the analysis of interview data and the preparation of reports and conference papers well before they write their thesis. Hence Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2006, p. 4) conceptualize doctoral research as a continuous process of inquiry through writing, and for David Scott and Robin Usher (1996, p. 43) research is “writing and the production of a text.” However, despite the dominance of writing in the process of knowledge production, the area of doctoral writing remains relatively under-theorized as a social practice. While there is a profusion of self-help and advice books on the market, most take a skills-based approach in which deficits in writing can be addressed through learning a set of decontextualized tips and techniques (Kamler & Thomson, 2004). This “study skills” model (Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998) treats writing as a set of technical transferable skills, failing to recognize how academic writing practices are situated in wider social and institutional contexts. Although there are guides for supervisors (Kamler & Thomson, 2006) and students (Rowena Murray, 2011) which do acknowledge writing as a social practice, Claire Aitchison et al. (2012, p. 2) conclude that relatively little is known about “how doctoral students actually learn research writing, how supervisors ‘teach’ or develop the writing of their students and what happens to students and supervisors during this process.”

In researching students’ and supervisors’ perspectives on doctoral writing, Aitchison, et al. (2012) found that both parties identified feedback as the primary mechanism through which students learned how to write. The nature and content of this feedback was crucial to the relationship between supervisor and student and to the development of the student’s doctoral identity. In this chapter, the role of feedback in constructing doctoral writing practices is explored through an analysis of the written feedback given to doctoral students. Interviews with students and supervisors can provide some insight into the perceptions of, and attitudes to, feed-

back. However, previous research has identified an interesting disjuncture between what lecturers *did* and what they *said they did* in relation to marking and feedback (Barbara Read, Becky Francis & Jocelyn Robson, 2004; Frank Webster, David Pepper & Alan Jenkins, 2000). Furthermore, written feedback on student work is a specific genre of writing, which can itself be seen a social practice. It is therefore a productive site for the study of the educational discourses which staff engage with in making and justifying their responses to student writing.

This study is part of an ongoing practice-based project relating to the written feedback that is given to students in higher education. An earlier phase of the research analyzed samples of feedback from a range of units in an undergraduate criminology programme to consider how the feedback given to students were shaped by the departmental, disciplinary and institutional contexts (Creaton, 2011). This phase of the project analyzes feedback from a very different type of programme—a professional doctorate—which raises different, but equally interesting issues about the discourses which underpin marking and feedback. The chapter begins with an overview of the professional doctorate and then analyzes some of the key themes that emerge from an analysis of the written feedback that was given to students on the first stage of the programme. It then goes on to consider the implications of these findings for enhancing feedback practice and concludes with a discussion on the value of the academic literacies approach as a tool for pedagogical enhancement (see also Kaufhold Chapter 6 and Badenhorst et al. Chapter 7 this volume).

THE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

The feedback analyzed for this study came from a professional doctorate in Criminal Justice (DCrimJ) programme offered by the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Portsmouth. The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications does not distinguish between the PhD and the professional doctorate: both are awarded for “the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication” (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). However, there are some differences in the structure, delivery and ethos of the awards. Professional doctorate programmes usually include a series of taught modules as a precursor to the research phase and in the DCrimJ, students study four taught doctoral level units (Professional Review and Development, Advanced Research Techniques, Publication and Dissemination, Research Proposal) followed by a research project which culminates in a 50,000 word thesis. Students are required to be engaged in a relevant field of professional activity and in this programme, a wide range of criminal justice sector backgrounds are represented, including the police, probation, social work and the law. The teaching of the units is embedded in the criminal justice context and stu-

dents link their assignments to their specific field of professional activity.

A professional doctorate programme was chosen partly for practical reasons—unlike the largely bilateral and private nature of feedback that is given by a PhD supervisor, the feedback that is given to professional doctorate students on the taught phase of programme is agreed between a first and second marker, scrutinized by an external examiner and retained for audit purposes. There was, therefore, an accessible source of naturally occurring data through which the conventions around academic and professional discourse could be interrogated. However, the professional doctorate is, in any event, a rich source of data for the investigation of discursive practices. David Boud and Mark Tennant (2006) note that the informal, situated and contingent knowledge generated through professional practice (Michael Eraut, 1994, 2000) can present some challenges for academic staff inducted in more formal disciplinary-based knowledge of the academy (Tony Becher & Paul Trowler, 2001). Whilst dispositional knowledge generated through reflection and reflective practice is well established in educational and health disciplines, it may be viewed with suspicion in disciplines located within a more positivist tradition. The multidisciplinary nature of criminology means that students and staff come to the DCrimJ with a range of different epistemological, theoretical and methodological perspectives. These are reflected in the written texts that are produced for assessment, and it is these texts and the responses to them, which are the subject of this chapter.

The sample comprised 63 assignments which were submitted by students in 2007-2011 for the Professional Review and Development module. This module is the first one that students take on entry to the programme and includes a critical review of the concepts of professionalism, professional practice and professional knowledge; reflective practice and an introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of research. Students are assessed through a three-part assignment which requires them to critique an academic journal article from the perspective of their professional practice; to provide a reflective account of their personal and professional journey to the professional doctorate and an assessment of their learning and development needs; and to critically analyze the concepts of professionalism, professional practice and professional knowledge within their own field.

The feedback that had been given on these assessments was uploaded to NVivo for coding and analysis. The first phase of coding was concerned with analyzing the comments at what Theresa Lillis (2008) terms the transparent/referential level. These included comments that staff made about student writing, particularly in relation to surface level features of the text. The second phase of coding focussed on the discursive/indexical level, looking at the linguistic features of the feedback indexing wider discourses. This chapter discusses two key themes which emerged from the analysis of the data: the relationship between professional and academic

knowledge and the negotiation of doctoral identity.

KNOWLEDGE

Markers made a range of comments about aspects of students' writing, such as structure and referencing, which also featured in the undergraduate feedback from the first phase of the project. The most significant difference between the two samples was the markers' attitude to language which explicitly positioned the student within the text. In traditional undergraduate essays, markers strongly disapproved of students using the first person or making reference to their personal or professional knowledge or experience. From an academic literacies perspective, these conventions can be seen as having an ideological function beyond a simply stylistic preference. The exclusion of personal experience, the absence of the author in the text, the use of objective prose are all features of a dominant "essayist literacy," which privileges the discursive practices of particular social groups. Lillis (2001, p. 115), for example, found that the "institutional rejection" of personal experience was a particular issue for the student writers in her study, who felt marginalized by the lack of opportunities for drawing on their own lived experiences as a resource for meaning making within higher education.

However, aspects of the professional doctorate assignment required students to explicitly engage with their personal and professional perspectives. Markers also made it clear that, even in relation to the more conventionally academic aspects of the assignment, it was critical to position themselves as a practitioner:

I think it would have added value to position yourself at the outset. As a police officer you would presumably take a particular view of this.

... although you allude to your profession right at the end, you have not explicitly stated why this article is of interest to you in your particular professional role/context.

Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1996, p. 127) suggests that locating oneself assertively and deliberately within a text reflects ethical, rhetorical and theoretical choices on the part of the researcher. However, for students, these choices are often determined by wider disciplinary and institutional constraints. In the case of the professional doctorate, the deliberate foregrounding of both the personal and the professional can be seen as disrupting some of the traditional epistemological and disciplinary boundaries and practices which have applied in dominant academic writing contexts. Acknowledging the legitimacy of professional and personal knowledge requires a reconsideration of the academic writing practices which are entwined with the particular type of disciplinary knowledge generated in the acad-

emy. It can also make explicit the function that writing and feedback practices serve in reinforcing power relationships and existing patterns of knowledge construction.

IDENTITY

A second key theme which emerged from the analysis of the feedback was how tutors positioned themselves in relation to the students through the feedback that they gave. Markers often addressed the students by name and made extensive use of the second person to frame their comments. A more intimate relationship between the marker and the student was also established through the use of other metadiscoursal features. The use of hedges and tentative language was prominent, with markers using phrases such as “would have liked,” “wondered if,” or “possibly” when discussing areas of possible omission or further discussion. Even where there were areas of disagreement, phrases such as “I’m not sure that I agree,” or “I’m not entirely convinced” were used. The feedback was also noticeable for the extent of personal engagement that markers had with the text. There were examples of markers responding to points in the student essays with anecdotes from their own professional experience, drawing on examples from their current research or sharing their perspectives on the doctoral journey. There were also numerous expressions of pleasure and enjoyment in reading the students’ work and in the prospect of working with the student in the future.

The pedagogical discourses employed by members of staff on this course are in significant contrast to those at undergraduate level, where feedback was written in a largely impersonal tone, was more authoritative in nature and disclosed little about the marker’s own position. These differences suggest a renegotiation of the identities of students and markers at doctorate level. At undergraduate level, there is usually a very clear difference in status and expertise between the staff and student, which is reinforced through the form and language of the feedback genre. However, professional doctoral students often occupy senior positions within the criminal justice sector and have embarked on the programme with the intention of becoming “researching professionals” rather than “professional researchers.” The student may be seeking academic recognition of their existing professional knowledge and experience rather than an apprenticeship to the academy. The language used in the feedback reflects the different nature of the relationship in which knowledge is exchanged rather than simply validated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Mary Lea & Brian Street (2006) argue that the academic literacies approach has both theoretical and practical value—as a heuristic model for understanding literacy practices and as a framework for curriculum development, training programmes and

personal reflection and development. How then can the evidence from this research project inform current practice in approaches to marking and feedback more generally?

Firstly, a close analysis of the feedback that staff give to students can provide useful evidence to monitor and inform assessment practices. Royce Sadler (2005, p. 192) argues that the focus on making assessment criteria transparent is misplaced, because the difficulties in defining terms precisely simply “sets up new verbal terms that in turn call for more elaboration, and so on in infinite regress.” A more productive approach, he suggests, is to identify the norms of the assessment community through a close examination of the nature of, and reasons for, the actual marking decisions made by tutors. Through this inductive process it should be possible to identify and convey to students the standards which are embedded in the tacit knowledge of a particular localised assessment community.

Arguably, however, these strategies may simply reinforce existing patterns of knowledge construction and representation within the academy. A central criticism of the communities of practice approach is that issues of power, authority, and structure tend to be unacknowledged and under-theorized. The approach does not account for how particular groups of students may be excluded or marginalized from the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Romy Clark & Roz Ivanic, 1997; Lillis, 2001) or how dominant literacy practices may serve as a barrier to engagement rather than as a shared resource (Lea, 2005). The development of a more coherent set of shared standards may make for fairer assessment practices, but does not challenge the role of the university in defining and reifying particular forms of literacy practices.

Thus, Lillis (2003) argues for a more radical transformation of pedagogical practice. She uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s work as a theoretical framework through which to argue for a shift away from monologic approaches that privilege the single authoritative voice of the tutor and towards dialogic approaches which include a range of discourses and voices. Practical examples of this approach include: “talkback” rather than feedback on students’ written texts, opening up disciplinary content to a wider range of external interests and influences, and opening up academic writing conventions to new and different ways of knowing. This, she argues, is the crucial step through which an academic literacies approach can shift from a theoretical frame to a pedagogical frame.

A second practical implication of this research relates to staff development. A starting point would be to have course-level or programme-level discussions in relation to establishing what views are in relation to acceptable forms of knowledge and representation practices within the discipline. What sources of knowledge are acceptable within the discipline and is there a preferred hierarchy? For example, should students be looking for theoretical support or to empirical evidence in the first instance? When looking for sources of evidence, are particular types ruled in or out, for example internet sources, or newspapers? This exercise is not necessarily expected to result in a consensus which can apply across all units and disciplines—

it is a rare discipline indeed where a course team would be able to agree on all of these issues. However, it provides the basis upon which to share some of this tacit knowledge with students and to highlight or flag up areas where there might be lack of consensus or certainty.

Another strategy for explicating some of this tacit knowledge would be the analysis of written feedback that is given to students within a particular unit or course. Discourse and/or conversation analysis provides a useful way to identify underlying assumptions and conventions in particular contexts. It provides an opportunity for questioning hegemonic or conventional practices within the discipline and for showing how taken-for-granted practices can be explored and made visible. It also has the advantage of enabling discussions about shared aims and tacit assumptions to be had without identifying or singling out particular members of staff. These practical strategies to uncover some of the tacit knowledge underpinning judgements about marking and feedback might provide valuable information about the norms, conventions and practices of the discipline that can then be shared with students. Alternatively Ann Johns' (1997) work on "students as researchers" suggests a way of getting students to investigate the academic setting in which they are writing and the values and expectations which underlie the texts they are being asked to produce.

In the context of the professional doctorate, the application of the academic literacies approach suggests a number of ways in which feedback and assessment practices could be reviewed. There is evidence of markers encouraging students to reconsider their academic writing practices and in developing different types of feedback relationships. However, the giving of feedback remains a largely private and monologic process and the final assessment—a thesis and viva—is the same as for the traditional doctorate. This might be seen as evidence of what David Scott, Andrew Brown, Ingrid Lunt and Lucy Thorne (2004) see as evidence of a "colonization" model in which dominant academic modes of representing knowledge take precedence over other methods of communication and dissemination. Tom Maxwell (2003) suggests that this is characteristic of "first generation" professional doctorates, which tend to conform to existing institutional doctoral practices. However, as professional doctorates become more established, he suggests that "second generation" doctorates offer a more radical potential to reshape the academic and professional partnerships. This might be reflected in the development of alternative forms of feedback, for example, dialogic feedback within the professional doctorate cohort as a whole; alternative forms of written representations, for example, practice based reports; and alternative forms of assessment, for example, a portfolio of evidence.

CONCLUSION

The example of the professional doctorate shows how an academic literacies approach can connect academic writing and feedback to wider discourses around

knowledge and identity. The analysis of the feedback given on professional doctorates suggests that feedback practices are epistemological, in that they involve judgements about what counts as valid knowledge in the department, discipline or the academy. They are also ideological, in that they are implicated in reinforcing existing patterns of power and privilege. Given the crucial gatekeeping function of marking and feedback, an understanding of how academic staff construct the boundaries of appropriate knowledge and identities and the extent to which they may allow them to be contested, is key to an effective theorization and teaching of academic writing.

CODA: FEEDBACK TO THE AUTHOR FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Jane,

This was an interesting and enjoyable read. However, it was interesting to note that, despite the implied critique of traditional academic writing conventions, this piece was written largely in accordance with those very conventions. So for example, it is written in the third person and you have avoided positioning yourself explicitly in the text. However, your own experience does seem very relevant—you are a member of the course team for the programme which is the focus of the research study and you even wrote some of the feedback that you analyzed as part of the project! I think it might also have been worth mentioning that you completed a professional doctorate yourself and encountered some of the same difficulties in negotiating the boundaries between the professional and the academic with which these students are grappling. Isn't it the case that your identities as course team member, marker and (ex)student will give you a particular perspective on these issues?

The fact that you have found it difficult to write outside the genre (despite the active encouragement of the editors of this volume to do so) illustrates the problems that are likely to be encountered in encouraging changes to deep-seated academic writing practices. A first step may be to set tasks which involve a standard written assignment but which encourage students to provide some interaction of commentary on the text (for example, asking students to write a couple of feedback paragraphs on an assignment; using the comment function to provide commentaries on the text). This allows students to produce conventional academic text but which also enables some engagement with and critique of the processes through which it is produced. Maybe you should consider something similar with this chapter?

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