

The path to prose

Paul McCarthy offers some reflections on supervising writing in a PhD

If I'd had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.

This well-known witticism, apparently uttered by Blaise Pascal, Mark Twain, Victor Meldrew and many others, reflects a counterintuitive thought – writing in a clear and concise fashion can be surprisingly tricky. Poor prose persecuted me during my PhD, intruding in every page I wrote, and it reared its ugly head again recently while supervising my first PhD.

I was entrusted to supervise a PhD student, especially her writing. I set three goals: to learn the guide to good writing, advance my writing skills, and light the path of credible prose for the student. Though English was her second language, she was able in both written and spoken English. Two experienced senior supervisors supported us and we met each week or fortnight during the first year of the student's PhD. What follows are my reflections on teaching and learning about writing a PhD, which is after all an attempt to tell an interesting story on paper. Acknowledging my frailties as a writer, I weave an argument that writing with purpose, clarity and style is an art crafted through practice and dedication.

I had not reflected on writing and its value until I realised that to gain a PhD one has to contribute originally and substantially to knowledge. How could I contribute to knowledge without writing well? After all, in Australia, a written thesis is often the only method to examine a PhD with an optional viva voce

sought by some examiners (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). In the UK, however, a PhD in psychology generally comprises two assessments, a large piece of writing (40,000–80,000 words) and a viva voce. However, some postgraduates struggle to write well (Torrance et al., 1992). Perhaps they assume wrongly that speaking English creates good prose and do not use reflective practice as an anvil on which to hammer out their ideas. In short, to contribute to knowledge, we should reflect on what we write, consider it thoughtfully and honestly answer whether it is the best we could have done.

Reflective practice, a concept introduced by Donald Schön (1983), is a conscious process, to thoughtfully consider experiences and recognise similarities and differences between a novice and skilled equal. In other words, the skills of the novice are assessed relative to the expert in this learning system to enhance the novice's critical and reflective abilities. During the supervision process, supervisors help students to engage in reflective practice, though they may not be conscious of the process. For example, when the supervisor discusses research issues with a student during face-to-face meetings, the student is challenged to 'think on her feet' and respond to questions orally. Afterwards, while the student is writing up her work, she might consider why she said or wrote what she did to develop new ideas and questions about her work. Good writing thrives on these two procedures because reflection forces people to interrogate either

themselves or to create a dialogue between supervisors (i.e. actors), questioning and peeling a person's concept of the world and challenging beliefs in a subject. By questioning and challenging what a person assumes, new paths for learning and greater understanding emerges.

During the supervision process, I consciously and unconsciously examined the practices, values and beliefs of the supervisors to develop my supervisory practice – in this instance, for the practice of writing. The other supervisors and I spoke about the process of writing and explained its value during face-to-face meetings with the student. The student grappled with her first task to explain the aims of her research proposal. Although challenged at first, via comments from the supervisors and advice in annotated scripts as well as her own reflection, she produced a succinct and defined research proposal for the reader. New sections were clearer, more concise and elegant, taking the reader by the hand through the central thread of the proposal. Although she would add the pearls later to show the context, she had the thread holding the beads on the necklace together (Murray, 2004). I was intrigued to know whether a mix of pedagogical strategies or reflective practice alone developed her writing style.

After discussing the research proposal and literature review with the main supervisor, we agreed that the student's work usually needed structural changes to improve the flow and argument. We talked about the structure and meaning of the student's research during face-to-face meetings. The initial draft of the student's literature review lacked certain components of an argument for which we were looking. First, the argument should define and clarify the key issue(s). Second, it should make the writer's position clear. Third, it should expect and respond to the opposition's arguments. Fourth, the writer's arguments should be put in increasing order of importance. Fifth, it should document each argument, and the source of each piece of documentation should be available to the reader (Murray, 2004). Although the student had succeeded in some of these requirements, we felt a better 'story' had yet to emerge, a 'story' that would entertain the reader and explain the value of her research.

That 'story' often only emerges through several revisions. Experienced writers often reflect and reorganise their work, persistently changing its content, striking out what needs removing and revising arguments that do not flow.

references

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Research undertaken among undergraduates and postgraduates in social science demonstrates that postgraduates typically produce more drafts of an assignment before hand-in than do undergraduates (Torrance et al., 1992). However, these drafts mainly contain stylistic but not structural changes: these postgraduates could correct grammatical mistakes, but they did not change the content of the manuscript when it needed changing. That postgraduates differ from both undergraduates and experienced writers in this writing technique implies a developmental change from novice to expert in the writing process. Helping undergraduates and postgraduates to reflect on their writing might develop this skill.

After supervising for five months, we considered reflective practice essential for the student. We analysed her text in face-to-face meetings and prompted her to answer our questions orally. Over time, our questioning gave greater understanding to the student. Greater reading of her subject filled the well from which she could draw her story, but only through writing could that story emerge (Elbow, 1998). The student found the writing process difficult, often dampening her confidence as a budding researcher and writer. She appeared unsure of the reader's needs. Looking through the camera lens, she saw what was important to her and what the topic explored, but not the elements of a structured manuscript for the reader. By exposing examples, we helped the student reach parity in her understanding of the needs of the reader and her writing.

We developed two principles for the student to improve her writing. The first principle was to find a 'voice', and in that voice, clearly explain the topic for the reader. Guided by her written work in face-to-face meetings, the main supervisor would ask, 'What is it you would like to say here?' The student would respond orally, and we would encourage her to write that answer. She could explain what she wanted to write, but her writing time distorted her 'story'. The second strategy involved 'taking her work to court'. In

court, she answered critical questions, supporting her work with research. Using this strategy, she examined the flow of arguments, the support for, and balance to these arguments and her final position that a layperson could understand. Both procedures imbued her writing with confidence, helping her to think critically about each word, its value and weight within her argument.

On reflection, I was aware that I did not have an overall strategy for helping a student to write well, but the building blocks of good prose emerged eventually in the student's writing and for that I was proud. Learning how to write well is a frustrating but fulfilling craft. Only by writing can we truly understand what we want to say. As H.G. Wells said, 'The toil of writing may help to clear and fix many things that remain a little uncertain in my

thoughts because they have never been fully stated and I want to discover any lurking inconsistencies and unsuspected gaps'.

But what advice would I give to someone who wanted to write well or write a lot? I began by collecting books on good writing comprising grammar, style and strategy. To write well, as Donald Murray's (Pulitzer Prize winner, 1954) cardinal rule shows, is to 'apply your behind to a chair'.

Most productive writers use a schedule. For example, a prolific English novelist in the Victorian era, Anthony Trollope, began writing before work each morning at 5.30 and did not indulge himself to sleep any longer. He considered three hours of writing in one day enough for any writer. Many other skilled writers had jobs alongside their writing commitment. Agatha Christie worked in a pharmacy during World War I, which influenced much of her writing career; T.S. Eliot worked in banking. Despite our hectic lives, we can find time to write and perhaps time to write well. You need to be prepared to write when the time to write arrives. And like Ernest Hemingway, you need to 'leave some water in the well'. He finished his work mid-sentence so that when he returned to his work he caught the thread of his thoughts when he last wrote. Peter Elbow (1998) advises to write without focusing on what is written for sets of 15 minutes. This strategy gets something down on paper.

I learned the rules of good writing using my books on grammar and style, and I try in vain to remember these rules when I revise. These books help me write well-constructed sentences and explain how and why these sentences work best. Active verbs replace passive verbs; redundant words cluttering the prose are removed; shorter sentences help paragraphs to flow. I am moving on from 'the cat sat on a mat', trying to remove nominalisations (i.e. nouns derived from verbs or adjectives) from my writing and to show pace, excitement, poise and flair in prose. I encourage you to split the infinitive and 'to boldly go' where some people have gone before. Think about what you want to write and keep your arguments rigorous. 'Longer words' do not mean 'better writer'. Lots of small words mean big things like 'tax', 'love' and 'life' – longer words discombobulate the reader. Now, I 'start' rather than 'commence'; I 'try' rather than 'endeavour' and I 'buy' rather than 'purchase'.

Learning to write well and supervise another's writing has taught me how to write better and teach better. I want to inspire students to write and, like Picasso, 'I don't know if inspiration exists, but when it comes, it usually finds me working'. In my brief experience supervising a PhD, I have learned the value of reflective practice and developed my editing skills and those of the student. I have taken down my antenna for criticism and erected one that welcomes new ideas, clarity, and advice for my writing. To reflect is to be a better writer, and without reflecting on my writing I would have struggled to understand how I could learn from others and, perhaps, them from me.

More than anything else, I am trying to live by a Latin creed, *Nulla dies sine linea* – 'Never a day without a line'. I hope my lines have told my story as I understand it and I leave you with an enduring lesson about good writing drawn from the life of Nobel Prize winning Irish poet and dramatist W.B. Yeats:

...he never allowed his equipment to rust unused. Early and late, he worked at his art strenuously. It is this continued faith in works that in part distinguished him from lesser poets, that and an unusual ability to stay at a poem until it came right. (Bradford, 1965)

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