Redefining Research Writing Support

What are the missing links?

Weronika Gorska
Dr Saima Sherazi
Queen Mary, University of London

Supporting Masters Dissertation and PhD Thesis Writing

The aim of this PIM is to explore the extent to which EAP teachers, Research Skills Trainers and different disciplinary areas can learn from each other by addressing questions such as:

- 7 questions -

1. What are the specific needs of research writers at PhD and Masters levels?
4. At what stages of PhD or Masters research is support for writing most needed?
5. To what extend is support for reading also needed?
Researching Postgraduate Literacies

Key debates in academic literacies
- Transition from school to university (Leung & Street)
- Undergraduate writing (Leung & Street)
- MA essay/dissertation writing (Wingate & Tribble, Kaufhold)
- Writing in English for publication (Lillis & Curry)
- Home/international students’ needs
- Doctoral education (Robinson-Pant & Street, Costley)

Our interest/Research area(s)
- Becoming a research writer:
  - What does ‘being a writer’ entail for doctoral students?
  - What support provision is offered by the departments?
  - What are ‘the real needs’ of research students?
  - Should research writing support take into account different stages of a PhD?
  - How do PhD students transform reading into writing?
QMUL research writing training

In-Sessional Language Centre Provision:

- Research Writing Workshops (since 2011/12)
  10 weeks, 1 day workshop
- 1:1 tutorials
  by appointment
- Critical Thinking and Writing in Law (MA only)
  term 2 – 10 week course;
  term 3 – 1:1 tutorials - by appointment
Research Writing Workshops

- See hand-out for the Scheme of Work

- 10 week course (Autumn & Winter Terms)
- Two pathways: Social Sciences, Science & Engineering

- Home & International Students on PhD & Masters Programmes

- Fully booked within days of being available
  - Consistent attendance (week 1-5)
  - Varied attendance (week 6-9)
  - Drop in numbers (week 10)

- Materials adapted from:
Theoretical Perspectives

- Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998)
  - The centrality of identity in academic writing
  - The impact of power relations on students writing
  - Contested nature of academic writing conventions
  - Requirement to switch writing styles and genres
  - Writing as ideologically inscribed knowledge construction

- Ethnographic-style research:
  - adopting an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloome, 1997: 183)

'Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally'

(Brewer, 2000: 10)
Research design

Data Collection
- End of term questionnaires (done)
- Interviews (done)
- Tutor/group discussion (to be done in the Summer)

Research Participants
- RWWs students – Winter term 2013
  Questionnaire Sample
  - 10 students (home & international)
  Interview Sample
  - 5 in total, including 4 ‘expert’ speakers (Rampton, 1990: 98)
- 2 course tutors

Data Analysis
- Stage 1: Content analysis (initial stage)
- Stage 2: Discourse analysis
Questionnaire Data

- See hand-out for the Questionnaire

- 4 open-ended questions
- Final session of the RWW (late March 2013)
- 10 respondents → 9 questionnaires

Themes:
1. Writing divorced from disciplinary research training
2. Writing as an essential need
3. Continuous, assessment focused writing support
4. Scaffolding research reading for research writing
### Q1: Research Training
#### Theme 1: Writing divorced from disciplinary research training

**Departmental training**

- No formal training
- Workshops on software applications
- PhD requirements for scientists
- Lab equipment / machines used in experiments
- Research methods & methodology
- Training sessions run by senior PhD students
- Writing skills training (S6)
- Supervision meetings (only one student mentions this!)
- Group seminars with other PhD students
- Weekly seminars in year 1 – focused on different aspects of a PhD (e.g. research questions, viva,)

**Outside of departments**

1. **Learning Institute**
   - Managing your PhD
   - Speed reading
   - Critical thinking
2. **Language Centre**
   - Research Writing Workshops (RWWs)

**Other Universities**

- Lab training / software applications
Research Writing Workshops

Steve

‘The RWW has really complemented my training by filling in some gaps. Specifically, discussing the literature review sections helped me learn how to read critically and quickly, and making outlines for each chapter has helped me to consolidate my thoughts.’

Rachel & Andy

‘RWW has complemented the other class reading and comprehension have been covered as the use of metatext and document structure’
Q2: Specific needs of PhD writers

Theme 2: Writing as an essential need

Ann
‘Needs:
- To be taken step by step through the process of writing
- To receive feedback throughout the process identifying how to improve the work and what to focus on in the future to improve it.
- Research training needs to be complemented with writing & reading training – a PhD is very different to other forms of research writing & knowing the requirements is not enough. You need to be taught what they are in practice. ‘
Q2: Specific needs of PhD writers

Departmental support

- Only one student commented on this:
  
  S8: ‘No writing specific training at departmental level – would be good to have in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} year.’

RWW input

- Rachel & Andy
  ‘The department has not addressed this however they did provide the RWW which covered the requirements.’
Q3: Stages of PhD writing support

Theme 3: Continuous, assessment focused writing support

Ann
- ‘The support needs to be relevant to the stage & level of the PhD process.
- It should be continuous with a focus on the stage of a PhD (e.g., Year 1 – an intro to the viva to know what you are heading towards.
- Year 3 – more detail of what the viva is what to do in preparation, etc.
- Year 1 an introduction to the PhD, getting to think about research & the research questions. The importance of noting citations, etc…
- Year 2 more focus on the writing process.
- Year 3 – more focus on how to finalise the PhD, etc….’
Q4: Reading support

Theme 4: Scaffolding research reading for research writing

Steve:
‘I’ve always struggled with being a very slow and methodical reader, I like to understand everything I’m reading, at the time of reading. But this is not possible with the volume of literature you have to read for your PhD thesis. Some very useful tips were given in the RWW on how to skim read - be reading the introductions and conclusions and the 1st sentence of each paragraph. Other than this I have not received any help with working with literature and I think this is one area where it would be greatly appreciated. I think support on how to read critically, what to take away from reading a paper and how to organise what you are reading and how it links together, would all be very helpful. ‘
Interview Data

See hand-out for the Interview Questions

- 7 open-ended questions
- Late June 2013
- 5 respondents in total
  - 4 case studies (questionnaire & interview) with ‘expert’ speakers
  - Steve, Rachel, Andy, Ann

Themes:
1. Writing divorced from disciplinary research training
2. Writing as an essential need
3. Continuous, assessment focused writing support
4. Scaffolding research reading for research writing
5. Awareness of structure and content of individual chapters
6. Awareness of research ‘Voice’ in writing
7. Periodic cycles of writing support need
Interviews (1)

Theme 1- Writing divorced from disciplinary research training
Rachel:
‘It won’t focus necessarily on your research area because it encompasses the whole of the condensed matter group. So I have learnt about techniques like MMR that I won’t probably use but because people in our group do we have learnt about it’.

About the RWW course Rachel says:
‘We were told that we should go on it but we didn’t have to if we didn’t we wouldn’t fail our progression’.
Interviews (2)

Theme 2 - Writing as an essential need
Ann:
‘helped me critically evaluate my work; helped me finish...certainly helped me refine my work... at the end of the day you are critically evaluating what exists...

Theme 3 - Continuous, assessment focused writing support
Andy:
‘main purpose served is checks and balances...to make sure students know what they are doing.’

Theme (3 and) 4 - Scaffolding research reading for research writing
Steve:
‘Current model is good but with more reading and writing support thrown in.’
Interviews (3)

Theme 5 - Content and structure
Ann:
‘...because I came from a research background having worked in NGOs I thought I didn’t need any research skills but writing a PhD is so different. ‘The way a PhD is written is very different to anything you’d ever write.’

Theme 6 - Research ‘Voice’ in writing
Ann:
‘...it is different in terms of the ‘voice’ as well, in which it is written... It is that difference between Academic writing and real life...’

Theme 7 - On the need for cycles of writing support
Ann:
‘ your thinking changes... Introduction changes... writing changes’
Initial Findings

Students’ needs are best catered for when research support:

1. Combines both disciplinary focus and study skills provision
2. Is offered in critical stages of doctoral degree, e.g. before an upgrade, writing-up and final submission
3. Builds writing skills on reading

What are the missing links?
Q&A

In your experience:

1. What are the specific needs of research writers at PhD and Masters levels?
4. At what stages of PhD or Masters research is support for writing most needed?
5. To what extend is support for reading also needed?