

https://dspace.org/

Writing-centred supervision for postgraduate students

Chamberlain, Cheryl

2016

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20788

Chamberlain, Cheryl (2016) Writing-centred supervision for postgraduate students, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20788>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

WRITING-CENTRED SUPERVISION FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Thesis submitted by

Cheryl Chamberlain

In fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD

Faculty of Humanities

University of the Witwatersrand

April 2016

Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a considerable increase in research which centres on postgraduate supervision and research supervision has recently changed significantly (Grant, 2010; Walker, 2010; McCallin and Nayar, 2012). For some time postgraduate pedagogy has taken a lesser role in supervision practice compared with the role of supervisor as researcher. More recently supervision pedagogy has taken a more central role in the supervision debates and there is recognition of research teaching as a necessary and sophisticated skill (Grant, 2010; Walker, 2010; McAlpine and Amundsen, 2011). This shift in doctoral training away from viewing the thesis as a product to a pedagogy of training has resulted in a growing field of interest in postgraduate research writing. The emphasis on the research supervision role is beginning to acknowledge the work on postgraduate academic writing (Caffarella and Barnett, 2000; Kumar and Stracke, 2007; Aitchison and Lee, 2010; Catterall et al., 2011; McCallin and Nayar, 2012; Lee and Murray, 2015). However, for many supervisors writing is still seen as 'marginal or ancillary' to the real work of research and consequently there is very little research that 'opens out the complexity of PhD writing practice' (Kamler and Thomson, 2001, 6). This research, located in two disciplines in a Science faculty in a research-intensive university in South Africa, provides a local perspective on supervision pedagogy and research writing in a Science Faculty.

In this thesis, research writing is seen as contextualized social practice in that supervision and writing practices have implications for the development of individual research writers. Within the institution there is little discussion between supervisors or between supervisors and their postgraduate students around research writing. There needs to be sensitivity to the disparate needs of individual students in the context of their research writing. Historically in the context of this thesis, this related to opening up academic literacy practices to historically disadvantaged undergraduate students, but more recently has widened to include all students, including postgraduate students. It has become increasingly important to find out what the writing challenges and practices are for postgraduate students and their supervisors, not only by focusing on their research texts but also by critically engaging with written feedback given to these students as they struggle to engage with the academic discourse of the institution.

This research employs a qualitative approach to investigate the flow of events and processes related to the writing aspect of supervision and the perceptions and reported experiences of both postgraduate students and their supervisors. The thesis considers how participants understand these using a case study approach, consisting of eleven pairs of supervisors their Masters and doctoral students. A variety of data sources are employed including interviews with the participants, and drafts of student writing with written feedback from supervisors.

Some aspects of supervision and postgraduate research writing remain hidden from view as these practices are intensely personal, revolving around the identities of those taking part and power relations which centre on both the relationship between co-supervisors and the supervisor-student relationship. This thesis puts forward a new model of co-supervision i.e. a writing-centred co-supervision model with a content supervisor and a writing supervisor *both located within the discipline.* This co-supervision model allows the writing co-supervisor to provide a 'safe space' in the writing process for the student. Significantly issues of power between the co-supervisors remain inherent in this model of co-supervision and thus research writing remains to a large extent on the margins of academic work.

A further finding relates to the research writing issues identified by supervisors and/or postgraduate students mainly linked to positioning viz. structure; coherence; argument and flow; voice; and audience. There is little pre-thinking about the process of assisting postgraduate students to write. Despite the identification of some writing issues (either by supervisors and /or students), these are not always linked to *strategies t*o enable students to overcome their writing difficulties. The analysis shows that the majority of these relate to the *process* of research writing and *positioning issues* (argument, voice, and audience). Furthermore these strategies are not always made explicit when supervisors work with students and surprisingly there is little match between those suggested by supervisors and those utilised by their students.

Central to this research is the nature of written feedback given to postgraduate students. Supervisors' knowledge of their written feedback practices is critical. The diverse feedback practices of the supervisors are uncovered using a new analytic feedback framework illustrating a continuum of feedback practices varying from big

picture feedback; superficial surface-level feedback; and a combination of the two – mixed feedback. An analysis of the findings show that the majority of the supervisors use mixed feedback as their modus operandi. It is suggested that a shared meta-language regarding feedback would allow supervisors to open a space for an improved feedback dialogue both with their colleagues *and* with their postgraduate research students.