Title:

Pedagogy of feedback on student academic writing: research supervisor practices for the end of the research degree candidature.

Abstract:
All academic writing is advanced with the benefit of feedback about the writing. In the case of the academic writing genres of the research proposal and the dissertation, feedback is usually provided by the research supervisor. Given that academic writing development is a process, and in the case of the research proposal and dissertation, writing which develops over time, it seems likely that the nature of feedback on drafts written early in the candidature may be different from feedback provided by the research supervisor later in a student's candidature.

When a research supervisor has been reading a student's writing over a period of time, their own familiarity with the writing generates a risk to their ability to provide critical and objective feedback. Particularly by the end of a student's candidature, the research supervisor's familiarity with the work may cause them to miss elements of writing improvement.

The author, as a research supervisor, has developed a feedback grid to facilitate feedback on the final drafts of a dissertation. This feedback grid is generated by the embedded promises in the early sections of the dissertation, which are then used to audit the content of the final sections of the dissertation to ascertain whether promises made have been fulfilled. This provides a strategy for the research supervisor to step back from the work and read the dissertation with the agenda of a dissertation examiner.

The grid is one strategy within a broader pedagogy of providing feedback on writing samples.

Biog
Dr Geof Hill has been providing research supervisor professional development at Queensland University of Technology since 2000. His own post doctoral practice led research has focused on the ways in which graduate students develop their understandings of the academic writing genres of the research proposal and the dissertation. He has advanced the proposition that research supervision is pedagogy and that in the case of academic writing involves a range of feedback giving strategies.

Introduction

This paper addresses a very specific aspect of academic writing.
In the light of the conference theme – The role of student experience in shaping academic writing development in higher education – I am specifically focusing on the experiences of higher education research students, and the way in which feedback from their research supervisor helps to develop their academic writing.

This context reflects certain assumptions.

The predominant genre of academic writing for higher education research students is the dissertation, and while this is a genre in its own right, it also contains another academic writing genre of the literature review.

Many research students develop their craft of academic writing in the context of the research proposal - a third genre of academic writing which also contains a literature review. The research proposal provides a foundation text for the dissertation and is supplemented with the research data, the analysis of that data and the conclusions raised by the investigation.

Viewing dissertation writing from this perspective suggests three stages in the development of a dissertation.

1. The development of the research proposal through which a research student builds their academic writing craft.
2. The middle stage, in which the research student is progressing the main thrust of their investigation and (hopefully) concurrently writing about their investigation in a range of developing chapters.
3. The final stages of candidature, the commencement of which is signified by the coming together of the variety of documents (chapters) into a draft dissertation.

The development of the dissertation and of the student's craft in academic writing is supported by feedback from their research supervisor[1]. In addition to this, the initial phase of candidature may also involve assistance in academic writing in the form of scaffolding[2], to help a research student begin the onerous task of writing a research proposal and subsequent dissertation.

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[1] Research supervision is the predominant teaching method by which a research student learns how to do research and how to write about research. This relationship has a provenance linked to the Master and Apprentice relationships of the medieval guilds, but in contemporary universities, the relationship has become more equitable. The provenance also extends to pedagogue relationships from Ancient Greece. In modern times, the one-on-one relationship of supervisor-student has given way to models of multiple supervisors for a single student, multiple students for a single supervisor, and the supervisor and student located in different geography and connected only by technology, but, despite these variations, the learning within the relationship is still predominantly based on a dialogue between the supervisor and their student. Part of this dialogue is the feedback that a research supervisor provides for the student on samples of their academic writing.

[2] Vergotsky's (1962) notion of 'scaffolding' involves a complex task being broken into simpler less complex tasks. One such example applicable to academic writing is Brown's (1994) set of questions which assist a student in the development of their research proposal. Brown (1994) compared this model to what he described as learning academic writing by 'osmosis', and suggested that this – 'osmosis'- was the way in which many research supervisors assisted students by simply instructing them to read research literature.

Feedback giving

All academic writing can be advanced with the benefit of feedback about the writing. Providing feedback on writing serves many different functions within the development of any academic writing genre.

- ➢ It can simply correct errors in writing.
- ➢ It can be used to alert students to the requirements of a particular genre of writing.
- ➢ It can also be a device to generate the student's critical thinking, and through this to improve the quality of their writing

(Hill, 2011).

As a research supervisor provides feedback on samples of the student's writing, they are in essence making explicit the criteria by which their dissertation will be examined (Hill, 2007), itself a research supervision pedagogy.

In this paper I am suggesting an additional role of feedback giving; one which draws on the supervisors understanding of the examination process and which involves providing feedback to the research student about the coherence of the arguments presented in the dissertation. This type of feedback can only be provided in the final stages of research student candidature.

Feedback in the final phase of candidature

The final phase of candidature is signaled by bringing together different sections of the dissertation into a complete draft dissertation. The challenge for this stage is to present a coherent extended argument. Ideally, by this time, the student will have enjoyed a long history of involvement with their supervisor, receiving consistent feedback on their samples of academic writing.

In my experience, this lengthy relationship also brings with it a dilemma. As the research supervisor has been reading drafts of the research student's academic writing and providing feedback, they become familiar with the overall argument of the research student's dissertation. This familiarity, a positive outcome of a good working relationship between the research student and their supervisor, also means that the research supervisor can become too familiar with the work such that they are unable to read it objectively. As with familiarity with any text, it is harder to identify problems because the mind fills in what might be seen by a less familiar reader to be absences.

To this end, and in my own research supervision practice, I have devised a process to facilitate objectivity for the research supervisor as they read their student's writing and enhance the type of feedback being provided by the

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My own work with students undertaking practice-based research has developed a form of scaffolding for the research proposal (Hill, 2008).

research supervisor on the research student's work. This process is based on several assumptions about research and about the writing of the dissertation.

1. Research is intended to make a contribution to knowledge such that a reader of a dissertation can reasonably expect that by the end of the dissertation it will be clear to them where that contribution has been made.

2. The early chapters of a dissertation contain 'promises' of what is to come in the later text. For example, **the abstract**, by definition provides a summary of the overall study and often forewarns about the sorts of conclusions that the research expects to emerge from the study; When a student argues for a particular **methodology** they provide insights into what can be claimed as a truth and thus create expectations about how conclusions might be reached in the final stages of the dissertation.

3. Sometimes these signposts of what is to come are more deeply embedded. The way in which an issue is framed in the early stages of the dissertation also sets up expectations as to the direction a candidate might undertake in pursuing the investigation.

   For example, a student who writes that one of the key pieces of literature cited has expressed a concern that there is a space for contributions to knowledge in a key aspect of the literature about the topic, is foreshadowing that the dissertation under examination is likely to attempt to fill that identified void.
   Another example of embedded expectations is when a student discusses the problems associated with their particular methodology and also provides the ground work to later argue that the way in which they have addressed these problems presents a contribution to the knowledge about the particular methodology.

These assumptions and foreshadowing of the argument are not always evident to the writer, as they are immersed in their writing; nor are they necessarily evident to the research supervisor, who with many readings of the work becomes familiar with the work, sometimes to the point of loosing the critical edge necessary for providing feedback on the writing. My awareness of these expectations has come from my parallel work as a dissertation examiner. I have often made the comment in my examiner's report that that what was presented in the abstract was not realized, or what was promised as methodology was not carried through.

In addition to the expectations about the study that are embedded in the work there are also more general expectations by way of the work being research. By definition, research makes a contribution to knowledge. Sometimes, in addition to the contribution to the knowledge related to the issue under investigation, the research student also makes a contribution to knowledge related to the investigative methodology.

A good case in point would be the case of practice-led research. Gray (2006,6) suggests that "real situations [are] usually complex and changing, requiring flexibility, responsiveness and improvisation". If a candidate has devised ways to address this complexity they are potentially making a contribution to the knowledge about practice-led research.

Finally, university based research is often hampered by the limitations of the study and it is often the case that a final chapter also reveals ongoing questions that the study was not able to address and which may be picked up by other investigators.

These assumptions and expectations can be presented as a grid:

		Page and paragraph	Page and paragraph
1	The contribution to the thrust of the investigation		
2	The contribution to the practice of undertaking research.		
3	contribution to a particular methodology (Sometimes)		
4	Future directions		

As a supervisor reads the final draft of the dissertation they can add substance to these generic qualities, citing the particular pages in the dissertation in which the candidate has elaborated on expectations about the dissertation. This produces a list of reader expectations about the dissertation which acts as an audit trail as the supervisor is reading the paragraphs in the final chapter of the dissertation.

For example a discussion in the final chapter about the ways in which the candidate struggled with the methodology can be noted in the third section of the grid as a contribution to the particular methodology. This way a supervisor can audit whether the student has made a claim about this contribution to knowledge in their final chapters.

That is not to say that every possible reader expectation needs to be met by the writer, but recognizing these possible gaps can provide a research student with important feedback about where to boost their concluding chapter. Such feedback also enables the student to write their dissertation in such a way as to make it easier for an examiner to read it.

This feedback can be provided to the student by way of the grid or may simply form the basis for a face-to-face discussion about their final draft.

One person's practice does not always easily translate into another person's practice, so this paper is presented in the tone of being generative rather than generalisable. It is intended to act as a catalyst for further reflection and consideration about the general practice of research supervision and the specific practice of providing feedback to research students on their final draft dissertation

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