

## **‘There are more questions than answers and the more I find out, the less I know’: dilemmas in qualitative educational research.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses my attempts to conduct postmodern Foucauldian doctoral research into academic writing and writing development practices in higher education as a research-practitioner, whilst continuing to satisfy the conventions of academic writing and scholarship. In particular I want to share some of the dilemmas that I have encountered as part of my research. These dilemmas relate to many contemporary issues circulating in educational research; not least the validity, reliability, purpose and value of qualitative educational research and the role of the educational researcher/practitioner. I not only analyse and critique the practices around academic writing and writing development in higher education using a qualitative research paradigm, but also analyse and critique the values and assumptions which underpin the qualitative research itself. As such I have been engaged in an overt but necessary struggle with a plethora of contextual and personal factors which are experienced, but not always acknowledged, in any educational research project.*

**Key words:** Qualitative educational research, postmodernism, academic literacies, Foucault, role of educational researcher, writing development practices

### **Introduction**

I argue, in my PhD, the research that forms the basis for this paper, that all human activity is a form of practice and that individual experiences and concepts of epistemology (knowing or knowledge) are inextricably linked to particular settings or communities and the specific practices that individuals enact within them (Wenger, 1998). I came to this conclusion, in the earlier pilot stages of the study, when I formed the view that although researching practices in education, such as academic writing and writing development, I did not have to justify myself through any application of that research for the purpose of improvement to practice (although traditionally funding criteria

anticipates that it will). Rather, I became increasingly determined to recast the purpose of my research. It became much more about encouraging myself, in my role as educational researcher, to enter into a dialogue with colleagues (and to encourage dialogue between themselves as a fellow practitioners); in order to expand and problematise, not only the issues around academic writing practices that were the focus of the research, but the practice itself of educational research writing and the process of being both researcher and researched. It was by critiquing and foregrounding the relationship between my theoretical approaches and their links to research processes and practices that I began construct a more situated and discursively based understanding of the educational practices and educational research processes I was engaged in researching.

Traditionally, qualitative, case study research conducted by practitioners tends to be aimed at 'improving practice'. This was certainly the premise with which I embarked on my PhD. However, I soon discovered that taking 'improvement' as the main aim of my research was limiting and ultimately pointless, or rather, not really the point of doing the research. My thesis is a case study, theorised within a postmodern, poststructural paradigm which involves a deliberate deconstruction of many of the methodologies involved in traditional qualitative educational research. As part of my broader reflexive postmodern ontological stance I also want to question, how educational researchers, who are often working within a broadly qualitative or interpretative approach to exploring educational practice, can ever be said to create 'new' knowledge from their research? I focus, in my research, more on critiquing many of the dominant theories underpinning processes of educational research than the perceived outcomes of any such research. As Winter writes;

Theory cannot simply be derived from data, but it is always the outcome of a process in which researchers must explore, organise and integrate their own and others' theoretical resources as an interpretive response to data (1989: 261)

Taking such a postmodern approach to an educational research issue like academic writing and writing development practices in higher education cannot but produce a multiplicity of meanings and corresponding open-endedness which often leads critics of postmodernism to complain about a lack of certainty, clarity and focus. I feel, however, it is only fair to state at this early point in the article, that my PhD is deliberately, even defiantly, ontologically doubtful and uncertain. Indeed, critiquing the idea of an epistemological position of certainty is an important part of my postmodern methodological process (Schwandt, 2007). I maintain a postmodern respect for uncertainty (Usher & Edwards, 1994); because I believe that the process of educational research that I am engaged in *is* uncertain. For me the epistemes generated by educational issues such as, academic writing and writing development, are always in process or flux. In the same way the

subjects involved in educational research, in my study, lecturers, have subjectivities which are always changing and developing although they remain culturally specific, and power-inscribed (Kincheloe, 2001; Lincoln, 2001). I feel I have no option therefore but to be suspicious of any kind of methodological prescription or dogma.

### **Subject or subjectivities**

Butler's work (1993, 1990) reminds us, like Said (1978), that the unitary, centered subject is a product of Western culture; like the agency of certain individuals or groups it can appear natural and inevitable. Agency is closely associated with modernist notions of individual autonomy which argue that power appears to be embodied in actors or individuals who can make decisions, carve out their own identities and determine their own value systems. An important question raised by the concept of habitus and Foucauldian theories of discourse is the relative absence of agency they suggest. In this sense both theories signal a shift away from a modernist 'philosophy of consciousness' characterised by a belief in reason and the systematic development of concrete forms of knowledge, towards postmodern, 'social epistemologies' which promote more tentative epistemological concepts. The former approach is 'subject-centered' whilst the latter seeks to de-center the individual subject and replace it with the idea of multiple, discursively constituted subjectivities.

Decentering the subject's agency in this way is central to a postmodern ontological position because forces and examination of how a seemingly autonomous senses of 'self', as well as a subjugated 'self', can be legitimated discursively. Butler notes that powerful subjects, (actors/players) can simultaneously embody and reify the effects of power whilst obscuring those (1993). In her analysis of 'self' Butler (1990) uses a Foucauldian concept of power which concentrates on how discursive power can appear to manifest itself emotionally as a sense of individual power and autonomy, although for Foucault, concepts of individuality are both disciplining and productive of power (1980). This is because discourse not only positions how individual's act, think, or feel, but how they are perceived as they do so in the wider social spheres they inhabit which place them in positions of power or powerlessness.

Once again it is useful to draw on Foucault's concept of genealogy which he describes as

...a form of history which can account for the constitution of Knowledge's, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs its empty sameness throughout the course of history (1980:117).

Foucault's genealogical 'histories' are histories of how individuals, although constructed through discursive fields which have developed out of social

interaction and practices (as discussed above) are nonetheless not reducible to those patterns. Holland and Lave address this issue in one way through their concept of habitus as a kind of 'history in person' (2001); a term that echoes Foucault's concept of the 'historicisation of the subject' (1980). Bartlett and Holland situate such 'histories in person' inside what they call 'figured worlds of literacy' to suggest ways in which individuals create what they call 'identities in practice' through language and literacy (2002). This idea suggests that individuals, like the lecturers who have taken part in this study, may seek to actively construct themselves in a particular way within a figured world, in this case, the academy, and that social positioning of this type becomes part of their habitus. Like Butler's notions of 'performativity' (1997) these 'identities in practice' are created by individuals and enacted through language and literacy which position and realise the individual within the wider discursive 'space of practices' that they inhabit. In higher education, for example, this process may involve individuals consciously positioning or projecting themselves as 'lecturer'; however, they may also simultaneously be constituted in their professional field of activity as a 'journal contributor' and 'learner'.

There is no fixed or singular identity created through this notion of agency, or the adoption of 'identities in practice'. Nor are these agentic identities in any sense more 'real' than discursively constituted ones. Moreover, I would argue that movement between any potential forms of identity takes place in transitional spaces and will often result in new hybrid, possibly transient and provisional 'ways of being'. It is not possible therefore to predict which actions or identities will emerge from discourse where contingent and politically strategic power relations affect individual habitus and identity formation in infinitely different ways. There is always the possibility of completely new, often hybrid forms and practices emerging not just the kind of endless social reproduction suggested, some would argue, by a simplistic application of Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

My weaving of agency, discourse and habitus in my PhD acknowledges the regulatory function and a priori status of discourse but argues for more fluid, liminal notions of identity, and habitus. This, in turn reflects the hybridity and multiplicity of academic writing practices and identities in higher education. There is, additionally, an important point to be made about how discourses, in powerful social institutions like universities, discipline, regulate and normalise certain kinds of identities. Insisting, conversely, on the mutability and underpinning power-relations of discursively constituted identities is, I would argue, an important tool for problematising and resisting them.

In my PhD, I treat the epistemes generated by social situated educational practices, such as, academic writing and writing development, as discursively constructed and therefore always in process or flux. Similarly, myself (as researcher) and the subjects who participated in my research have subjectivities which are always changing and developing although they remain

culturally specific, and power-inscribed (Kincheloe, 2001; Lincoln, 2001). I feel I have no option therefore, but to be suspicious of any kind of methodological prescription or dogma about the certainty of any conclusions that I choose to draw from my research into my participants and their academic writing practices.

### **Researching practice and practising research?**

As a consequence of thinking about ontology for my PhD methodology section, I became increasingly critical of the traditional distinctions and spaces often drawn between the subjectivities of the researcher (who is also a practitioner); their 'subjects' (who are also practitioners) and the practices being enacted/ researched simultaneously. As a consequence I abandoned all pretence of objectivity and neutrality in my research. Instead I focused more on critiquing many of the dominant epistemologies underpinning the processes of educational research, than the perceived outcomes of any such research. As Ball writes:

Absence of theory leaves the researcher prey to the unexamined, unreflexive preoccupations and dangerously naïve ontological and epistemological a prioris.... (Ball, 1995:265-6)

Ball is concerned here with any individual educational researcher's place within the wider debate about educational research that Scott termed the "epistemological crisis" (1995: 174) of higher education and which many postmodernists have identified as a "crisis of representation". I took issue with Hamersley's "two-worlds" theory" (2002: 61) where practice and research are viewed as fundamentally different activities taking place in very different worlds. My research approach challenges this view, as I would argue that that even highly theoretical educational research, such as my own, can be viewed as a form of professional practice. Research, after all, does help constitute educational studies as a legitimate academic discipline.

Street (2003) talks of how applying theoretical frameworks such as social and situated theories about language and literacy to mainstream educational practices is difficult but necessary as such theories can help explore the 'hidden' power relations operating within educational settings or as Bartlett and Holland (2002) called them, "figured worlds". Figured worlds are the theoretically constructed "socially produced and culturally constructed realm(s) of interpretation" (p.6) which inform their research framework. I view my research setting as one such 'figured world', and like Bartlett & Holland, (2002) I am committed in my research to link the practices around academic writing and writing development in my specific case study setting, to broader social theories such as sociocultural history, social practice theory and Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1991).

With this in mind I felt that Pring's distinction between knowledge and practice as outcomes of research is difficult precisely because it is impossible to separate the theoretical from the practical in the 'lived world' of higher education in my research setting (2000). Indeed, Tight (2003) links the expansion of educational research into many different aspects of professional practice with the growth of the higher education sector over the last 30 years and argues that the role of researcher should be more integrated with and collaborative in practice than it often is. He argues, moreover, that it is often difficult to maintain a clear gap between research and practice. This reflects my view that they are inherently muddled. This muddling, I suggest, can be viewed as a positive consequence of the close personal connection that many practitioners-researchers have with their research focus and their subjects of research; producing what Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley, (2003) call "new ways of connecting *what we know* through research with *what we do* in ...education." (p.265). Italics in the original.)

Maclure describes how writing is the established, authoritative vehicle for autonomous self-expression throughout Western culture (2006). This is nowhere more obvious than in higher education, where academic forms of writing are the primary vehicle for the articulation of and performance of socially prestigious academic 'expertise'. Academic writing's especial significance to the academy, means that it can be treated as a site through which discourses of power, knowledge and pedagogies of learning within higher education can be explored and challenged. This, I felt, would be an interesting starting point for my PhD. Like my research participants, I am a lecturer working in higher education and I am very conscious of the fact that lecturers are constantly experiencing academic writing practices as students, as professional writers (of teaching materials, conference papers, journal articles and books), as researchers, readers and as lecturers. The resulting 'bricolage' of ideas, opinion, values and beliefs around academic writing in higher education are complex and complicating: well-suited I feel, to a postmodern ontology which encourages the crossing of discipline boundaries and utilisation of multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks such as New Literacy Studies (NLS) which is just one aspect of a wider 'social turn' in the social sciences away from individuals towards social interaction and social practices (Gee, 1996).

By using a multidisciplinary theoretical framework like New Literacy Studies (NLS) in my research I can treat literacy practices as one aspect of the inevitable complexity informing educational experiences and settings. Consequently I analyse my participants' practices and identities as lecturers around academic writing and writing development "with an eye to the ways in which historical and social forces have shaped a person's linguistic habitus and thus impinges upon that person's actions in the moment." (Bartlett & Holland, 2002: 6)

Early exponents of NLS such as Gee (1996), and Street (1998) argued that higher education writing practices produce and value particular kinds of writing, which are reified through contextually specific writing discourses and communities. Gee, (2004); Coles & Hall, (2001); Hamersley, (2002); Erickson & Gutierrez, (2002) and Street (2003) have also produced work which argues that applying theoretical frameworks, such as social and situated theories about language and literacy, to mainstream educational practices is difficult but necessary, as such theories can help explore the 'hidden' power relations operating within a variety of educational settings. In my thesis, I develop NLS ideas and use them to explore the relationship between individual perceptions, (including my own) and wider social/institutional discourses around academic writing and writing practices in higher education. Using such an approach academic writing practices emerge as the locus for a complex range of emotions, pressures, power relationships that Foucault characterises as 'discursive enunciations' (1980).

### **Data or Doubt?**

The discovery that there is a crisis of representation in educational research was for me liberating, precisely because it created a space to question the established epistemes and ways of knowing that underpin much educational practice and research. Drawing on the work of Stronach & Morris, (1994) I would like to suggest that a failure to question what qualitative educational research is for, can result in the researcher becoming complicit in the more 'conformative' ways of evaluating and valuing research which the on-going commodification of education has produced. This conformity undermines the potential for educational researchers to question and ultimately challenge taken for granted assumptions about what their research can or could be, beyond the strictures of the current overwhelmingly 'performative culture' of higher education and the output/impact driven funding of educational research in higher education. My PhD is about academic writing and writing development in higher education and it is itself an act of academic writing and writing development in higher education. In this sense I am engaged in what Scott and Usher call 'the textuality of research'. And I agree with them when they assert that in research, ".how the text is written is just as important as what it is about." (999:155)

Choices made about how my study was to be written up were made deliberately as a part of an ontological stance that seeks to resist closure. In that sense the whole study is best regarded as a historically situated reflective analysis that simultaneously embodies past and future and present perceptions of writing and writing development in higher education. Its design draws on Ricoeur's (1984) notion of 'phenomenological time' and as such it has no simple narrative trajectory composed of a chronological beginning, middle and end. My research narrative and use of my respondents' narratives are not designed to produce a fixed or even explicable picture of the participants (lecturers' in higher education) perceptions (of writing and writing

development). Drawing on Ricoeur's theories about research, I do not feel that it is a problem that as my participants' perceptions remain 'ambiguous, mysterious, discordant and confused'. Rather, as I argue in my methodology chapter I feel that acknowledging this from the start creates 'a deepened appreciation of the unknowable' which is for me one of the main purposes of educational research (Ricoeur, 1984 in Erben (ed.) 1998)

The position I have taken does, I feel, challenge dominant educational research approaches, which are all about trying to get to 'know' the subject of the research more clearly as a consequence of the research. To help me distinguish my research outcomes I draw on Bruner's idea of two, distinct kinds of knowing which are 'logico-scientific' (or 'paradigmatic') and 'narrative'. In defiance of traditional Western positivist research paradigms I deliberately refuse, when analysing the dialogue with practitioners occasioned by this research, to prioritise the former way of knowing over the latter (1986; 1996). Ontologically speaking therefore, I do not see the end point of my questioning of participants to be discovering any 'real' or 'new' empirical meanings 'or patterns to lecturers' and students' perceptions about writing and writing development. My analysis of the narratives elicited from my sample group of lecturers is valuable because they reveal how discussing writing and writing development leads inevitably to discussions about the nature of knowledge and the exercise of cultural power in higher education. Through this process of re-presentation, my research problematises the 'givenness' and resulting invisibility that has cloaked writing and writing development in higher education in order to open up what Bernstein called "... new possibilities, new assemblies, new ways of seeing..." (1996:185).

Reay (2004) suggests that Bourdieu underestimated the importance of individual reflexivity and reflection and the role they play in forming 'dispositions around practice'. Like MacLure (2006), Reay looks at ways in which 'practice inevitably operates at an unconscious level unless disturbed by events that cause self-questioning' (2004). In this sense my PhD is an attempt to elucidate some radicalised meanings which may help others to think about the issue of academic writing and writing development in higher education more deeply. As a postmodern researcher I prefer, like Foucault (1980), to define the role or identity of the qualitative educational researcher as an interpreter of meaning, rather than one who discovers new knowledge. I am aware that this approach problematises not only the role of the researcher but what is researched and how it is researched. For this reason, throughout my PhD, I am mindful of the power relationships within the discursive landscapes I traverse and am hopeful that this study is part of a wider debate about the potential of educational research to be transformative and transgressive.

I am convinced by Lather's contention that educational research can still be valuable even if it,



Advocates the creation of a more hesitant and partial scholarship capable of helping us to tell a better story in a world marked by the elusiveness with which it greets our efforts to know it. (Lather, 1991:15)

And accept that my findings will be both 'hesitant' and partial'. My PhD, even upon its completion, will continue to be a 'work in progress', not least because it is bound up with a process of continual professional and personal reflection and reflexivity. I do not think that more study on my subject area, academic writing and writing development, will or should, produce clarity and certainty. Rather I feel that research like mine initiates a journey where I will be forever in what I call 'research flux', a state subject to reflexivity and reflection. Stronach and Maclure (1997) describe flux as a form of 'turbulence'; 'research flux' in this sense includes the ability to disturb surface meanings and complicate understanding in perpetuity. This study, accordingly, does not debate or seek to discover 'truths' about lecturers' perceptions about writing in higher education. Instead of engaging in a battle over what academic writing is or should be in higher education, I am concerned with how perceptions about how academic writing might have become formed; that is, how are differences between what academic writing means articulated; how do they become discursively visible and dominant and what might be the "effects in the real" of challenging the practices that arise out of these meaning within institutional settings such as higher education (Foucault, 1980: 237).

Alongside the importance of 'flux' as a methodological stance I appreciate the responsibility to clearly articulate and debate my rejection of many established qualitative educational research traditions. I am aware that I need to be explicit about what I am doing and why I am doing it (even as I am doing it). However, my conscious deployment of various theoretical frameworks is a form of "methodological anarchy" where ideas operate as catalysts for new ways of being a researcher as well as encouraging research into new subject areas (Thomas, 1997: 76). For example, I am using Foucauldian ideas to explore a picture of my chosen community of practice or work-based culture as a

... a set of ( governmental and other) practices aimed at producing certain sorts of persons, not as a collection of phenomena which hold meanings like a bank, from which people withdraw and to which they deposit (Kendall and Wickham, 1999:112).

I also employ a particular interpretation of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, linguistic capital and field as part of my critical research agenda (1991). The capacity to interrogate experience through a Bourdieusian lens provided me with a way of using critical reflection (Moon, 2004) productively in my research. As Reay writes,

Habitus is a way of looking at data which renders the 'taken for granted' problematic. It suggests a whole range of questions not necessarily addressed in empirical research; How well adapted is the individual to the context they find themselves in? How does personal history shape their responses to the contemporary setting? ...Are structural effects visible within small scale interactions? (Reay, 1995:369)

These were exactly the kind of questions that emerged out of my pilot study, which was primarily operational and underpinned by a rather mechanistic approach to the question of how to improve academic writing and writing development in higher education. It was during the period I was conducting my pilot project that I began to see that as a researcher-practitioner I needed to be more critically reflective and reflexive about my own and my participants' habitus as a way of understanding and interpreting their perceptions.

### **Reflecting or reporting?**

Writing from what she calls a post-structurally reflective position McNaughton (2006) argues that the importance of reflection to critical educational research is that it provides a way of discovering an individual's understanding of their professional practices as well as simply unearthing them for the researcher's purposes. Boud et al (1985) also discuss how reflection is an activity where individual's 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (p. 19). I have appropriated academic writing and writing development practices for lecturers in higher education for this purpose. In a process not dissimilar to Friere's concept of 'conscientisation' (1972), I have found that for me the process of research has not really been about discovering new knowledge and understanding, rather its most lasting effect has been to develop a critical consciousness which has served to reinforce my longstanding political commitment to the relationship education social justice.

As MacNaughton writes:

"Becoming poststructurally reflective often provokes educators to rethink and deepen their understanding of equity and its possibilities in their work by radicalising their understandings of power and knowledge ....in their settings (2006: 5)

McNaughton's point here is that the importance of critical reflection to critical educational research, such as my own, is its ability to provide ways of opening up contestable discussions about educational practices as well as discovering, interpreting and I often in the process, fixing their meaning; for purposes of an educational research project.

Postmodern reflexivity, in this way, involves the researcher 're-visioning' what is being looked at (Hillman, 1992). For this reason there is a

'Representations' section in my PhD, which replaces the more conventional 'Findings' section. In it, I explore what my data has suggested to me about the ways in which academic writing and writing development practices can be re-interpreted as 'situated' historically, culturally and socially in the setting I have been researching. Furthermore my interpretation of the data in this instance is not taken as transparent, unproblematic or simply 'given', rather it is discursively situated and constituted. By being critically reflexive in this way, I am able to consider the possible conditions which allow the predominant practices of academic writing and writing development to come into being, at any particular time and in any particular place; how they continue and are legitimated, in addition to any competing perspectives or practices around them that may exist. Such reflexivity requires constant self critiquing which is an important requirement to my postmodern approach.

Moon, asserts, critical reflection in education is "a set of abilities and skills, to indicate the taking of a critical stance, an orientation to problem solving or state of mind" (1999: 63). My reflective 'critical stance' refutes notions of a 'state of mind' that draws on precepts of empirical essentialism. It is less about problem solving than problem making. I am not seeking to resolve my research observation and experiences through essentialist Aristotelian binaries or modernist 'truths'; rather I prefer to reflect on the how the lived reality of myself and others is full of ambiguity, paradox, contradiction, hybrid, transgressions, and indeterminacies. As such I 'embrace' (to use Stronach and Maclure's active verb) the social relativism of postmodernism as a prerequisite of a vigorous, rigorous and potentially transgressive approach to qualitative educational research. My research aims are not to know my university lecturer subjects 'better' or more fully than before. Rather, I am interested in making them unfamiliar to themselves, myself and others in order that we can begin to renegotiate the 'contestable meanings' inherent in their practices around academic writing and writing development (Stronach and Maclure, 1997:157).

### **Improving or Impacting?**

I am ultimately most interested in my own and other lecturers' capacity to analyse and explicate our epistemologies of practice, as such I am part of a now established and popular movement in qualitative educational research which focuses on the importance of personal reflection and reflexivity to forms of professional practice. However, I cannot help but feel that many of the accountability and validity claims made for the efficacy, influence and usefulness of educational research are done so within a culture of 'performativity' and the commodification of education (Ball,2003, 2004). Ball argues that such a culture limits the scope of research methodologies and shapes them to meet the expectations of target and outcomes focused government agencies that fund much educational research. This has resulted in the idea that the purpose of practice based educational research is to 'improve' practice and then measure the 'impact' of improving that practice.

In comparison to much educational research I do not seek, in my PhD to provide any clear answers what writing or writing development actually is nor do I intend to propose what could be done to improve or correct 'poor' or 'inappropriate' academic writing or writing development models in higher education. Rather, I strive to interpret and situate the attitudes, beliefs and understanding underpinning many of the perceptions about writing and writing development in higher education elicited from my sample group of lecturers. In doing so I intend to problematise a range of dilemmas that I would argue inevitably arise out of the research process. These include epistemological issues ( what do I/my participants know? how do I/ my participants know what I/they know ? can we 'know' anything for sure ?); methodological ( how did I find it out , how did I shape what I found out? What didn't I find out? What did me /miss/ignore/misinterpret?) And ethical (how did I find it out, who did I ask, who did I not ask) and so on. Recognising these dilemmas cannot but challenge the assumption that 'impact' and 'improvement' are the only or even desirable arbiters of what constitutes successful educational research.

The approach I have taken to my educational research project inevitably entails struggles over the meaning-making not only around academic writing and writing development in higher education; but around the process of educational research itself. I see my research as acknowledging how interactions, between researchers and those they research, shape and inform much qualitative educational research. Acknowledging that such interactions are often messy and muddled has the potential to destabilise, or at least, confuse old certainties about the assumed validity of educational research. My research, inevitably produces more questions than answers about what education research is actually for if it is not claiming to 'create impact' and 'improve' practice. I suppose, ultimately, I am suggesting that that, in itself, might be a worthwhile thing to do.

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