

Moving out of our comfort zones to make a difference – do we *really* want to?

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Abstract

In this paper I would like to focus on postgraduate teaching and supervision. I ask whether some of the issues raised by our keynote speakers could not be meaningfully addressed by academics if they were willing to think more openly and less traditionally about these concerns. I would like to outline my presentation firstly by referring to aspects of three of the think pieces and then contextualise these aspects within my own local research, at postgraduate level. There have been a number of important changes in higher education over the past twenty years but the most significant appears to be the massification of institutions. This massification means that western universities have experienced dramatic shifts in the composition of student cohorts which now include large numbers of second language speakers of English and others drawn from non-traditional backgrounds. Research indicates that this change in the student body presents university educators at all levels with challenging and complex issues. One of most difficult is students' apparent inability to write in a way that is acceptable to the academy. This inability to write 'acceptable' English impacts on students' self-esteem and sense of agency, and is often an aggravating factor in supervisory tensions. I argue that this issue needs universities to consider whether traditional ways of thinking about academic English should not be reconsidered. The complexity of academic communication needs to be acknowledged. Nowadays those who teach academic writing are not poorly qualified language teachers but academics with great insight into the sociocultural and linguistic issues of our students. Yet traditionally these academic advisors are not held in high regard and their considerable expertise and insights are often brushed aside. We need to acknowledge the contribution they make already, and how much more they could make if allowed, and their potential to positively influence teaching and learning in our institutions. I also query whether what we view as an acceptable standard of academic English enjoys sufficient attention. If English is a global language then who decides the standards to be met? I contend that this is a debate that needs to be held and must involve those most qualified to speak.

Keywords`

Postgraduate students; academic writing; academic advisors.

Introduction

In this presentation I would like to focus on postgraduate teaching and supervision. I ask whether some of the concerns raised by our keynote speakers could not be meaningfully addressed by academics if they were willing to think more openly and less traditionally about these concerns. I would like to outline my presentation firstly by referring to aspects of three of the think pieces and then contextualise these aspects within my own local research, at postgraduate level.

Bamber talks of the lack of helpful evidence around postgraduate teaching especially at local level. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013, p.123) agree with this contention noting that "the experience and practice of postgraduate study in higher education institutions has suffered ...from a paucity of research across a range of issues". They surmise that this might be partly due to the fact that these students are assumed experienced in academic matters in that they have successfully completed undergraduate degrees. This is probably one of the "unquestioned assumptions" Bamber refers to. Bamber puts forward the view that staff do not see the value of scholarly inquiry into teaching and learning. I agree with this latter statement but feel that in my particular context there *is* a great deal of valuable advice, based on 'homegrown evidence' around postgraduate teaching, but that this advice is brushed aside by the very practitioners who stand most in need of it. I would contend too,

that the complementary and alternative models of supervision, that Bak sees as a valuable step forward, are available but are treated with the same lack of respect.

At the outset I need to state that my interest in the postgraduate area centres around student writing. It is increasingly acknowledged that large numbers of postgraduate students require support for writing in academic contexts regardless of their linguistic background (Baynham, 2000; Casanave, 2008; North, 2005; Strauss and Walton, 2005; Wingate and Tribble 2011) yet the teaching of such writing “is routinely sidelined in the institutional discourse of higher education” (Turner, 2011, p.3). Turner argues that language plays a role in every discipline, not only in the texts that are read or written but also in how they are taught and assessed. The irony, of course, is that the importance of language in higher education is only marked when it is viewed as faulty. It is unmarked when the way in which the message is delivered is seen as acceptable (Turner, 2011). The obvious result of such a positioning of language is that it is discussed in a deficit discourse – there is something wrong with students whose language doesn’t measure up and they need to be fixed. Turner seeks to address this imbalance, moving language from the academic sidelines to a more central position. I would like to contextualise this debate in my own experience at a New Zealand university.

Contextualising my presentation

AUT University is the newest of New Zealand’s eight universities, being granted university status in 2000, 40 years after Waikato University. Its elevation from polytechnic to university status mirrored similar moves in the UK and Australia. The only difference in New Zealand was that AUT was the only polytechnic to be elevated. The move was controversial and most of the other universities opposed AUT joining their ranks. In a country of around four million people, another university was not seen as necessary. AUT therefore found itself in the unenviable position of having to justify its elevation and do so relatively swiftly

Increasing the number of postgraduate programmes and students was an institutional priority but it soon became clear that the teaching and supervising of the influx of postgraduate students was proving difficult for staff, many of whom were in the process of upgrading their own qualifications. I joined AUT in 1999 shortly before it became a university and worked as an academic advisor for 18 months. While I found the work interesting it soon became apparent that I had no scope for advancement and very little support for any research interests, and I accepted a position in a faculty. However the linguistic and sociocultural issues I had encountered during my time as an academic writing advisor had piqued my interest, and now that I was a faculty staff member I had both research time and funding available to investigate these issues. Originally a colleague and I concentrated on the challenges facing academic staff teaching and supervising postgraduate students whose first language was not English (Strauss, Walton and Madsen, 2003). These academics voiced their frustration not only with the language issues they faced but what they saw as the university’s expectation that they would deal with these challenges as part of the supervisory/teaching process. “I don’t have time to be an English teacher”, one retorted, a sentiment echoed by many of his colleagues (Strauss et. al, 2003,p.11). Others said they did not know *how* to help their students. Turner points out “the ways of doing” (2011, p.21) academic language are often taken for granted by academics while they remain a mystery for students. As an academic advisor in a later research project noted:

A lot of [academics] don’t have time, nor do they have the knowledge about how language works. They’ve often internalised it through exposure or they’ve been able to work it out how to write well and how to fit. It’s something that is kind of innate. They’ve never looked at it and it’s become automatic. So they find it really hard to understand what it is that students are finding difficult so they’ll send them to us and we’re actually much more interested in what is going on with the students in terms of their thinking round their writing and analysing what it is that’s wrong. Yeah cos often it is just go and get your grammar fixed up. Well sometimes the supervisors don’t really understand what grammar is, what syntax is (Strauss, 2013, para 20).

Academics’ attitude towards academic writing was manifested in a number of disturbing ways. Helping students with language was seen as “getting in the way” and “sidetracking” the academics from doing “the more fun stuff”, finding the “good oil”. Language was clearly seen as a barrier and an irritant (Strauss et al, 2003, p.11), and while the vast majority of those we spoke to had great sympathy for the students, concerned that students often felt “ashamed or useless” (p.8) when they saw the extent of the language corrections, academic staff viewed these students as deficient, needing to learn to think and write in “an appropriate Western fashion”.

The opportunity then arose for me to assist two L2 students and their supervisor with the thesis writing process. In return for this assistance it was agreed that I could write up the experience as a research project (Strauss, 2012). In common with Bak I believe that there are other and hopefully better ways of supervising than the traditional “isolated dyadic relationship” (Green, 2005, p.153) between student and supervisor. Green seeks to reformulate supervision “ecosocially, as a total environment within which research activity ... is realised”. In such an environment discipline and writing experts, who also bring sociocultural insights into the student concerns, could form a coherent supervisory team for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders. The two students clearly had difficulties with academic writing. Both men were embarrassed about their language difficulties, particularly the older of the two who had completed a doctorate in English in his own country. “The English”, he maintained, “was not the same” (Strauss, 2012, p.288). Unfortunately, despite initial enthusiasm for the idea of working collaboratively, the supervisor very quickly lost interest. She refused to read any of the students’ work, confining their interaction with her to the data collection process. She would read the theses, she said, once the students had completed their final drafts.. In total, over an 18 month period we had two brief meetings at the beginning of my involvement, and when the students submitted their theses.

In her defence she had spent more time with them than with her other Masters students, and she felt that because they were not ‘good’ students she was unlikely to publish with them, but her attitude made it very difficult for me. Part of the problem was that the students had picked up on her dismissal of my involvement. My suggestions as to how the structuring of the theses could be improved were met with anxious queries as to whether this would meet with the supervisor’s approval. Because she was not willing to engage with me I could not ask her to reassure them. Because the supervisor did not want to see their work before the theses were completed I had to deal with the methodology and findings sections of their work. These sections offer students fewer problems linguistically than introductions, literature reviews and discussions, and are relatively easy language wise for the discipline expert.

The one bonus of the supervisor’s lack of involvement was that my sessions with the students turned almost unintentionally from ‘feedback’ to ‘talkback’ (Lillis, 2003, p.204) where I invited the student to explain sections to me. I was moving from feedback with its tendency toward closed commentary to Lilli’s talkback where the focus was on the student’s text with its myriad of possibilities. This process allowed me to help them rewrite their research in acceptable academic style. An added bonus was that the students were teaching me and this allowed them to regain some of their self-esteem which both acknowledged had been dealt a severe blow.

This experience left me with growing concern about the way in which language was perceived as a barrier, and the damage this seemed to do to the students involved. Research with a masters student (Chang and Strauss, 2010) revealed Chinese students’ concern that their intellectual ability was aligned with their proficiency in English. One noted “It’s not that we don’t have the ability, but we have to first understand the whole thing, the whole context – in English – not Mandarin. We are not here to discover the new notion called critical thinking – critical thinking exists in China too!” Concerns were also expressed that students were teased or laughed at by supervisors because of their English errors. While one must accept that such joking could well have been intended in a good natured way it was not interpreted in this way. At the very best such teasing was insensitive , at worst it smacks of what Cameron (as cited by Turner, 2011, p.30) sees as “linguistic bigotry”, noting that it is among the last publically expressible prejudices left to members of western intelligentsia.”

During my research I was also forced to reassess what I thought was acceptable academic English, and to consider the very real possibility that we are too conservative (or is ‘too precious’ more appropriate?) about what we consider acceptable. I have discovered that questioning what is acceptable is an emotive issue. I am still surprised at the depth of emotion academics display at the suggestion of use of the first person even though as Pennycook (2005) points out it has been accepted practice in many discipline areas for some time. Shelton (2006, p.60) argues that the possibility for different varieties of English “appals, or even terrifies some who think there is a ‘purity’ to be defended. Siedhofer contends (2001, p.152) that English native speakers feel that “their language” is being “abused and distorted” The problem with this protective approach is that native English speakers want to have their cake and eat it. Widdowson (1994, p.385) notes that it is a source of “considerable pride and satisfaction” to many of these people that English is the international means of communication, but he argues that *because* of its international status it is no longer ‘their’ language – “other people actually own it” (p.385). Along with this feeling of protectiveness appears to be a conviction that native speakers (and writers) always have a better command of English than those who are not fortunate enough to have English as a first language. Such a belief should be approached with caution. Schmitt (as cited by Ryan and Viète, 2009, p.305) argues that “native speakerdom [is] derived not from creative language use but from the shared set of memorized stock phrases that native speakers understand and tacitly agree are efficient ways of expressing

ideas". One academic advisor noted that it was empowering for students to realise that their language was not incorrect, it just did not meet the supervisors' expectations (Strauss, 2013). I noted in passing that the papers submitted to this conference should be reviewed by "a professional technical writer or *native English speaker*" (my italics).

These writing issues are an integral part of the challenging and complex postgraduate environment at my university. It would therefore seem logical that staff charged with helping postgraduate students with their writing would be greatly valued. Bamber in her think piece speaks of professional services staff "having an enormous role" to play. Unfortunately there is overwhelming evidence (at least in New Zealand and Australia) that they are not valued and their role is regarded as relatively minor. The claim that their work is 'securely located on the periphery of higher education' (Turner 2011:29), is echoed in a numerous articles. (Emerson & Clerehan 2009; Velautham & Picard 2009;; Chanock, 2007; Woodward-Kron 2007; Alexander 2005). Their lack of status is reflected in the language used to describe their positioning in the academic world. They are 'the writing ladies' (Alexander 2005), and the 'servants' (Pennycook 1997) and 'butlers' (Raimes 1991) to the faculty masters.

. At our institutions staff charged with assisting students with their studies are known as academic or learning advisors. While their primary focus is on students, postgraduate learning advisers are there to assist and advise lecturers and supervisors as well. This downgrading of the work of academic advisors, described above was what I had experienced but I wanted to know how other advisors in New Zealand saw themselves positioned in their universities, and whether they believed this positioning impacted on their ability to do their work. In order to find out how this worked, I spoke to 21 advisors at seven of the eight universities in New Zealand. The picture that emerged was depressing (Strauss, 2013). Despite the fact that they were highly qualified, and many researched and published in the area of postgraduate teaching and learning, their work, is not valued and their input is often treated with suspicion. A number of institutions has already designated these staff as professional, as opposed to academic, with an accompanying loss of research time and funding, and career opportunities. The rest feared that their universities might follow suit. Very few felt secure in their posts despite the fact that most had good working relations with at least some discipline staff members. The overriding issue appeared to be that it is not sufficient to persuade university staff that these academic advisors are doing a good job. They need to convince university staff that language support is a *job* worth doing.

Bamber speaks highly of the work of staff at these centres noting that professional services staff (as opposed to academics) "have an enormous role to play... and their use of evidence is of equal value to the evidence gathered and used by academic staff". In my context I feel that this well meant commendation encapsulates the problems that academic advisors. They are not viewed as *academics* they belong in the ranks of professional staff.. Because most discipline (real)academics have little understanding of the complexities of academic language, they view it from the technisist perspective which assumes that language is easily dealt with, and easily fixed' (Turner 2011:18). Students just need a little help, and those who provide this superficial aid are mere technicians. There is little understanding that language and thought cannot be separated. Chanock comments:

Frequently [Student Learning] Centres seem to be regarded as a form of a crash repair shop where welding, panel-beating and polishing can be carried out on students' texts - an idea that makes sense only if you regard the text as a vehicle for the writer's thoughts and separable from the thoughts themselves (2007: 273).

This devaluing of the advisors' work, and hence of the advisors themselves, impacts on their ability to assist their students. Students are quick to pick up on academics' understanding of the role of language in the academy, that is something that can be quickly and easily fixed –so they come to be fixed. A few are ashamed of their visits and want them kept secret from lecturers and supervisors. The advisors are viewed, in the words of one as, "low grade language teachers who are paid by the university to provide a proof reading service for students whose English isn't up to scratch" (Strauss, 2013,para.11) There is also a certain amount of suspicion about the work they do. One noted, "I think we're treated with a certain degree of mistrust like 'who are you really and what credentials do you have to be getting yourself involved with our students?'"(para.16) The implications of the downgrading of the importance of the work done by academic advisors also means that it is "politically" (para.27) very difficult to feed student concerns back to staff involved as the latter are "tetchy about interference outside the content area" (para.27). A number referred to schools and departments at their universities as "silos" (para.16).

Advisors were frustrated that they had great difficulty influencing teaching and learning despite their knowledge about the challenges postgraduate students face. One pointed out that their ongoing contact with students meant that “we see the university through student eyes”. Those who work almost exclusively at postgraduate level may see over a hundred masters and doctoral students each year which is a great deal more than any individual supervisor. This ongoing contact with the work of students drawn from all over the university gives them a perspective across disciplines (Quiddington, 2009). Bamber notes the importance of research that enables us to learn from our students. Learning advisors “saw the university through student eyes” and because of the vast amount of reading they had done of students’ work they had “learned a great deal about what makes effective or ineffective postgraduate work. One advisor, when discussing her lack of status and the problems this caused asked, “Does that signal something? Does that mean student learning, and researching student learning, are actually not recognised? Do they want to keep it as remedial assistance?” (Strauss, 2013, para.31).

In summary the research indicates that the postgraduate arena is complex and challenging for all involved. Increasingly the use of acceptable academic English is highlighted as problematic, and as written assessment remains central to assessment practices at universities (Goodfellow and Lee, 2005) the ability to write well cannot be underestimated. Another influence that needs to be taken into account is the global spread of English. This spread means that many countries are familiar with its discourse features (Canagarajah, 2001). Some even require postgraduate theses and dissertations to be submitted in English so many of the students coming to our universities believe themselves well equipped to deal with the academic literacy demands placed on them. It would appear quite reasonable though that institutions are able to impose English language standards but if English is a global language then whose standards are we imposing? Should we perhaps be interrogating what we are asking students to do? Are we consistent in our demands on students across institutions even in Schools and departments? What *is* acceptable academic English? Are we holding to traditional ways of expressing ourselves because we believe they are the best, or are we doing so because this is what is comfortable?

In my admittedly limited experience academics fall into three different camps as far as academic language is concerned. There is one camp that asks “if students can’t read and write what are they doing at university anyway” (Strauss, 2013, para.11)- this I believe is a relatively small group and they might be answered cynically in this neoliberal age because we need the money, and more idealistically, because we wish to make educational opportunities more widely available. Another group feel that they have the ability to assist students with their writing but not the time to do so. The last (and I believe) largest group has great empathy for student writing difficulties but has neither the time nor the ability to deal constructively with them. It is this latter group too, who demonstrate awareness of the fact that it is not simply a case of the writing but the damage that it is causing to students’ self-esteem and sense of agency these students realise that they are perceived, and begin to perceive themselves, as “lacking” in some way (Strauss, 2012).

Horner 2006, p.573 speaks of a “living English, one that rejuvenates the language by contesting standardized dominant English terms in the light of ongoing, and differing, lives, contexts, values”. I argue that what counts as acceptable academic English needs to be debated in all English medium universities but it is one that should include, and possibly be led by, those most knowledgeable and experienced in student writing. I contend that these are the marginalised academic advisors, the low paid language teachers who are there to serve the discipline masters. If their voices are to be heard then it is the discipline academics who must move out of their comfort zone, and acknowledge the expertise and knowledge of these advisors. Surely teaching and supervising diverse cohorts implies the embracing (or at least the contemplation) of “the use of new forms of written and spoken discourse” (Land). We need to acknowledge that what is not always or necessarily best and that there are different but equally valid ways of sharing knowledge. If postgraduate educators want their students to leave their comfort zones these educators need to model such behaviour themselves.

They need to acknowledge the important role of academic advisors, give them time to conduct the research so sorely needed, and accord them the respect which will ensure measured consideration of their insights. Consideration should be given to involving advisors in supervisory teams. Land notes that “learning thresholds are often the points at which students experience difficulty ... as they require a letting go of customary ways of seeing things, of prior familiar views”. He says that students have to recognise deficiencies in their existing views of a phenomenon and let go of this view. I argue that the quote above is as relevant for the academics themselves as it is for the students they teach.

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