Supporting Masters Dissertation and PhD Thesis Writing: Where EAP Meets Research Skills Training

Saturday 29th June 2013: University of Essex, Colchester campus.

In the last 10 years UK HEIs have benefited greatly from special funding made available for generic skills training/development for PhD research and post-doctoral students. As a result, most provide some support for PhD thesis writing and (in some cases) Masters dissertation writing usually via a centralized Learning & Development Unit or Grad School. Such support is available to all students, mixing native speakers and non-native speakers of English.

Meanwhile, EAP teachers and course designers have continued to pay attention to the specific problems of research writing experienced by international students. So it is now common for HEIs to have two completely separate sources of support in this area, particularly at PhD level.

This PIM aimed 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:

1. What are the specific needs of research writers at PhD and Masters levels?
2. Do needs vary greatly across disciplinary areas?
3. Should provision of support for NS and NNS of English be the same or different?
4. At what stages of PhD or Masters research is support for writing most needed?
5. To what extent is support for reading also needed?
6. How can we help research student writers engage with specific tasks including: the development of research questions and claims through reading and writing, planning and producing literature reviews, analysing and writing up research data?
7. How can we help research student writers engage with the whole range of 'less-central' texts such as preparing funding applications and personal statements?

These questions, and in particular question 6, were considered as part of a panel discussion at the end of the PIM. The panellists, all from the University of Essex, were:

Chair: **Dr.Peter Luther**, *Dean of the Faculty of Law and Management*

PhD student: **Pavel Reich**, *School of Philosophy and Art History*

PhD/MSc Supervisor: **Prof. Edward Tsang**, *School of Computer Science and Engineering*

PhD/MSc Supervisor: **Dr.Ann-Christine Frandsen**, *Essex Business School*

Learning and Development Advisor (Curriculum):   **Dr.Maxwell Stevenson**, *Learning and Development*

EAP Lecturer & MA Supervisor, **Dr**.**Wendy Archer**, *International Academy*

PANEL DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

PL: There are two main needs in my area. The first one relates to the NNSpeakers – the need to write clearly and well in whatever good English may be. All that I mean by it is in such a way that the medium does not obscure the message. I then focus on what they are saying and not how they are saying it.

But also …. the need for them to write in an appropriately academic style and tone so that their arguments have force and authority. In my subject area that is more important than in other SS disciplines. A lot of theses in my disciplinary area are library-based. They are simply taking issue with previous opinions, whether of judges or of academics.

Having identified these two needs, this is where I tend to throw up my hands in despair as an academic. I think I and my colleagues send out a range of mixed messages. On that first need, I'm quite sure that I and my colleagues disagree about what is good English. My basic definition of 'good English' would certainly not meet the more exacting standards of some of my colleagues. And going on from that we will almost certainly disagree on what is an appropriately academic tone. A recent example from a discussion with a student and his supervisor concerns whether it is ever permissible to use the word "I" when you are writing. I know that some of you will have agonized over that. And views differ. I looked in one style guide that absolutely prohibits it.

I am also conscious in my area that conventions of academic writing have changed very noticeably even in the past generation. Certainly if you go back to the 1930s and 40s they have changed dramatically in Law. Partly because of new approaches to Critical Legal Studies. The aim was to strip away pseudo-objectivity – to admit that there were no right answers only opinions, and that one opinion was no better than another opinion. In part it's also the move away from the rhetoric of the courtroom. In academic articles from the 30s and 40s, they don't ever say that the judge in such and such a case was wrong. It was considered bad form for an academic to criticise a judge. They would say: "It is submitted with all due respect that the learned judge may have misdirected himself." It looks very odd now on the page. Reliance on an article from that era for guidance will produce an odd-looking thesis.

I'm conscious too that our students are subjected to a much wider range of writing styles than I was as a student. Nowadays, particularly with the rise of the internet there is much more informal writing about the subject; much of the formal writing is less formal and it's harder for students to judge the style and tone. I had a visit from a baffled PG student the other day (a NNS) who had submitted two essays at the same time to different teachers. One had come back with the comment: "Your writing has a style and vigour that is unusual for this sort of exercise". The other one came back with the comment: "This is appropriate for a blog post but it is not an academic essay". And the style was exactly the same.

So those are some questions. I don't know how we begin to answer them.

ET: I would like to talk about the style of communication with students first. When I first supervised students in the 1980s, I wrote a diary recording what I discussed with the students so that I could remember what I said to them the next time we met. And then I

realized at the next meeting that what the students had understood was very different. It happened almost every time. Of course I blamed my own English and not making myself clear. And then I thought of a cunning way of dealing with this. I decided that the students should write this diary, not me. From then on I started a system of the students writing a diary: after a meeting they would write what we had agreed.

Coming from a technological background, obviously I use technology to the full. I used Googlesites – Google provides a service free of charge where you can create a site where you can share your documents with other people. The advantage is that the student would go away and he or she would write the diary and I would see it – even when it was written. When the students finished writing I would immediately have access to their documents and whether they had done the right thing. This also satisfies the requirements of the University – it requires us to keep a record. But the advantage of this diary is that it is there to serve a real purpose, not just to satisfy our Deans. This is really effective, I can tell you. With Googlesites we can exchange documents and I can easily put copyright articles on-line for my students to read but it is not in the public domain.

Now I want to talk about the 'good English' that Peter mentioned. For technical writing I require my students to write things that people can understand. If they write something and show it to other people in the same discipline, they should understand. So clarity is the first requirement. And I almost always ask students to write short sentences. There is nothing wrong with long sentences if you can write very good English. However, with long sentences it is easy for students to get confused themselves. With short sentences you can debate each point – one point at a time. I ask them to write one point in one sentence. In technical writing I ask them to write everything like a proof: you have the premise, you have the stats that this is based on. Stat 2 is based on stat 1. Stat 5 is based on stat 2 and 3 together, and so on. I ask them to produce documents like a proof: you can improve the style later. The first production has to be like a proof to me.

I would also like to mention teaching foreign students. Some students, especially from China or the Far East – the problem is not just in English. There are more serious problems than English, I feel. The problem is in the attitude towards knowledge. If I ask them a question, say "what would be the consequence if Britain withdraws from Europe?" or "What would be its impact on the British economy"?, let's say. If you ask this to a Chinese or a Japanese student they would expect you to have a model answer in your mind. They are trying to guess what you think the model answer is. You've got to be aware of this cultural difference because they are not used to choices or dealing with open questions. They have been told that everything has a model answer. That is my experience.

ACF: I did my own PhD not too far back in 2004 as a mature student in Sweden. And I think I have some of my experiences with me when I try to supervise my PhD and MSc students. One of the key issues that I've seen with MSc students who want to do the PhD later is the expectation that the PhD will only be an extension of the MSc. Dealing with that sort of expectation is quite difficult. From a PhD supervising perspective what I try to do is to consider how to encourage the students to know the rules of the game. We all have different disciplines and we work to write within that discipline. From where I am coming, for instance, I don't mind "I". However, it has to be relevant within that discipline in trying to make your

contribution to knowledge. So the feedback I try to give the student is about consistency within that argument and within that field. And if the institution also could support the PhD student in doing that, it would be great because it is quite a considerable task.

And with that I also get them to think about how they can structure their thesis and arguments. There are more ways than just a standard version. And with the PhD now just within the 3 years it's about finding a way to be elaborate, innovative in telling your story and your arguments in different ways. But it's limited when you just have 3 years. Still there are different ways to put your thesis together though it's more difficult because you may have less time.

So that's one thing. The other thing that I think is important and that I tell PhD students is to find their own voice. How do you help PhD students to write in a style with which they are confident. This is my argument and this is the way I want to tell it. And I try to encourage them to say "stand up" – imagine that you have an audience to talk to. And "I have a story to tell you and this is it." It is that sort of active voice and the consistency in making that voice heard that I try to help them with. And maybe the institution can also help us more to do that better.

And maybe vis-à-vis the literature review asking: How can you situate yourself within the literature? How would you like your relationship to be with the other people that you are debating with? How would you like to construct that literature review? Where are you? Where is your argument?

Finally, I think the institution also could perhaps support with the final manuscript - proof and vocabulary reading and come back to the student to see what changes need to be made (so you also learn something along the way). But I think an absolute focus on vocabulary and grammar might be too narrow. I would like to take a broader perspective on how to tell the story, how to tell the argument, how to put that together and be consistent.

PR: This ties in a lot to the question of 'good English'. Often it's not a question of linguistic issues but the subject-specific criteria needed to write an essay. These criteria are not only subject-specific but also country-specific. A lot of the times when you have an international student in my experience – they come in and don't know what they are looking for. In my MA I was writing what I thought were brilliant essays but they didn't get very good marks. I went to the teacher to ask "what's the problem". And they weren't bad enough that he could point to things. He just said "it's not bad – just improve a little bit". But I had no idea. And this is the sort of practical knowledge or knowhow after working a few years in your subject that you just know. There's no outline or script to follow to know what a good essay is or even how to do it. All of these questions have to do with absorbing the structure of the paper.

WA: I'm going to pick up on various bits and pieces. I'm coming at this from the position of a tutor on a PhD Writing Course. One of the roles that we as EAP tutors are well placed to deal with is this notion of acting as a bridge between students and supervisors. Certainly in my experience, from the courses and looking at the comments from students – the comments have generally been along the lines of "it was really useful to know this so that I

can go along and ask intelligent questions to my supervisors". In the sense that students were exposed to different types of literature reviews so they could go off and decide which was best for them.

I feel that for both NS and NNS there are a lot of expectations of PhD researchers who are in a transitional state in the sense that they are expected to know a number of things. There is an expectation that international students will have gone through research methods courses and that this is information that they have, and they know how to activate it and use it. I think where we can be helpful is to try to pull that out of them and say: "You may not want to talk to your supervisor about this, but I think you should". We can help them to realize that these aren't silly questions. And encourage them to use the writing process as a way to generate questions that they can ask their supervisors. And go to their supervisor with a system of notes, for example. Don't just go along and say: "I don't know what I'm doing". It's about using that experience in the classroom with them to try to get them to experiment with their writing and to use the writing to help them out with their supervisors.

The other point is the idea of this argumentative strategy – where are you with respect to the literature. In discussions with other colleagues and in my own PhD it seems the feedback often is: "Yes this is all great. You've identified the right literature. You've identified the right points. But where do you stand?" That is one of the things that we can help them with. An example: I had a student who came to me with some feedback on a piece of writing that had been assessed by the supervisor. And he was confused because of this question of "where am I? ". And we looked at the work – just a 2-page piece of work. It was very descriptive all the way through and this brought us round to the idea of using the references well. I think that is something that we as EAP teachers can do. What is the difference, for example, between information and author-prominent referencing?

Another issue is that of reading. How do you select texts? How do you prioritize texts? What do you do with those texts once you have them? Very often another expectation that we put on students is that they know how to select texts well and that they know what they should be looking for. As EAP tutors we can certainly encourage that process, developing their note-taking skills, how they write analytical notes and how they take those analytical notes and incorporate them into the writing process itself.

Other things that students in my groups have responded well to include looking at issues such as structuring. They are dealing with a massive piece of text that will be a new experience for many of them – 80,000 words, in some places slightly more or slightly less. This is a huge thing to keep your motivation going. I think this is one of the things that we can help students with. The course that we've set up here has been very much on the basis of allowing them to bring in examples of texts. They get a lot of assistance from looking at the mistakes that other students make, testing out research questions, trying to understand each other's research questions. And as many EAP lecturers won't be specialized in those subject areas, this taps into notions of clarity. If it's not clear to me, then maybe there is something wrong. I think as EAP lecturers we are in a very special position to be able to help students as we are on the frontline in that respect.

MS: We are divided into different areas in Learning & Development and one of those areas is supporting research students. I work in a slightly different area but I contribute to that. I'm here today because we have been doing some work with Academic writing. One of the themes that interests me is referencing that Wendy was talking about. In referencing there is this notion of other people's ideas appearing in your own work and how you do that in an appropriate way. Pavel talked a little bit about feedback on structure and how that can guide the process. How do you intuit the structure from the work that has been written? Ann-Christine talked about storytelling and how to articulate what that story was. And Edward talked a little bit about communicating your ideas succinctly. We have been working on a programme for writing that tries to take all of those things into account and take a step back from them by identifying very specifically and very concisely what the idea is that researchers are trying to express. And getting them to articulate that in a very short and very clear way.

One of the things that we've found is that they are often surprised by how unclear they were about their idea before they had to focus it. We use 10 words – they are allowed 10 words to express their idea. We have approached this through a Creative Writing technique and have tried to highlight that we are stepping back from Academic Writing to try to look at this. What we are saying is that all writing is Creative Writing but because you are trying to express this idea but are not able to articulate it it's very difficult to argue that it's a good idea or to support it or indicate how other writers who have ideas about similar subjects might be contributing to this knowledge.

The project that we ran we started piloting with the Faculty of Humanities. And one of the things we were trying to grapple was feedback on essays where although it was a very good essay the idea seemed to be implicit with the tutor trying to draw out and identify what that idea might be. Perhaps it was present at the end, perhaps it wasn't there at all. It was felt that if the students could make their ideas explicit from the very beginning, that would be a very good thing. And there also was a feeling that people were not actually very good at précis: they were very good at quoting information extensively but not actually interrogating that information or extracting the ideas.

PR: The country I come from is the Czech Republic and there we learnt how to summarize and regurgitate information. Here in Britain you talk in general about how to create arguments. So you don't want to regurgitate information. And I think this is the educational system in most of Europe, so in Germany and Italy people tend to summarize and then maybe put their opinion at the end. It's really difficult to have to unlearn that. And I imagine this is much more difficult for PhD students because if you start with a Masters, you have timed practice, you write essays, get bad marks and improve. But in the PhD you don't.

(Invitation for comments, questions or even 'scorn and derision' by the Chair)

Q1: I have a question about the relationship between students, supervisors and EAP teachers. I think this is a moment to come clean about that relationship. A lot of students that I deal with don't feel terribly comfortable with their PhD supervisor. I say "in what way?" They reply: "I don't want to look stupid in front of the supervisor". So if there is something that the

supervisor is struggling to explain to them, they are not going to say: "Sorry, you are going to have to go through that again". How do people feel about this? Is it something that is just a reality?

PR: My supervisor is just intimidating generally. She has a brilliant mind, so that is intimidating as is her experience. I think after a while I got more comfortable with her but I think there is a need for a supervisor-free space where you feel less restricted. So we have various groups in the department where supervisors are not allowed. It does create a completely different dynamic.

ACF: I can understand that. But with PhD students you have a longer time to get to know each other. And I do share my experiences of being a PhD student and how I struggled myself. Sharing that, I hope that the student won't feel scared of telling me such things. But I can understand that.

ET: I am afraid of my students. But I'm also a very direct person so if the student tells me something which is wrong, I tell them. I don't normally say: "This is a very good point, but ….". I haven't acquired that British style. So I am very direct and it can sometimes be intimidating. On the other hand, I believe that teaching involves two things: one, I have to set a target and if they have not reached the target I will tell them. The second thing is that you have to encourage. So I always find small things to praise the students. This sounds like I am contradicting myself but there are always things that they have done right and wrong.

Q2. From a psychological point of view do we ever think about creating a positive research climate, a research community where the students actually can feel comfortable, where a certain power relationship is removed? And are supervisors concerned about sharing their own struggles? Do we see a partnership there? And could this partnership create a more comfortable community?

PL: I think there are some very big issues there about research culture and research community. Sometimes it's even a question of having the basic facilities such as a social space so staff and students can get together on an equal footing. It was one of the founding ideas of this university that there would be common space – not space for staff and space for students. I think we have moved away from that idea of providing space in that we are very short of space. As far as the bigger issues are concerned I think it varies enormously between the subject areas how much staff feel able to open up to their students. The relationship between supervisor and student differs so much . In some disciplines it is very usual for supervisors to write articles for publication with their students. In my subject this is almost unheard of. I think that probably helps build closer bonds as well and it helps their careers.

Q3: I am interested in the relationship in this institution between the Learning Development group and the EAP group. In my experience Learning and Development is very much up here and EAP is down there. I'd like you to tell me if this is the case. And then I'd like you to tell me how we get EAP up to the same status as Learning and Development.

MS: It's certainly the case that EAP tutors through the Skills Centre and Learning & Development work together because there is significant overlap in what we do. At present I am working with an EAP tutor to see how we can apply some of the ideas mentioned previously particularly for students coming into the Business School. Helping people to engage with writing who may not realize why there is a need for writing at all. I don't recognize complete division in our labours nor this description of the esteem with which we are held within the academic community. Although it doesn't happen all the time, there are opportunities for overlap and we try to make the most of them.

Q4: As a PhD or MSc supervisor if you think that your student needs help that you cannot give who would you direct that person to? And how would you make that decision?

PL: My instinct here in a subject area that tends to attract few PhD students is that it would depend on the person. A NNS of English, rightly or wrongly, I would think of EAP first. If it was a NS and academic style or tone were the issue I might instinctively go to the Learning and Development Unit.

ET: For some of my students improving their English was the first step in their PhD. EAP tutors have had remarkable success in this respect. I don't know how they do it. But my first PhD student was a NS. When I found that his English was not up to standard, how could I as a NNS correct his English? What I wanted to say is that it's not necessarily the case that a NS can write.

PL: This has been a bit of a problem in the past. There is a lot of provision but it's not all joined up.

Q5: I'd like to ask the PhD student if it would have helped if material submitted previously had been made available - and the assessment that was made of it. Would that have helped you to understand what you were expected to do?

PR: That happens. I asked my supervisor to give me examples of work that got the highest marks and I tried to copy the style. I also teach UGs and I've had a lot of requests from them: they just have no idea what the criteria are. If we did make sample essays available to them, that would help a lot.

ACF: Where I come from in Sweden current MSc theses are made available to all students and there is a sort of discussion at the end. So everyone knows what the other one is doing and they are practising and criticizing, finding out gaps. Everything is shared.

PL: Within my department we have just for the first time made some sample UG essays available through Moodle. We've got a problem – not with the good ones bit we would like to approach students whose work could be improved. But we are simply scared of doing this.