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Critical autobiography in the professional doctorate: improving students' writing through the device of literature

Christine Eastman and Kate Maguire

Abstract

This paper argues for a pedagogic practice to overcome the challenges that many professional practitioners face in undertaking a professional doctorate. Recent examination feedback on a professional doctoral programme of 300 candidates in the UK highlighted that a number of candidates often struggle to write persuasively, critically, and reflectively. This paper discusses the impact of a series of workshops designed to support students in resolving the challenges of writing clearly. In our workshops we encouraged the students to conceptualise their professional doctorate as a critical autobiography. In order to foster a critical autobiographical voice in our students, we explored a range of autobiographical texts for students to use as models for their own writing. In addition to offering a description of our teaching practice in these workshops, this paper explores the theoretical background that illuminates our pedagogical choices. Both theory and practice are posited side by side in our paper to uncover mutually illuminating connections in our discussion and evaluation of our attempts to improve students' writing. We suggest that conceptualising the professional doctorate as critical autobiography is a valuable tool for professional practitioners who struggle to communicate the complexities of their practice confidently and lucidly.

Introduction to the professional doctorate

The professional doctorate in the United Kingdom is a pathway that conceptualises and theorises practice. Having substantial roots in the UK, USA and Australia, it has been traditionally associated with the fields of education, nursing, business and engineering. However, in the last twenty years there has been a steady growth in professional doctorates that have responded to the demands of a wide range of professional people across many working sectors (UKCGE 2011). There are factors important to these research practitioners including, but not limited to, selecting methodological approaches to research, conceptualising complex practices and expertise, and positioning of practice in the wider knowledge arenas, including the academic arena. Costley and Armsby (2007) explore the differing research approaches, methodologies and epistemologies considered on a specific professional doctoral programme and find that professional doctoral candidates invariably use approaches that are traditionally accepted within their professional area: case study, followed by action research and ethnography are most often used. Although Costley and Armsby's findings emerge from a relatively limited number of participants, their results stem from a wide range of inquiries into the research influences on professional doctorates and also have implications for our own research, particularly for how candidates contextualise their positionality and recognise the role reflexivity plays in their work.

Costley and Armsby are concerned with how professional doctoral candidates can develop their work 'without recourse to a disciplinary or even a social science approach' (254). In this study we build on their model comprising a 'rigorous investigation from the standpoint of the practitioner' (254) by using critical autobiography to place researchers at the centre of their work, to help them to make an impact on both practice and knowledge and

to focus them in thinking about resolving what have come to be termed sticky problems. Other indicators of professional doctorate level research are the depth of criticality in research areas and the ability to convey ideas as coherently and compellingly as possible. The challenges of facilitating mastery of these final two requirements – in particular, putting the self at the centre of the writing and developing critical depth – motivated our decision to design and deliver a series of workshops to support candidates in transmitting complex ideas with clarity, the core skill of a professional doctorate. In a quest to embody the multidisciplinary nature of the professional doctorate, we sought to combine our diverse academic specialisms – English literature, on the one hand, and anthropology, on the other – together with our shared expertise in professional studies in order to provide solutions to the perennial conundrums confronting our doctoral candidates: how to transmit complex ideas with clarity; how to write with critical depth; in short, how to write well.

Background to the workshops

In 2013 we designed four themed workshops of four hours each over two semesters, flexible enough to be refocused to attend to issues as they arose from each successive workshop. Some of the participants had not been in higher education for several years; others had not been in higher education at all but were senior level professionals in their various fields of practice, managing high impact projects. English was not the first language for a third of the participants but all were fluent in written and spoken English. Reading materials and activities were prepared in advance and a web presence set up for interaction with and among participants. We ensured a mixture of autobiographical literature including works chosen by participants as favourites and pet hates, and literature that they had never accessed, and were most unlikely to access, including non-Western writers found infrequently on traditional university syllabuses. The autobiographical works we chose ranged from diaries to poems

and from memoirs to novels. We did not employ restrictive criteria in order to delimit the generic boundaries of autobiography and we were unconcerned with the truth content of the texts or with the actual correspondence of the authorial persona with a real-life author. We were concerned more with the construction and presentation of an authorial voice in the works and we used the term 'autobiography' with this broad meaning.

In this paper we explore how our particular approach succeeded and why. We suggest how this approach can be positioned in a critical autobiographical frame and how it can become an important tool in developing doctoral level criticality not only in the professional doctoral context but also in non academic sectors. We envisage that our perceptions and observations will contribute to thinking of critical autobiography as a form of research that encompasses auto ethnography, which is becoming increasingly used as a research approach in organisations. The approach outlined in this paper contributes to the discussion of the relevance of identity to professional learning, as we examine how our candidates drew on their cultural store of conceptual frames that serve to contribute to their individual formation of self and their self-constructed obstacles to knowledge and new learning. The workshops covered a range of topics and we shall outline the content of each session in the discussion that follows, together with an analysis of the results of our method. This article presents a pedagogical case study, in the first instance, which serves as the basis of theoretical reflections on the role that reading can play in professional doctorate programmes, as a tool for enhancing candidates' writing. But first, in the interest of terminological clarity, we outline the notion of the 'critical autobiography', a concept that is central to the doctoral candidates' theorisation of their role in the workplace.

Critical autobiography

In the introduction to our first workshop we advanced the notion of 'putting the self at the centre of the writing', adducing a link between ontology and writing at the core of professional doctoral research. But what is the self that we attempt to elicit from professional doctoral candidates? What lies beneath a researcher? In analysing the undertaking of a professional doctorate in education, Joan Forbes (2008) investigates the crucial role identity plays in doctoral learning. She discovers that an individual's capacity to construct multiple identities allowed her to reframe her research by helping her to examine her underlying assumptions and by using writing as a transformative practice. She asks herself what effect her reflexive writing has had on her doctoral work:

> A focus on epistemological reflexivity engendered important changes in my personal identifications. I was changed through my engagement in the continuous dressage of the practices of learning to think and write reflexively, being made as a writer and producer of knowledge in particular ways (459).

Forbes' account of transformational change through her engagement with reflexive writing reflects our own aim in providing candidates with the tools to examine their own identities in a critical fashion, a central concern of the professional doctorate.

Although he is writing about adult learning in general, Robin Usher's (1992) arguments in defence of the importance of writing are valid in our own context of professional doctoral research:

> Adult education must write and recognise the place of writing because it is only though writing that it can maintain a capacity for questioning and subverting the tendency both of its own and other social practices and discourses to become power-knowledge formations (113).

Professional doctoral candidates are concerned intrinsically with 'questioning' and 'subverting', to borrow the terminology proposed by Usher, the power and knowledge structures in their places of work. Candidates are encouraged to use the mode of academic

investigation to reframe problems in the workplace. We contend that it is through the act of writing that theory and praxis cohere as professional doctoral candidates' interrogate their own identity as researchers and workers and use the autobiographical perspective as the nerve centre of their research. Our contention is that as educators we can tap into the innate human tendency to narrate the self as a means of promoting improvement in our students' writing. The professional doctorate, as a programme that encourages the narration of a working self, is a pedagogical framework that lends itself particularly to a reconceptualisation of learning as the process of discovering to read and write the self.

Usher furthermore makes the point that research in adult education has centred less on 'writerly' texts which stimulate further thought and more on 'practitioner' texts such as reports. Professional practice curricula also tend to place particular emphasis on practitioner texts: on the reading lists for many professional doctorate and work based learning programmes texts that aim to teach students how to do something tend to predominate. Usher notes that in adult education prose has been less concerned with imagery and style (100). This is also true of many professional doctorate programmes, which often place greater emphasis on reading as vehicle for the delivery of content, rather than on reading as a lesson in the mechanics of form. In other words, professional doctorate students are sometimes encouraged to take a utilitarian approach to reading, to pay more attention to the content that is delivered and less to the way that it is delivered. But this emphasis can have a detrimental impact on students' writing. How we write something is an essential part of the communicative process and if students are encouraged to examine how other writers use language then they are more likely to reflect more deeply on how they themselves use language.

In their investigation into the complexities of writing research at the academic/professional interface, San Miguel and Nelson (2007) highlight the challenges professional doctorate students have in establishing authorial identity. The authors make a

point of correlating a student's problematic text with her insistence of relying on a third person account in her narrative: ironically the student's third person account was attempting 'to meet what she considered to be the expectations of the academy' (San Miguel and Nelson 2007, 77). In order to address our own candidates' pronominal insecurities and lack of authorial identity, we chose to bring writers' autobiographical accounts into our workshops: we believed that examining these accounts could mitigate writing problems which arose from the candidates' attempts 'to integrate the domain of the workplace, the profession, and the academy' (San Miguel and Nelson 2007, 81).

Perhaps autobiography is motivated by a 'narcissistic dream of self-presence' (Ryan 1976, 35). Perhaps it is also 'necessarily fictive' (Ryan 1976, 36), 'a discourse containing the discursive subject which constitutes the topic of discussion' (Blanchard 1982, 100), or simply a form that can hardly be expected to contain the complexity of a life. The best definition might be Pascal's conviction that it is a form which offers its readers 'a complex set of interpretative problems' (1960, 54). Autobiographers do not share the same principles or value set but there appears to be a common motive 'to carve public monuments out of their private lives' (Howarth 1974, 369). In the context of critiquing one's own practice with a view to making significant changes to one's profession, organisation or community of practice, the core of the professional doctorate begins in the practitioner's critiqued story of their working life. In fact, one type of autobiography – the oratorical autobiography – takes vocation as its theme: how work guides one's life and becomes the story of one's life. However autobiography is defined, it is an ineluctable fact that constructing one's story concerns language, not least the use of the first person and an 'I – we' construct. Language – and the intricacies of how autobiographical texts are constructed through this medium – was therefore of paramount concern in our workshops.

The psychoanalyst is always interested in how notions of self are constructed and in the 'latent dynamics of the text' (Ryan 1976, 40), or what the author did not intend. This could be perceived as the unconscious dimension of the work, the hidden meaning, or a certain ignorance concerning one's own text. We, however, focus on the unpremeditated use of autobiography to improve one's criticality and thus one's academic writing. We say 'unpremeditated' because although we encourage doctoral candidates to recount their 'stories' as they relate to their workplaces, past and present, and what has informed their values and decision making processes, we are not looking for their stories to be histories. A *history* is a story that is experienced, recounted and condensed usually chronologically. Instead the autobiography functions as *language*. It allows the writer:

> to project human life, complete with its epistemological processes, into a mental space whose primary feature is that it includes representation of the subject slowly going through all the steps, meticulously surveying the various planes which made this mental space possible. (Blanchard 1982, 114)

Participants examined the writing of others, using the writing as a lens to construct their own 'critical' autobiographies. This transformational process, of seeing oneself clearer by examining others' lives, began to emerge. Recent writers have explored the transformational properties of the professional doctorate. Nye et al (2014) use the metaphor of wandering or weaving as doctoral candidates start to make sense of their learning about themselves: it is a fluid process rather than any lightning bolt of illumination. Morley and Petty (2010) claim that a robust knowledge base – that which is articulated by critical engagement and writing clearly – provides professionals with 'authority, legitimacy, persuasiveness and political leverage' (1). Fulton et al (2012) view the professional doctorate as a process of self-reflection which focuses on how one is viewed through the eyes of others (and through one's own eyes by extension). In Fenge's (2010) account of completing a professional doctorate,

she makes a strong case for using a retrospective reflexive narrative of her own experiences to make sense of her identity both as a professional and a student. In fact, as she persuasively puts it: because of the ambiguity and mystery inherent in the human self, we are forever dealing with multiple identities. In their investigation into the motives that drove Irish professionals to Trinity College Dublin to complete professional doctorates, Loxley and Seery (2012) found, among other motivations, the 'intrinsic drive to learn, the desire to write and the desire to speak [...] with confidence and authority' (10 – 11). In all of these accounts of transformative learning journeys, the importance of self-reflection in recounting the journey and the necessity of learning how to express the journey as clearly as possible resonate with our experiences of delivering these workshops.

We had a further concern in supporting candidates whose first language wasn't English. If, as Belcher and Hirvela (2005) state, many qualitative researchers face deep uncertainties and a considerable degree of risk taking in undertaking writing for a dissertation or professional doctorate, non-native English speakers must feel as though they are 'balancing in mid-air without even a wire' (188). Because the qualitative paradigm seems to place much more emphasis on discursiveness and complexity in the writing process than the quantitative study, non-native speakers may perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage. Although an investigation into the challenges of academic writing for non-native English speakers lies beyond the scope of our study, we were acutely sensitive to any additional support these students might have needed. We note that our encouragement to frame their professional doctoral narrative as critical autobiography could harness the strengths of commitment and self efficacy which Belcher and Hirvela find emphasised in self-narration.

The workshops

We shared the delivery of our workshops and the facilitation of the groups. One of us focused on examining criticality, introducing the fundamentals of critical thinking, dialoguing with knowledge and challenging the selection of likes and dislikes based on uncritiqued assumptions or prejudices. The other focused on literature, introducing the participants to convincing and persuasive prose to see how points of view were handled, pieces framed and organised, the metaphors and images that were employed and how writers marshalled evidence to support their conclusions. We both looked at different aspects of identity, one on the cultural and socially constructed and the other on the voice of self or selves. We shared intensive note taking to gauge the impact of our workshops, and used notes as an alternative to video or audio recording, which would have been intrusive. We wanted to encourage as much openness as possible. Participants reported that, as facilitators, with different professional backgrounds, we modelled the possibilities of, in their words, 'transdisciplinarity in action', the 'complementarity of otherness', the 'rich possibilities when one is open to difference'. The participants themselves were from a range of ethnic and professional backgrounds, which enriched the discussions.

There have been two recent studies on transformative learning, one with professional doctorate candidates, the other using creative writing and fictional autobiography with adult learners in general. Patricia Guthro (2014), in her examination of the identity issues inherent in becoming and being a writer of fiction, makes the point that people who write fiction set out to produce meaningful work. Although we set out to help candidates write better by using fiction (as well as non-fiction) and did not necessarily equate the perseverance fiction writers need in order to succeed with that same determination those taking professional doctorates need in order to develop their careers, there is a shared concern between our work and that of Guthro's in the recognition that both our students and hers are striving to create meaningful work. Guthro makes the compelling point that work that is 'closely aligned with an

individual's beliefs and values [...] has greater personal meaning that impacts on one's sense of identity' (175). If we take it for granted that the professional doctoral candidate has invested great personal meaning, and even emotional stake, in her project work, we can perceive a connection between this investment and the intensely personal desire to be identified as a 'writer' by the fiction writer. Moreover, there are elements of fiction writing such as making sense of one's life (and work) which mirror the professional doctoral candidates' concerns. Similarly, Celia Hunt's (2013) recognition of the benefits of creative writing as a tool for learning is not unlike our own striving to be the most challenging, creative and provocative teachers we can be: our primary concern is always to produce a space conducive to transformational learning. We differ from Hunt in that we do not view writing as therapeutic: we recognise that someone's creativity may be blocked for emotional reasons, but our concern is with developing reflexivity as students learn useful writing techniques rather than taking into account anyone's emotional state.

Finally, Paul Gibbs' (2014) examination of the professional practice curriculum offers us considerable weight in proposing a professional doctorate course of study which includes a degree of writing and criticality support. Gibbs uses the term *currere* as a 'proposed curriculum of self-understanding' to make the case that professional practice or work based learning should be viewed as a 'lifelong journey' rather than a curriculum of employability skills (147). In his persuasive paper urging us to rethink radically the nature of higher education's relationship to professional practice, he envisages *currere* as a way of helping practitioners understand what drives their practice autobiographically. Like Gibbs, we want our candidates to question the domain of professional hierarchy, not to accept authorised authority, to understand their own becoming. Ultimately, we set out to help students to write better by using fiction and non-fiction and designed workshops around what John Dewey (2009 [1916]) called 'amelioristic motives', a way of improving current practice.

Workshop 1

Probing the notion of critical thinking was done through examining the dynamics of constructing convincing and persuasive prose with learning which came out of the experiential parts being linked back to their doctoral work. Participants had been asked to bring in examples of writing they liked and disliked and to share their views in pairs. Participants agreed that critical thinking was the fundamental building block in higher education, particularly at doctoral level, but that it was not solely a rational, mechanical activity. Reflection, including emotional responses, was central to critical thinking in adult life. In particular, the ability to imagine alternatives to one's current ways of thinking and living is one that often entails a deliberate break with rational modes of thought in order to prompt leaps in creativity. This reflection, as Boud and Walker (2009, 82) explain, is 'a useful instrument for recognising [the barriers] which come from our personal story and those which come from the social, cultural context in which we have developed'. Critical thinking or critical reflection should therefore be the basis of autobiography. The more critical the doctoral candidate is, the better he or she is able to tell his or her story; however, what had challenged us was how often the candidates wrote descriptively, concentrating on problem solving and ways of doing or not doing rather than on ways of being in the world which informs ways of doing.

The idea of critical autobiography as a model in which the value of the individual can be appreciated, in which the mystery of what it means to be human is appreciated, in which the possibilities of identity exploration are rich and transformative is one which surfaced as early as the first half of this first seminar.

When discussing the writers whom the participants admired or did not admire, they began to reveal themselves and a notion of the self as defined by its relationship to others.

One participant read out an excerpt from the *Four-Gated City* by Doris Lessing. He praised its vocabulary from a 'vanished time' and described the writing as 'evocative, poetic' and having a depth of narrative that evoked 1950s London perfectly, a London to which he could relate, the narrator, a woman to whom he could relate. Another candidate discussed 'the beauty of the Qu'ran' and said its 'lyricism' drew him into 'the possibilities of beauty in everyday life' and 'formed the cornerstone of his leaning'. Another offered his admiration of Orwell's essays and spoke about how he was able to envisage clearly the situations Orwell had lived through and written about, situations he felt were both distant and yet somehow familiar.

In this first workshop, in which participants examined a range of different genres, we could see students beginning to connect with different characters and their stories. And in their attempts to make sense of texts, students were beginning to make connections with their own lives and experiences. As Bruns (1992, 252) points out, 'basic to hermeneutics both ancient and modern is the idea that there is no understanding at a distance; one must always work out some internal connection with what one seeks to understand'. But the participants did not create connections only among the experiences they had lived and ones that the authors were depicting; they also created connections between the status of the writers they were reading and their own status as emergent authors. A discussion about a writer's attributes or lack of them would invariably lead the participants to an admission of struggling with their own writing and harbouring anxious attitudes towards writing at this academic level. By reading autobiographical texts and by looking at how authors presented their stories, the workshop participants were beginning to envisage themselves as authors and make links with the authors' self-presentation and their own. Looking at others' stories emerged as an oblique window onto the participants' own. Russo's theorisation of how we use narratives to comprehend the self goes some way in explaining how and why the

workshop participants began to use the autobiographical texts in this way: 'Since we put together our lives as narratives, with intentions, a causal and temporal order, a setting, we tend to make narratives of others too, and study history and even fiction for similar selves' (2005, 195).

We also introduced some extracts from writers who were regarded highly and publicly recognised: a Nobel laureate and a social commentator, without revealing the authors' names. The participants' responses to the extracts, their strong and well argued criticisms and their initial embarrassment when the writers' identities were revealed were explored more thoroughly in later workshops. For example, the extract from the Nobel Laureate was unanimously considered 'boring and dense' and 'exclusive of the reader'. We had at least introduced the concept of how the identity of the author can influence the critical lens being used to assess the piece of writing.

The participants became interested in the assumptions relating to audience and purpose which writers make about readers and which readers make about writers, conveyed through style of writing and knowledge of authorship. They were struck by the assumptions they as readers made based on personal and cultural prejudice; the difference between 'not wanting to know' or read something because of uncritiqued assumptions and remaining in a state of 'not knowing' because of it. There was fear around exposure to what they did not want to know– a theme which came up later in Workshop 3and which will be discussed more fully then.

Participants were beginning to look at their writing through a different lens, seeing how the manner in which the words were put together could substantially influence how the writing was received by others. Hierarchical reverence for the big guns of literature and knowledge was revealed as an obstacle to their own knowledge development. As the workshop participants began to question how texts were put together, questioning the place of

a particular adjective, the length of a given syntactical construction, the repeated use of a certain phrase, their fear of exploring others' texts critically was now diminishing.

By the end of this first session, criticality had deepened significantly. The questions participants were asking of each other and of the works had become qualitatively different over the four hours, intimating how they might use the discussions to enhance their own academic writing.

Workshop 2

While continuing in our second workshop to examine the autobiographical texts we had introduced in the first, we began to look at the question of voice and how a researcher presents herself using a particular voice in her writing. Participants expressed their unease at having to adapt their writing style to academic expectations. Many participants felt compelled to use the passive voice in their research in an attempt to be 'objective'. Their unwillingness to use the first person in their academic research had resulted in the awkward prose that examiners and supervisors noted in their evaluation of professional doctorate candidates' work. Our growing concern with candidates' reliance on excessively complicated constructions that failed to express what the candidates wanted to say was the origin of our desire to run these workshops. All too often it appeared that candidates were not themselves when they were writing, but instead they appeared to create an academic alter ego. There was a gulf between the clarity with which the candidates expressed themselves in their workshop and the obfuscatory nature of their written work. We wanted to get these candidates to write with the same confidence and fluency with which they spoke, to be unafraid of putting their 'authentic voice' on paper. We encouraged them to apply the lessons they had learnt from autobiography to their own writing. How had Orwell or Lessing given that impression of

authenticity in their writing? The answer, which the candidates discovered with little guidance, was these writers' use of the first person.

We decided to focus our attention on candidates' anxiety surrounding use of the subjective voice in research. Candidates perceived that in 'traditional' research, objectivity is conveyed in the passive tense. But the professional doctorate, which is based on practitioner research, requires dialogue between the researcher and her context, a subjective - objective interaction. We therefore explained to candidates that because their research is about themselves, about their work, parts of the research process are necessarily conveyed in the first person active tense. Practitioner research is thus well placed to reveal what Laplantine and Nouss (2008) refer to as 'metissage', or the interweaving of connections, cultures, ideas. Through its use of the first person, successful practitioner research examines the complexity that exists between islands of knowledge and within the range of human interplays including social constructs, the 'I – we' relationship, the influences on motivations and actions, power dynamics and the experience of the lived rather than the observed world. In the context of the workplace the subjective is not generally perceived to be an acceptable indicator of reliability. The workshop participants revealed that they had suppressed the first person in order to conform to the exigencies of the workplace. Our role in these workshops then was to challenge these students by encouraging them to develop a subjective perspective, whose masterful use they were able to witness first hand in the autobiographical texts we examined together.

For our participants, it emerged from their exploration of autobiographical texts that they used the objective passive form to 'hide behind', to 'keep our "subjective" opinions silent' even if these had been critically informed by years of professional experience. What then might be the 'subjective' voice for each individual with its own hallmark? In every

writing situation the writer uses a particular voice which indicates the relationship she intends to establish between herself and her readers. One's voice is the role one assumes:

> A writer's voice depends on three things: his knowledge of himself, his awareness of the character of his audience, his understanding of the matter he wishes to discuss. Unless he knows his subject, he will not be able to strike a clear attitude toward it; unless he knows his audience, he will not be able to choose means of persuasion likely to be effective with it; unless he knows himself, he will not understand his purposes clearly enough to appreciate which voice or voices he can honestly assume in making his appeal. (Martin and Ohmann 1963, 138)

Our contention is that the passive voice can render indistinct, less powerful and even evasive such knowledge and awareness, such a clear attitude, such an appreciation of subject and audience. Of course it has its uses: impersonality can become a device for making matters seem important and, as mentioned above, appear more reliable in dealing with factual information rather than constructs. However, the technical construction is rigid and at times convoluted. We went through a number of exercises which demonstrated the advantages of using the more direct and rigorous active voice such as:

> There were a great number of dead leaves on the ground → Dead leaves covered the ground
>
> The mouse was eaten by the cat → The cat ate the mouse

However, this demonstration felt like a 'lesson' – pedagogically prescriptive and boring. It was not until we turned to 'voice' in poetry that the participants responded at a level that evaded the strictures of the cognitive gatekeeper. They read Robert Frost's 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening' and identified with the bold narrative style of an author who refused to efface his presence in the literary work. Some of the comments included an admiration for Frost's sense of concision, his directness, his exact word choice. One

participant remarked on the poem's 'autobiographical lucidity'. Participants repeatedly expressed the desire to find the voice to relate their narrative construction without it being boring, narcissistic and unreliable: 'I saw [the workshops] as a chance to gain more opportunities to learn within the programme [...] grapple with what we were supposed to be doing and most importantly, find out what "voice" I needed to have for my doctorate'; '[there is] a trusting atmosphere where we can express ideas and learn how to express ourselves and find our voices without feeling stupid'; 'my main problem is that I don't like to commit to paper until I feel confident about what I am saying'.

It became increasingly apparent that this elusive 'voice' was the tool by which the participants could impart their knowledge and values. Although it was helpful for the participants to explore how points of view are handled, how pieces of writing are framed and organised and how writers use metaphors and images to strengthen their prose, participants appeared to be searching for the confidence to write in their own voices where 'own' appeared to have a different identity than 'own' in the context of their professional lives.

Workshop 3

We had asked participants to carry out two activities prior to the workshop. The first was to read chapter two 'The Years of Magical Thinking' from Barbara Ehrenreich's *Smile or Die*: *How Positive Thinking Fooled America*. The second task was to go to the webpage we designed for the course and read four poems there without knowing the authors. We looked first at Ehrenreich's essay. Ehrenreich's essay was a useful starting point for discussion given that it encapsulates Schön's idea (1983) that reflexivity enhances personal and professional development. Ehrenreich's value for the workshop participants lay in her ability to fuse features of academic work with the personal, creating a narrative shape and voice with which the students could identify. In her desire to create a qualitative research methodology that

could capture the experiences of her personal and professional life in a social and cultural critique, Jess Moriarty (2014) cites Joan Didion's work as embodying the combination of academic analysis and reflection with a creative exploration of personal feelings about the world. Ehrenheich's essay too proved an empowering text of unvarnished experience for the candidates to use as examples of critical autobiography. Usher (1993) suggests that autobiography as a qualitative methodology can be rationalised by its preoccupation with locating the authenticity of the self.

The Ehrenreich essay critiques the multi-billion dollar positive-thinking industry and offers an autobiographical account of the author's diagnosis of breast cancer. In her essay Ehrenreich vents her feelings of impotence and rage and her subsequent investigation into motivational conferences. Her examination of these positive-thinking conferences results in an acerbic, balanced and sage diagnosis of an America beset by the seductive assumption that one only has to desire something to make it happen. We were less interested in whether the participants agreed with Ehrenreich's polemic views on complacency and brainwashing and more in whether the participants could comment on her 'voice'. The questions we used to provoke discussion were the following: What made it her voice? What made it original? Was it persuasive or not and why? Did you trust what she was saying? The participants concluded that a major strength of her writing was 'her ability to merge her facts with her autobiography'. In personalising her argument, she 'made her views more immediate, more potent, more urgent'. Her arguments – whether economic, political or social – are, in the words of one participant, 'filtered through a heightened emotional awareness', which is 'coloured by her history, her memory, her autobiography'. The participants commented on Ehrenreich's 'ability to interpret a subject', analyse and 'discuss it with precision', care and lucidity while 'amplifying her questioning prose with the personal'. They did not doubt the reliability of her evidence or her authenticity. They did not feel manipulated. From the

discussions, the participants came to understand that originality can reside in a thing, an artefact, but also in a person and their way of seeing, searching, interpreting and communicating.

'My aim has always been to find my original voice because I know it's like no one else's': this candidate rewrote part of her doctorate and won the poster presentation award in a summer conference competing with PhD students as well as professional doctorate candidates; her writing style in particular was commended. Although simply a minor anecdote testifying to the impact of our workshops, the prize-winning candidate's rewritten work is indicative of the broader reach of our workshops in encouraging candidates to reflect on their work and to adapt their voices in a quest for greater authenticity and clarity. What then emerges as a piece of research into a particular area of the professional setting becomes distinctive, a new synthesis, an existing model applied to a new situation, in a new way fundamentally informed by the critical engagement the researcher has with her own lived experience and its relationship to the environment and the human grouping/s of which she is a member. Ehrenreich's approach helped the poster prize winner, in her own words, to find 'the internal connection to what I was saying' and her critical view of herself provided the 'conditions of reliability' about her observations about the work environment.

The third workshop also explored power dynamics and cultural influences, the same influences that were perceived by some participants as blocking their route to originality and distinctiveness. Some of the participants admitted to being prejudiced against certain cultural products because of the perceived identity of the author. The four poems on the website were about identity and belonging, but none of the poets had identified the details of who they were and what cultures they were writing about. The discussions centred on the degree to which the participants felt that they had been able to relate to the authorial persona projected in the poems. One participant claimed to be able to relate to a poem because it was 'obviously

by a man who had known battles'. Another participant claimed to be able 'to relate to the exile' of the Jewish people in a poem and suggested that it was written by a Jewish exile. The revelation of the identity of the poets were caused genuine surprise; for example the male poet was in fact a female poet, the Jewish exile a Palestinian. Yet the fact that the participants had previously expressed sympathy for these poets and their concerns meant that it was illogical for them to attempt to revise their opinions now that the poets' identity had been revealed. The participants had therefore been encouraged to explore poetry that might have been culturally inaccessible to them before.

Underpinning our desire to engender an appreciation of the power of language was our belief that confidence was central to all writing and self-expression. A command of structure, language and material allows the writer to be bold. Above all, the goal of writing is to 'succeed with human readers' (Elbow 2011, 174). Readers are too diverse to agree to the same standards of quality, therefore the ability to write well is predicated on that fragile and elusive ingredient called confidence. Our premise was that this confidence, which makes a piece of writing assertive, searching and powerful could be developed by practising writing autobiography and constructing personal narratives.

In her exploration of working class autobiography and gender, Regenia Gagnier argues that narratives of the self are extremely significant in the discourse of human identity. The following criteria from her autobiographical canon, are those we emphasised in the workshops: 'a meditative and self-reflective sensibility; a faith in writing as a tool of self-expression; an attempt to make sense of life as a narrative progressing in time [...] and a belief in personal creativity, autonomy, and freedom for the future' (1990, 100). When we set out to help doctoral candidates become more effective writers, we were effectively promoting their use of an autobiographical discourse as a means of achieving the attributes espoused by Gagnier.

Workshop 4

The final workshop branched out beyond autobiography to examine how authors project an authorial identity designed to promote an image of confidence and authority in academic discourse. In this workshop we used examples of academic writing and extracts from academic journals in disciplines with which the participants might not be familiar, for example climatology, cosmology, medicine. They examined the properties of the writing style employed by the authors and evaluated the effectiveness of the writing. They were encouraged to identify metaphors and other rhetorical figures and how these tropes, even in an academic discourse, contributed to making the writing more accessible and more engaging. Many participants remarked that even academic articles frequently use an unexpected, sometimes comical anecdote as an entry point to the material. Unanimously they were attracted by the 'professional/academic/journalistic style' best depicted in publications like *New Scientist* and *Scientific American* which 'bridged them into the discipline'. They remarked that the least successful academic papers, or the least interesting to read, required them to, in their words, 'learn a new language'. Witty anecdotes and an engaging autobiographical narrative proved far more effective devices for allowing readers to begin to penetrate the depths of unfamiliar disciplines. They identified the following as engagement enablers: introductions that connected to universals in the human condition, short, un-convoluted sentences, ascending complexity and evidential expertise.

There was some discussion about what is allowed and not allowed in academic writing protocols such as contracted verbs and using dialect and computer speak. Challenges arose about accepted practice and expectations that were culture bound which could be limiting to the pursuit of knowledge through criticality but at the same time it was recognised

that academic protocols existed as boundaries to ensure reliability and that the skill was in negotiating the boundaries with confidence, evidence and authenticity.

There remained concern, although somewhat diminished through the workshops, about the types of audience for which one was writing. Candidates on professional doctorates were writing not just for 'the academy' but for a diversity of audiences with different criteria of reliability and validity. Although the professional doctorate requires the use of the first person in researcher positioning, rationale for choices made in relation to the research activities, such as interpretative frames for data analysis and reports for different audiences on the research and its findings could be written in the style appropriate to the culture of those audiences and be included in the appendices as a vehicle of impact.

We then turned to what others had written about this issue of style to extract some basic principles which would support the individual voice and meet academic requirements. We looked at George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) which examines 'ugly and inaccurate' written English. Echoing Orwell, we stressed the importance of concreteness and clarity, simplicity and transparency. Transparency takes us back to authenticity. We concentrated on one of Orwell's major points: 'The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink' (1946, 15).

The participants were eager to draw on their cultural store of conceptual selves in their appraisal of Orwell's dictum, 'If you simplify your English, you are freed of the worst follies of orthodoxy' (1946, 20). A student born and raised in the Middle East related a personal anecdote about her struggles with her identity as an Arab Muslim in Jerusalem. What had she learnt from the workshops?: 'Not to be afraid of writing simply – to express myself in brief sentences and not to sound like someone I've read and might admire'.

Another student of African heritage was pleased that what he had learned with us was a consolidation of the advice he had been given in his formative school boy years in a British pedagogical system. Yet he had learned more with us, he said – he had learned to trust himself: his writing was as good as other writing in that it was *his* writing and that it was his *authentic* voice that counted. This candidate has since successfully published for his professional field and in an academic journal.

Our intentions at the conception of the idea of this series of workshops were bound up in our ideas about writing better and how to analyse in a deeper critical vein. The autobiographical dimension of the texts analysed in the workshops engendered a link between the students' own writing and their stories. They began to understand how an autobiographical voice – an *I* – might lend authenticity and clarity to their research, in much the same way as this personal voice had been effective in the autobiographical texts they explored in the workshops. We realised that each participant had a story to tell and in getting participants to tell their stories in the clearest and most reflective way possible, the legitimacy of life writing became the cornerstone of professional learning. Eakin (1999) illustrates the paradox of the 'simple' autobiography:

> Autobiographical discourse tends to promote an illusion of disarming simplicity when it comes to self and self-experience [...] Use of the first person – the 'I', autobiography's dominant key – compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of ourselves and stories; it not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organised than it possibly could be. (ix)

The personas are mysterious, ambiguous, and each participant will spend a life time exploring herself. 'Self' here is less of an entity and more of, in Eakin's words, 'a kind of awareness in progress' (ix). We have come to believe that in encouraging participants to reflect critically on their identity, to draw on their cultural store of conceptual selves, to

become who they are when writing about their lives can help candidates to write and critique to a high academic standard. Autobiographical writing – and the reading, analysis and replication of this writing – proved to be rich tool for developing professional practice in our students.

Some thoughts on epistemology

A discipline such as engineering or medicine, in which professional doctorates are common, may not at first seem suitable to an autobiographical approach. We maintain that this epistemological strategy can be used and has been used to great effect. In the early 1980s Robert Coles (1989), a psychiatrist and educator at Harvard University, found that graduate courses in ethical reflection for students studying medicine, law and business were not enough to encourage introspection. At Harvard he devised a programme of using literature as a way of guiding moral conduct, connecting with the human experience and offering his students the opportunity to examine the power of language. Jerome Bruner (2002) advocates the use of stories, particularly autobiography, in the field of law. One of our doctoral students was a pharmacist who had difficulty in writing up his material. We urged him to use a narrative structure, which is the basis of personal identity and is used to organise events "into unified and understandable wholes" (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 137). When we suggested that he tell a story and put himself in the centre of this narrative about his life, his business and his investigation, his chapters started to take on the structure they had lacked. As Bruner points out, "For better or worse,[narrative] is our preferred, perhaps even our obligatory medium for expressing human aspirations and their vicissitudes, our own and those of others" (p. 89).

Our pharmacist, who was investigating how to work with the NHS to make the concept of "the pharmacy" a community focal point, brought in an excerpt from his introduction on a memory stick to share with the class. The writing was bluntly, although at times

constructively, criticised as "having no impact", "meandering", "being extremely informative yet dull", "not emphasising [his] positionality". When encouraged to bring himself into the account, to arouse our sense of curiosity by providing a back-story, even to create a sense of drama, he was able to reconfigure his introduction by "telling the story". His first intervention was changing the awkward passive voice ("was looked into by me") to the active one ("I decided to look into the possibility..."). By putting himself at the centre of the account, he ordered his experience into what Mandler (1984) describes as a schematic, structured narrative that provides personal identity.

Story-telling and autobiography do not seem a natural fit for some disciplines and professions. Bruner (2002) suggests that some professionals, lawyers, for example, are loath to be thought of as great story-tellers and try instead to "make their law stories as unstorylike as possible, even anti-story like: factual, logically self-evident, hostile to the fanciful, respectful to the ordinary, seemingly 'untailored'" (p. 48). Accounts, and in this case, doctorates from more scientific fields such as medicine and pharmacy, are fashioned in dry and factual prose replete with awkward passive constructions, and approvingly drained of drama, because the writers want to be thought of as factual, logical and unfanciful truth tellers. Yet the drama and interest inherent in an autobiographical account of one's professional practice will enhance the language and pique the reader's interest, not detract from the self-evident legitimacy of a legal, medical or scientific exploration.

Costley and Armsby (2007) make the point that work-based learning students experience tensions "between the institutional drivers of the organisations for which they are working, their own value system and how they would like to develop themselves" (p. 31). Our students – coming from fields as disparate as teaching, pharmacy, law and human resources – were all

highly educated (bachelor and master's degrees and writing up the final stages of their doctorates) - professionals whose writing had hitherto been confined to academic and professional contexts. In using autobiography, students were able to present a personal view of the tensions and complexities in their professional lives. Costley and Armsby suggest that reflection can help people realise who they are and "how much who they are, is a part of how they do things" (p. 31). Structuring reflection in an autobiographical manner helps students to think of themselves as emerging authors and, in their own self-assessments, appears to help them to communicate a clear and compelling investigation, by emphasising the personal aspects of their professional identity. Students started to see how crucial it was to be narrators of their self-stories, to construct "story lines that integrate and give meaning to all the critical events that have been part of [their] existence" (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 147).

Conclusion

The views, voices and experiences of the participants contributed significantly to our understanding of the critical autobiographical experience of learning in the professional/academic context. We would suggest that professional learning is not solely about acquiring professional knowledge, skills and competencies but concerns the negotiation of ourselves: our voices, our expressions, our relationships, our quests and our interactions with the people with whom we engage in our professional lives and with the organisations in which we work. We observed an emergent sense of self as the workshop participants approached their own autobiographies /stories in the spirit of cultural anthropologists. It seems clear to us that for the workshop participants, the integration of a narrated account of lived experience into doctoral research can be considered legitimate academic knowledge as well as a useful way to support candidates struggling with the writing process. They came to recognise that the capacity to construct narratives reflected a more cohesive sense of identity. The participants' confidence to critique writers' works developed in parallel with the

confidence to write. Furthermore, the confidence to write emerged from the tentative construction of critical autobiography. Ultimately, this approach – using critical autobiography to improve writing skills and deepen criticality – should make a contribution to the research on the education of adults and adult learning and to narrowing the gap between practitioner and academic knowledge. A key outcome from this research is that we now offer regular workshops on critical autobiography as a translational bridge both within the university and in sectors outside the university, which are either already engaged with or intending to engage with the university in long term learning and development strategies.

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