Thinking through Play: “Visual” Approaches to Post/Graduate Research Writing

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Introduction

Starke-Meyerring (2011) argues that post/graduate students face a paradox when it comes to research writing in academic contexts. Seasoned and experienced members of the discourse see research writing as universal, generic and transparent. Over many generations, the practices, routines and patterns of interacting in a research culture become so “common-sense” that they are normalised and eventually become invisible to insiders in the discourse: “disciplinary and institutional traditions of producing knowledge through writing have become normalised to the point that they appear universal to long-time participants in research cultures, including supervisors” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, p. 77). In other words, insiders to the discourse (supervisors, professors, academic teachers) often do not “see” the patterns of writing that are specific to academia because they are so used to them. The paradox, according to Starke-Meyerring, is that research writing is not universal at all. Instead, research writing is always situated. Writing a thesis in Geography, for example, is very different from writing a thesis in Philosophy even though both may be housed in an Arts Faculty. Both of these theses are very different from writing a Science thesis. Writing a Master's thesis, again, is substantially different from writing a PhD or a journal article for publication. Long-time members of a research culture see writing as “normal”, obvious and clear—“common sense”—while newcomers (post/graduate students) experience the specificity: “the culturally shaped nature of writing, its deep rootedness in cultural, institutional, and disciplinary traditions of knowledge production” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, p. 78). Research communities develop their own culture with specific ways of arguing, making knowledge claims and valuing what counts as evidence. Starke-Meyerring (2011) calls this the “invisibility” of writing in academic contexts and she poses two consequences of this paradox. First, when writing practices merge into the unseen and we only focus on content (the writing is generic), we do not acknowledge the epistemic nature of writing. How one argues, for example, is tied to epistemology and how one
comes to know knowledge. How one questions (is allowed to question) is intricately linked to how knowledge is produced in a specific research culture. Second, when we are blind to writing as part of *epistemic practice*, we fail to recognise the role of writing in shaping scholarly identity. It is through writing, that the researcher engages with disciplinary debates, positions him/herself, and develops as a researcher. As such research writing can be transformative, developmental and identity forming. The example Starke-Meyerring gives is that in undergraduate writing, citations usually involve accessing information. In post/graduate writing, citations involve aligning oneself with particular debates, defending a position, establishing an epistemological foundation.

Research on post/graduate student writing confirms the invisible nature of research/thesis writing. The transition from undergraduate to post/graduate studies is often fraught with anxiety as students struggle to understand exactly what is required of them (Heussi, 2012). Many of the conventions and norms of academic writing are subtle and complex, yet post/graduate students rarely receive explicit instruction. Many post/graduate students feel intimidated and powerless about conducting and writing their research (Morgenshtern et al., 2011). In a context where language, genre, and stylistic conventions are governed by disciplinary norms that are constituted by competing and conflicting discourses, implicit learning becomes problematic. International students find it particularly difficult to access peer and academic cultures (Deem & Brehony, 2000). While not only coping with new systems and different research cultures international students are also negotiating all of this in a new or different language from their undergraduate programmes. “Widening participation” may be opening university doors to multilingual students, yet this access is potentially only partial and academic writing often serves as a mechanism of exclusion (Burke, 2008; Mitchell, 2010). These widespread structural and discursive practices are often seen as individual deficits and problems where the student is “blamed” for not being able to “see” hidden writing practices.

Research Problem

The challenge for our team was how to make the enormous range of research writing literacies visible, how to surface the epistemological nature of research writing, and how to tap into the identity-forming nature of research writing that is developmental, transformative and encourages the post/graduate researcher to develop an identity as a scholar? Our project only allowed for a co-curricular seven-day workshop for post/graduate students to produce this miracle. The