

REVIEW OF:

Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision

Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson, Routledge, London and New York, 2006,
173 pages

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Have you ever wondered what advice you should give to doctoral students who turn out 'turgid prose, badly structured arguments' or 'laboured literature reviews' (p.1)? Or, are you a doctoral student who is worried about the pending submission of your thesis and whether your writing is going to be good enough for the examiners? In either case, Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson's book, *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision*, offers something for you.

Although the authors clearly target doctoral supervisors as their main audience, they also cater for doctoral students and, I would argue, for anyone who wants to reflect on, enhance, and engage in discussion about academic writing. The book begins with a theorisation of doctoral writing as a discursive social practice. Kamler and Thomson argue strongly that writing is not a set of decontextualised skills, but that it is an integral and important part of research. Indeed, their argument is that writing *is* research. And, as we all know, academics are represented and judged by their writing and successful academics have to be able to write well. An important part of doctoral study, then, is the 'text work' that develops an academic or scholarly identity.

By conceptualising writing in this way, Kamler and Thomson argue that there is a need to move away from a notion of writing as 'a set of arbitrary rules and matters of etiquette' (p.7) – and away from the pathologising of individual writers when their writing seems deficient – towards seeing the potential of 'writing-centred supervision' (p.9). They use the work of Norman Fairclough to frame the 'writing' of a doctoral thesis – the production of text – within the teaching and learning relationships of students and supervisors, as well as within the institutional practices of universities and broader social, cultural and political contexts. The location of writing within those contexts means that Kamler and Thomson focus on complex processes and open up discussion about the importance of pedagogical spaces for foregrounding thesis writing in the student-supervisor relationship.

Using this theoretical frame, the book offers chapters that focus on particular aspects of thesis writing. One of my favourites was the chapter with a memorable title – 'Persuading an octopus into a glass' (Chapter 3). Drawing on a metaphor used by a doctoral student to describe the difficult task of 'reviewing literatures', this chapter provides practical advice about the tricky tasks of doing 'literature work' and the associated 'identity work of becoming a scholar' (p.34). It also teases out Kamler and Thomson's rejection of the term 'literature review' and their resolution to use the pluralised 'literatures' in its place. Additionally, it suggests how supervisors might engage in dialogue with their students about the practice of academic writing and how they might work to co-construct texts with their students. Many of the ideas in this chapter resonated with the challenges I experienced when writing my own doctoral thesis and they have given me ideas about how I might work with the doctoral students I supervise.

Several chapters (in particular Chapters 5-8) focus on specific linguistic features of academic texts, particularly those that will enable doctoral students to write with authority. These chapters provide a pedagogical and linguistic toolkit, with accompanying metalanguage, that supervisors can use when providing 'guidance for revision' to their students (p.100). Using the systemic functional grammar of Michael Halliday, the authors identify some useful linguistic tools, including nominalisation and Theme. Whilst they recognise the panic that some supervisors and students may feel about the use of grammar and its metalanguage, they guide their readers effortlessly through accessible and useful explanations and examples. In keeping with the book's theoretical framing, these are not presented as decontextualised skills, but are discussed in the context of the supervisory processes conducted by the authors with their students.

Much of the book discusses how doctoral supervisors and students might address issues around writing. The final chapter (Chapter 9), however, moves beyond 'dialogue-based supervision practice' and the relationship between supervisor and student, and explores how 'systemic attention to writing' can be of benefit at the institutional level (p.144). In looking at the broad context, as per their use of Fairclough's model, Kamler and Thomson describe a range of strategies that they have used in faculty, university and cross-university contexts.

Throughout the book, Kamler and Thomson do their fair share of myth busting, presenting their concerns and critique about advice that has been offered in publications about thesis writing. Yet they don't stop at critique. Their book offers practical pedagogical suggestions that supervisors and their students can try. Nevertheless, the authors are adamant that their book is not a 'how to' manual. Instead, they 'talk about things' that they have found useful and encourage others to 'use or remake strategies for their own supervision contexts' (p.1). Examples from their own doctoral students and colleagues, with 'before' and 'after' examples of students' texts, provide effective illustrations of how these strategies might work.

Kamler and Thomson argue that it should be possible 'to dip in and out of the chapters', rather than reading their book the whole way through (p.xi). They do, however, recommend that readers look at the first two chapters where they explicate the book's underlying theories. Having read the book from front to back cover, I think I would have missed too much if I been selective about which chapters or sections to read. I know, though, that I will return to particular sections and will use some as ways of opening up discussions about writing with my doctoral students. The book's theoretical foundations resonated with my beliefs about writing and I loved reading a text that distanced itself from deficit stories about doctoral students who can't write well.

Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision is not a book that offers sure-fire solutions to writing a good doctoral thesis. However, it offers ways of facilitating dialogue between supervisors and their students about 'the what' and 'the how' of effective writing practices within academia, as well as suggesting ways of developing a writing culture within institutional contexts. This is a book that I plan to revisit.

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