

# Power effects, normalising advice and evolving knowledge of doctoral writing

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Résumé de l'article

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Article

# Power effects, normalising advice and evolving knowledge of doctoral writing

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## **Abstract**

Prescriptive advice about doctoral writing often fails to recognise the complexities of the doctoral journey and of the discursive and social practice work of thesis writing. Linguistic and cultural backgrounds are ignored where advice about writing converges around a norm. In this paper, we explore the role of ‘advice’ in our growth as thesis writers by examining our literacy history and tensions we faced while writing our theses. We pursue a duoethnographic process (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), a process that facilitates the construction and reconstruction of perspectives. From our differing backgrounds, we experienced discourses of advice in alternative ways. We identify normalising advice trends, which in turn, led us to seek out and act upon our agency. Therefore, advice occupied a fulcrum point between opposing forces during our PhD candidature. Inspired by Foucault’s (1977) ‘power/knowledge’ we think of experiences and encounters along our doctoral journey as power effects which shaped our views on advice. We conclude by outlining how insights for our teacher-selves inform how we speak about impacts and advice with doctoral students.

## **Prologue**

A colleague asked Kevin to recommend a good book on how to write a thesis. She wanted a framework and a series of checklists for each chapter to bring the thesis through the stages from planning to write-up. A reasonable request, one that the receiver had also made during his PhD candidature. Yet, the idea of such a recommendation was very difficult. This experience is mirrored in Naoko’s sudden realisation that a once-loved writing model had lost its appeal. There was no excitement about presenting this model to students anymore. A series of conversations

between Naoko and Kevin's revealed interesting questions to probe here. What was our problem with dispensing the advice that we desperately sought earlier? What has our experience of negotiating normative advice while completing the PhD taught us? How does this experience inform our current work with students?

## **Introduction**

Over recent years, research has revealed doctoral writing to be a dynamic space of textual and discursive work, as well as a site of socialisation and identity formation. When students write, they negotiate a thesis genre along with a plethora of conventions around the structure of a thesis and the arguments therein. Waves of research have emerged to reveal doctoral writing is far greater than mere 'text work'. It is simultaneously a social practice, where students develop their scholarly identity and position themselves in research and academic communities (Kamler & Thomson, 2008; Oswald et al., 2022; Tapia & Stewart, 2022). Guidelines for doctoral writing, feedback from supervisors and other forms of advice plays a pivotal role in informing the textual and social practice work of doctoral writing. In this paper, we identify how advice received during our different PhD journeys helped to fashion our written work and our doctoral-writer identity in multiple and often conflicting ways.

Many studies have examined the wide range of challenges and tensions doctoral students face as they are socialized in the discourse of an institution from students' perspectives and have shown that doctoral writing is embedded in their lives, both in and outside the university. Previous studies have shown the relationships between the tensions they experience in developing writer and academic identities and their different facets of identity such as linguistic and sociocultural background, gender, ethnicity, profession, and expected roles in family (e.g. Cotterall, 2011, 2013; Leach, 2021; Oswald, et al. 2022; Tapia & Stewart, 2022). Students' perceptions of challenges and the ways in which they deal with them are contingent upon their contexts, their relationships with others, and the tools and resources available to them (Vygotsky, 1994). An individual's personal history shapes their views and different facets of their writer identity (Ivanič, 1998).

There is a growing awareness that discourses about doctoral writing often reflect singular, normative or institutionalised perspectives (Starke-Meyerring et al. 2014). Researchers from across multiple cultural, linguistic, geographical contexts, across multiple fields of study and employing multiple research methods have demonstrated problematic effects such as deference to the English language (Curry & Lillis, 2022), skill-based conceptualisations of writing (Kamler & Thomson, 2014), and of severing the process or product of doctoral writing from the lived

experiences and future ambitions of writers (Oswald et al., 2022). Normative ideas about writing are disseminated throughout expectations on university websites and handbooks, in training seminars and workshops, and in texts published to advise students. Such ideas channel what could always be otherwise into very specific paths and ignore the effects of “inherited patterns of discourse that frame, facilitate, constrain, or stifle... practices involved in thesis writing” (Starke-Meyerring et al. 2014, p. 15). This push and pull between channelling and ignoring means that students deal with opposing and contradictory forces.

Opposing forces that impact upon the development of a doctoral-student or early-career scholar identity are a focal point in the literature around doctoral writing and around related themes such as writing for academic publications. Both the text and the social practice work of thesis writing involve opposing forces with which the emerging writer must engage. For example, some forces conspire to homogenise a thesis while others emphasise the individuality of the writing. Within both linguistic and cultural spheres, researchers negotiate tensions between narrow appropriations of their work and their wider experience-base and future ambitions. Curry & Lillis (2022) identify centripetal and centrifugal forces for multilingual scholars. They problematise the centripetal ‘English Only’ hegemonic discourse associated with academic publishing whereby success is measured in terms of publication in specific English language journals only. Centrifugal forces like wider political and community-building aspirations made such hegemony inherently difficult. Kubota & Takeda (2021) label the contradictory forces between discourse of English as a global language and plurilingualism as an interplay between homogenous and heterogeneous forces. Hegemonic and centripetal forces do not only relate to language for doctoral researchers and emerging scholars. For Oswald et al. (2022) the prizing of positivist, objective evidence-based research methods in social work doctoral programmes created significant challenges for the authors’ convictions on the necessity of alternative modes of inquiry such as community-based methods. This challenge of competing forces between the institutional preference for positivist methods and the authors’ pursuance of alternatives manifested as a tension between reified knowledge and lived experience, or an onto-epistemological gap (Hemmings 2012; Oswald et al. 2022).

The literature has already identified shortcomings of prescriptive advice literature and has argued that reductive texts fail to recognise the complexities of the doctoral journey (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). Research documents the normalising effects of PhD advice and outlines how such effects extend far beyond the presentational format of a thesis. Kamler and Thomson (2008) examined twenty-five doctoral dissertation texts as a specific genre and identified how an expert–novice relationship is produced and reproduced through such discursive moves as the simplification of the PhD journey to a series of linear steps and over generalised rules. In engaging

with the notion of 'normalcy', Starke-Meyerring (2011) argues that "without critical dialogue about writing, students are left to struggle with complex questions of researcher identity development" (p.88). She argues that much of the day-to-day transactions around supervision and producing written documents ignores research bases "on questions of writing, research, disciplinarity, and knowledge production" (p. 76).

Within the modern university, there are alternative approaches and theoretical framings to prescriptive advice models in the teaching and advising of thesis writing. Scholars raise the pitfall of teaching models which aim to mould students' work to agree with textual patterns. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) argue that supervisors need to pay more attention to L2 students' various linguistic and cultural backgrounds and experiences as well as their access to all sorts of resources that are essential to write, because students bring their own ideas about writing gained in a previous discourse community. Among students and writers, collaborative efforts are made to provide individualised help, such as students-led collaborative practices in a graduate programme (Tapia & Stewart, 2022) or different forms of writing groups (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Maher et al., 2008).

Genre theory and the field of academic literacies also problematise prescriptive advice as an approach to thesis writing. In genre theory, genre is a multifaceted construct with various features that go beyond textual patterns, including social actions, communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and power relations (Flowerdew, 2011). Rhetorical genre theory focuses on how patterns of discourse and writing become normalised in human collectives such as institutions, and in turn, on how such collectives generate expectations and values for individuals to belong and partake (Starke-Meyerring et al. 2014). In response, the goal in teaching thesis writing is not a simple transmission of knowledge of textual patterns but to raise students' rhetorical awareness of how the target genres work in the intersection of various disciplinary networks and demands (Tardy, 2009; Cheng, 2018). With such awareness, students can make their own judgements about writing depending on their own purposes for writing and depending on the audience. The field of academic literacies adopts a specific epistemological and ideological stance towards academic writing (Lillis & Scott, 2007). The academic literacies researchers challenge the ideological stance that sees variety as a problem rather than as an asset. Adopting a critical ethnographic gaze, scholars in the field argue for shifting the emphasis to transformative rather than normative approaches to literacy, for exploring conventions in relation to specific and contested knowledge making, and for alternative ways of meaning making in academic writing (Lillis & Scott, 2007). One common orientation among these alternatives to academic writing is towards valuing pluralities, rather than the authority of a single textual pattern.

Despite these pluralities in the wider literature, we experienced most of the advice on academic writing in our lives as student writers as an embodiment of rather monolithic, singular and unilateral ideas about thesis writing. Our dialogue on the place of advice, both specific advice literature and writing advice that emanated from research presentations and conversations, reveals the complex role it plays in our thesis writing. The advice informs the textual work of our theses but also plays a role in the social practice work of our thesis writing, namely the formation of our identities as researchers and our positionality in the research community. Advice about PhD writing is a broad concept. The use of this term in this paper extends to published texts on thesis writing but also to workshops and seminars we attended. In addition, it extends to conversations with our supervisors and other gatekeepers like HDR review panels. In this paper, we share how we encountered normalising trends around textual expectations and our emerging scholarly identities throughout such advice while writing a thesis. Furthermore, the paper identifies how normalising advice coincided with heterogeneous forces in developing our PhD thesis and identity as researchers. We negotiated and learned from opposing forces of normalising advice on the one hand and our wider cultural and linguistic background on the other. Through our discussions, we came to recognise the interplay of advice received, our reactions to this as students, and its impact on our theses and wider student experience as an interplay of power effects. We recognised how Michel Foucault's (1977) ideas of power and knowledge could provide a conceptual basis for this recognition, and how his ideas could be a generative theoretical lens to explore how various power relations informed our interpretation of doctoral writing advice.

### **Foucault's 'power/knowledge' to reframe the question**

In different ways and using different phrasing around the same broad idea, our discussions about advice led to a consistent theme of its normalising power effect. Foucault does not equate power with dominance or as something possessed by particular individuals. Instead of negative or downwards conceptualisation of power, we should observe how it "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault 1977, p. 194). In this paper, we explore the roles that power has played in our earlier experiences and our wider doctoral experience in producing our current views on writing advice.

Foucault emphasises that people are "much freer than they feel, that people accept as truths, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed" (Foucault, 1988, p. 10). While we encountered normalising advice as themes and trends that were built up in institutions and

academic communities, this paper also explores how we experienced a sense of freedom to negotiate such trends.

## **Duoethnography as method**

Ethnographic methods of learning about experience in a new discourse community provide rich insights into learners' interactions with the discourse of normalization, writing insiders' views and insights into their own cultural experiences, which other methods would not access. Since we both had negotiated PhD advice and were confronted by power/knowledge configurations related to advice, duoethnography held the potential to access, share and challenge our views through collaborative inquiry.

A duoethnographic approach (Sawyer & Norris, 2013; Norris & Sawyer, 2012) involves elements of autoethnography, narrative writing and life history. It involves reflection on the writings of a research partner and a dialogue about reactions to that writing. Such reactions might include elements of shared experience or a different perspective on one researcher's reading of a situation. There is a symbiosis between duoethnography as a methodological approach and Foucault's power/knowledge. In the case of Foucault's work and the work of Sawyer and Norris (2013), there is no discrete research method in terms of linear steps. Guiding a duoethnography instead, are eight 'tenets'.

In relation to the tenet around their 'polyvocal and dialogic' nature (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13), duoethnographies explain how different people experience the same phenomenon differently and thus could provide even more new insights because of the juxtaposition of different voices. The tenets of 'currere' (p. 12) and 'regenerative transformation' (p. 18) implore duoethnographers to look at their own experiences and thinking patterns from different and critical perspectives by engaging in the act of construction and reconstruction through dialogue. It is an act of sense making of own stories in relation to meaningful patterns and themes, opening new windows on past experience (see Krammer & Mangiardi, 2012; Snipes & LePeau, 2017). As experienced by these authors, we also have faith in this power of transformation to generate new understanding of selves and of the problems we are about to investigate.

## **Our journey towards and through this paper**

Our paths crossed as we worked towards a PhD at an Australian university. Naoko had worked as a high school teacher in Japan and gained a master's degree in second language studies in the US before pursuing a PhD in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Kevin

had worked in primary education and pursued postgraduate degrees in music and education (all in Ireland), before developing his PhD thesis around creativity and policy analysis. Although we both studied in a School of Education, our reading or research focus groups rarely intersected. Nevertheless, as colleagues navigating the PhD journey together, we shared wider experiences of dealing with advice and encountered tensions in simply 'translating' advice into practice. Now, with our PhDs written and working in our home countries again as university lecturers, the question, conversation and realisation detailed in the prologue struck us as an issue to further explore together.

We first wrote accounts of our experiences of advice and of our changing perceptions as we progressed to PhD study and beyond. These were then exchanged with the other and further discussed through regular conversations on Zoom. Through those conversations, our understandings were shared and negotiated. Various assumptions held by both, which had previously remained individual, were reflected upon and reinterpreted in light of the other's experience. It was through this process that knowledge was created.

Throughout the duo-ethnographic writing to follow, we begin by exchanging accounts of our first encounters with advice about writing and of how this shaped our perceptions. Following this, we explore tensions between these individual perceptions and collective conventional advice about PhD writing. This then leads us to reflect on how advice about writing positions us within and outside of various groups. Based on our reflections, in the final section we discuss what advice means to us now and how it will inform our future practice.

## **Early encounters with advice and our perceptions**

Naoko

My first contact with 'advice' on academic writing was during my preparation for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign language), a standardised English proficiency test for non-native speakers of English wishing to enrol in English-speaking universities. I began taking these tests soon after I entered a university in Japan to participate in a study-abroad programme in my junior year. The test practice book covered the textual pattern of an academic essay and linguistic devices to argue one's thesis and make the essay sound logical. Back then, I believed that was how I should write in an English-speaking university and how all native English speakers would normally write. To me then, learning academic writing conventions was part of learning the English language. Non-English-dominant speaking countries such as Japan put emphasis on the acquisition of English skills through public education drawing on the neoliberal idea of communication skills in English as human capital for academic and career success. Adopting standardised tests, they reinforced



the perceived importance of acquiring standardized forms of English (Kubota & Takeda, 2021). This “centripetal, or homogenizing trend” (Kubota & Takeda, 2021, p. 463) shaped my conceptualisation of ‘advice’ as authoritative textual patterns to follow.

When I was pursuing an MA in graduate school at a US university later, published journal articles helped my conceptualisation of academic conventions and served as the model of academic writing. In a research methodology course, we reviewed some published articles and were explicitly taught the research article genre, which I conceptualised as textual patterns, namely IMRD patterns. Another influential piece of literature back then was an academic writing textbook, one I later used when teaching an academic writing course for non-native English speaking graduate students. This book adopts a genre-based approach, addressing more social and contingent aspects of a genre, claiming a genre as a social practice rather than universal textual patterns. The use of this book contrasts with the usually-held institutional assumption of academic genres as universal and transferable (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). Retrospectively, my interest as a writer and a teacher of the course then was on how to make our writing look closer to the pattern of a model. As I positioned myself as a second language writer, I believed those rhetorical and linguistic patterns belonged to the western culture, namely the English-speaking culture. I diligently followed the conventions I learned, wrote a research article, and got it published after I finished my MA programme.

When I started my PhD at an Australian university, I did not draw on any specific advice literature. Initially, I attended a course or workshops on thesis writing, where I received advice and suggestions from instructors. I remember one slide that caught my attention in which a structure of a thesis was illustrated using a metaphor of the hourglass with the concepts of IMRD (Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion). I then saw similarities between this model and what I had followed when I was writing for my master’s degree. That was the moment when I was convinced that I could still follow the same academic writing conventions that I had ‘acquired’ for my MA. This idea was even reinforced by my long-held belief that academic writing conventions belong to the “western” culture and its language, English. What I ‘acquired’ at a US university should work in another ‘major’ English-speaking country, a country in the Inner Circle (Kachru, 1990). Although I had come to know by then the opposite trends, what Kubota & Takeda (2021) call “centrifugal forces of heterogeneity” (p.463), such as English as a lingua franca (Jenkin, 2014), centripetal forces I had experienced in the English education of Japan seemed dominant in my ways of understanding ‘advice’ and academic writing conventions.

Kevin

I struggle to identify my first experience of academic writing. I think of the demands of essay writing in post-primary school as early preparation for ‘academic writing’ in university. I associate academic writing with writing tasks that seemed distant from everyday communication. My benchmark was that it would have to look and read as ‘scholarly’. I would say or write: “Gertrude is a more complex and interesting character than Ophelia because it seems she can ignore her doubts about Claudius and enjoy a high position in society”. To try to express this idea in an essay, this would morph into some construction like: “Although both Gertrude and Ophelia could be considered blameless victims, Gertrude’s marriage to Claudius soon after his brother’s death shows her determination to gain an influential position”. I tried to include more punctuation, more variety in the sentence opening and more balance in my opinions. There were no practice books coinciding with these essay assignments that emphasised varied punctuation and adjectives, but this tentative formula impressed teachers and resulted in high marks on end of term tests.

I didn’t know then that my attempt at the ‘academic Hamlet sentence’ above as opposed to the more ‘everyday Hamlet sentence’ exemplifies my use of nominalisation where “information is packed more densely into noun groups” (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p. 93). I was never taught that nominalisation “has ideological effects, as the convention of verbs into nouns removes agency from the statement” (p. 97) or that practices of nominalisation varied across different contexts (Tapia & Stewart, 2022).

While I’m familiar with the structures like IMRD that Naoko mentions, these structures are not what I think of when asked to define or encapsulate what it means to me to write in an academic way. The primary definition and sense of what it is for me has remained largely unchanged from my post-primary days: it is this imperative to use ‘scholarly’ expression. Regardless of whether I am setting out a context in an introduction chapter or analysing a specific example from teacher practice in light of theory in an analysis chapter, the yardstick I developed is that I need to use more nominalisation and elegant expression.

We have different definitions and ‘entry points’ into academic writing. My experience makes me think of academic writing as something other than ‘everyday’ verbal communication whereas Naoko’s understanding is very much rooted in experiences of second language learning. We define it in different ways arising from our experience. Foucault’s work on discourses reminds us there is not a naturally occurring phenomenon called ‘academic writing’ just as there wasn’t a naturally occurring ‘criminality’. Moving away from discourses as solely written artefacts, Foucault makes the point that discourses can be thought of as “practices that systematically form

the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). There is a dynamism and constructive force in the quote; it was through our practice and negotiation of ‘what worked’ during early writing experience and test-taking preparation and through our emergent association with writing as a process or product that we began to form the object of ‘academic writing’. When we entered the same doctoral programme, any new discourse of academic writing in the form of advice or ‘how-to’ now at PhD level was inevitably interpreted in light of our past practices. As we realise in writing this duoethnography, our encounters with discourses of PhD writing also met with discourses from the literature around our respective topics. We are aware of the potential for discourses to evolve. As Kendall and Wickham explain, “discourses are not closed systems... the possibility of innovation in discourse is always present within any discourse and within tangential or succeeding discourses” (1999, p. 41). The possibility of innovation rather than closed conceptualisations of writing advice manifests in this duoethnographic work to understand PhD advice, to identify shared tensions between our experience and generic descriptors about writing, and to articulate how we navigated the space between constraint and freedom.

## **Tensions between our individual perceptions and conventional advice**

Kevin

When it came to writing the PhD thesis, a significant conflict for me was how to negotiate two perceptions. First, my learned sense that academic writing was something ‘other’ and ‘distinct’ to ‘everyday’ verbal or informal written communication and achieved in immersive slow work where the final structure and content were ultimately unknown until the end. Second, a perception on entering the PhD programme and at various points throughout the journey, that a PhD thesis *had* to be presented in a certain way and that this end-point of student academic writing simply had to fit within established norms and models.

The stakes at PhD level seemed too high for the uncertainty and unevenness that had gone before in earlier writing. Therefore, I consulted several pieces of advice throughout the journey. Invariably, I found neatly ordered categories, titles and subtitles were littered everywhere e.g. ‘procedures to compiling a good literature review’, or ‘steps along the way from devising a research question to the viva’. I remember one seminar about ‘qualitative research’ where the facilitator asked for a one-page summary about our own project in advance. This was a helpful development where someone was willing to offer tailored advice. When it came to the headings

on that summary page, for example interviewee numbers and the kinds of questions I wanted to ask, I could fill it in pretty quickly.

The relief from such experiences, however, soon gave way to frustration. I was frustrated by creativity as the 'big' topic of my thesis, and the abstract writing of Foucault as a 'framework' of sorts. I struggled to find a way to shape the project on one hand, but on the other, this perception that there were straightforward frameworks out there for all of us. In analysing the concept of creativity in my thesis, this brought me to psychological and sociological research and to cross several fields of enquiry. It didn't make sense to lay out the field, to identify the gap or chronologically outline key insights from the literature to date.

Many times, however, this gap between generic overview-type headings and the specificity of a research project was ignored. Even while experienced writers who had completed a similar project in the past acknowledged that such headings and frames didn't tally with our approaches, the dominant idea seemed to be that we just had to make it fit to meet the expectations of others. Those 'others' might be senior academics from other disciplines where certain methodological approaches are 'given' to a much greater extent, but that same academic might be randomly assigned to determine if my PhD candidature into the next year should continue. The reviewer, the examiner, the publisher, the conference attendees, the job selection panel were all presented as individuals who might expect certain presentational formats and conventions. We could appeal to the difficulties with colleagues pursuing the same work and even smile at the absurdity of finding a 'how-to' in any of Foucault's writing, but ultimately we had to please many gatekeepers.

Therefore, while I consulted and was influenced by various types of advice in the form of texts and seminars, the overriding idea for me was the sense of finding my own path through the process. Rather than finding a prefabricated framework for my work, I began to realise that much of the writing task involved designing and justifying a bespoke structure for the thesis. Those timelines towards completion, progress reviews that were held at the same time and in the same format for all students promoted an illusion of linearity that did not equate with my experience.

## Naoko

While Kevin was frustrated with dual challenges, I was disoriented by unexpected feedback from individuals and audiences on multiple occasions. At one time, I brought a draft to a scholar to get feedback and discuss my findings. I was expecting to discuss the analysis with the scholar. The scholar read it and said, "It is pretty descriptive," and the discussion did not even start. I got confused because I thought I had gained enough genre knowledge, formal, rhetorical, process, and subject matter knowledge (Tardy, 2009) for writing a thesis. In my view, that draft I wrote

was not a description of data but some analysis. I had another 'I-thought-I-knew' experience at the presentation of my research proposal. I started my presentation with a narrative to illustrate my motives and the background of my project. The feedback from the audience varied from informing me I was creative (in a sense of not being ordinary) to immature (as in a deviation from the norm). I did not try to be creative or resist norms at all. I was trying to demonstrate my rhetorical knowledge of this genre and achieve the purpose of the introduction section: giving a background of a research topic. I thought I had written the presentation script following academic writing conventions, which I thought I had 'mastered' before.

These 'I-thought-I-knew' feelings originated in my long-lasting mode of learning English, which had been shaped by the centripetal trends of neoliberal English language education in Japan. I knew alternative conceptualisations of second language writing such as genre knowledge (Tardy, 2009) or academic literacies (Lillis & Scott, 2007), which highlight the plurality of the process and the product of academic writing. However, when I reflected on the progress and development in writing ability, I adopted a neoliberal approach to measuring skills and ability development, a similar approach I had been trained to adopt for my English language learning. In my view, my MA from an English speaking university or a publication in English was equivalent to the scores in standardised tests, which could show ability and skill progress in a linear scale. With these 'scores' in hand, I had come to think that I knew 'what would work' already. When I began writing a thesis, I was mainly thinking about how well I could demonstrate the standardised pattern of writing or the skills I had learned. My genre knowledge (Tardy et al., 2020) then was very limited, especially in the awareness of rhetorical situations of the thesis genre.

Even though I started to doubt my genre knowledge, unlike Kevin, I did not explore advice literature much. I thought those pieces of generic advice ignored aspects of the history, background and identity of a mid-career professional with an MA. Some workshops and advice literature that I came across treated me as a novice in thesis writing, not taking into account my expertise, needs, problems, and wishes. The advice I needed then was how to utilise my knowledge and expertise in my PhD study.

After having multiple 'I-thought-I-knew' experiences, I came to understand that I should find my new way of doing this new genre. Finding my way in thesis writing proceeded mainly through frequent dialogues with my supervisors over my thesis writing. Then, I came to recognise that I was caught in the middle of the pulling and pushing of both centripetal and centrifugal forces. My supervisors never told me to fit in a single pattern, but I sensed that there were some 'safe' textual patterns and structures to please everyone. Simultaneously, I came to appreciate the abovementioned centrifugal forces in the scholarship of second language writing, which values

innovation in academic writing (Tardy, 2016). My attention in writing shifted to the effects of my writing on the audience. Getting feedback from my supervisors was beneficial in tuning the effect of my writing and finding ways not to deviate too much from the normalising trend while valuing what and how I wanted to write.

We approached the PhD thesis, and perceived and responded to 'advice' in different ways. However, we both recognised centripetal forces and normalising influences in advice, which ignores the individual. The conflicts we both experienced were derived from being caught between the two opposing trends in academia: normalising and pluralising. This suggests that the metaphor of centripetal and centrifugal forces (Curry & Lillis, 2022) is not limited to discussing linguistic ideologies in academia. These two opposing trends await all newcomers in various spheres and processes of thesis writing. Only after recognizing the presence of both trends, we came to realise that just following one trend is a barrier to finding our own ways in writing. This realisation would be a sign of our growth as thesis writers.

## **Positioning effects of advice**

Naoko

I acknowledge that there are some disputes over the dichotomized view of native-/non-native speakers (Pennycook, 2007). However, these dichotomized categories, 'we', non-native English speakers (NNES), and 'they', native English speakers (NES), were significant in my thesis writing life. During my PhD candidature, I attended some workshops for writings, where most attendees were non-native speakers, or L2 writers (second language writers), despite the fact the organisers did not limit the attendees to L2 writers. Some faculties explicitly talked about the issues with L2 writing. Against the backdrop of a centripetal pull toward linguistic mononormativity (Blommaert & Horner, 2017, as cited in Curry and Lillis, 2022) in academic institutions, a discourse prevailed that the students who were exclusively in need of 'advice' were NNES students.

To me, 'their' (NES) writing process looked mysterious, hidden in a black box. The idea of native speakerism (Holliday, 2006) nudged me to think that native speakers may possess innate academic writing ability since they were born and brought up in 'western culture'. I was always obsessed with the idea that there might be more to learn for me to be able to demonstrate 'native-speaker-like' knowledge and skills in writing. Consequently, I had mixed feelings all through my thesis writing. On the one hand, like my 'I-thought-I-knew' experiences show, I had an urge to perform an experienced scholarly writer identity. On the other hand, as an NNES student, I was

scared to get my writing judged as 'non-native like', which meant that my writing had never reached the NES's standards regardless of the experiences and never would.

The discourse of 'NNES-need-advice' also influences NES students' PhD life. One day in a PhD lab, when I was reading in the back of the room, I heard an NES PhD student, Jenny (pseudonym) coming in and angrily reporting to her friend, who was sitting near the door. The room was not that big so I was sure everyone in the room could hear what they were talking about. I was eavesdropping because she was complaining about an NNES student. She witnessed the day before, an NNES student was showing her text to another PhD student (an NES) to get it checked. Jenny was upset about the unfair position of native speakers and was saying to her friend, "Why do 'we' always need to fix 'their' language?" I kept quiet, so she wouldn't notice that the NNES student whom she saw the day before was me.

I had been trying to avoid a 'native-check' from colleagues, but on the day before, I had asked an NES friend to check the language in my ethics application. A faculty member, who had read it for its content, had suggested I ask for an NES student's help on language before I submit it to the university ethics committee. On that day, Jenny brought the NES and NNES discourse into the room and unconsciously foregrounded the ideology of power relations between NNES and NES students in the perception of everyone else in that room. The normalising discourse of 'advice' influenced the figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998) of PhD thesis writing for both NES and NNES. In our socially and culturally constructed interpretations, NNES and NES are assigned certain acts and positioned within dynamic and occasionally unequal power relations.

## Kevin

While I acknowledge my blind spots inherent in my 'NES group membership', I would say that difficulties encountered in my writing were in a different sphere to (N)NES status. Saying something authoritatively yet in a balanced way or condensing big or multiple ideas into short sentences, justifying why certain ideas do or do not fall within preconceived frameworks and models is not part of everyday communication in conversations or emails. A thesis is odd and specific. It's something few write or read, and this sets it apart as something very individual.

I would take the position that when writing and negotiating the construction of a thesis, I think firstly that I was alone rather than belonging in a collective like NES. As I write the word 'alone', I immediately reconsider. Does this show my ignorance and inability to recognise great supervisor feedback or advice texts that I drew upon? The challenge for me was the space in between receiving advice prompts and suggestions from supervisors and colleagues and turning in the next draft. Further clarifying ideas that I thought were clear or aligning abstract theoretical ideas

with my pre-existing data and structure reflected the complex epistemic nature of writing (Starke-Meyerring, 2014). I had to move this on between supervisory meetings and the eventual click into place would only come from exhausting different configurations of writings. I could read so many advice texts and completed theses yet, like all projects, mine was still different.

I seem to work so hard to emphasise the 'I' in all of this. Pre PhD writing had always been an individual endeavour and so I expected the same at doctoral level where the self-responsibilised mentality pervaded my work. I was more inclined towards advice and wisdom that emphasised taking responsibility and defending one's own decisions. Such advice came in texts with keywords like 'authoring your PhD' or 'managing your supervisor'. Even in the few writing groups I joined or in the conversations where people emphasised peer feedback or collaborative methods, I was tuned into the ideas of self-responsibility for completing this project. These ideas eclipsed some positive experience of collective endeavour such as a student colleague sharing what they liked about writing drafts.

In our figured world (Holland, et al., 1998) as students, arising from my earlier experiences, I aimed to be self-sufficient with an acute 'sink or swim' mentality. I wrote the thesis against the backdrop of my developing awareness of the social and political landscapes of modern university culture, and the neoliberalisation of universities and of academic's work (Lynch, 2012; Morrissey, 2015). In line with Foucault's (2004) understanding of neoliberalism, I began to identify with pieces of advice that prioritised individual responsibility. I started to see resonance between those talks of 'managing your supervisor' or 'publishing for greatest possible impact' and the individualistic values within university culture that were critiqued in literature around my thesis topic.

One effect of how advice is implicated in these 'we', 'they' and 'I' configurations is how any one cohort of students position themselves and are positioned in relation to each other. On a surface level, we all pursued the same PhD programme and had to meet the same programme requirements. This duoethography has revealed very different patterns of 'uptake' to advice. Ideas I took to be standard were 'other' to Naoko. Some collaboration and social strategies that Naoko pursued struck me as somewhat out of place in a culture that seemed to prize individualism. Undoubtedly, there were several other positional disjunctures in our student cohort. Underlying assumptions and beliefs about our positions have real effects: individuals may find working together problematic and may not understand the tacit knowledge of another.

Power and knowledge "exist within a relation of interiority to each other" (Kendall & Wickham, 1999, p. 51). This means that the knowledge we have gained about PhD writing is a product of our experiences from different times throughout our education and from our broader reading outside of 'advice genres'. Naoko 'knows' that many academic conventions prioritise



western conceptualisations of writing. Kevin 'knows' that advice that prizes a self-driven and competitive impactful scholar fits neatly with narratives about progress in modern universities. Our own reflections and the broader literatures we consult around conventions (for Naoko) and resistance to neoliberalism (for Kevin) challenge particular knowledge configurations and bring us to renegotiation. However, power effects work to construct how we perceive what is inside or outside of a norm at any given time. For this reason, passing on knowledge in a transmissive or context-free way or accepting it as a neutral 'given', is inherently difficult.

## **Will we “advise” students?**

Naoko

Throughout my PhD life, I reconceptualised academic conventions as principles to navigate on my journey to understand and appropriate them, rather than as prescriptive and universal rules for me to follow. As I made sense of 'I-thought-I-knew' experiences, my perspectives on academic writing as a writing teacher were reshaped. When I was an MA student and teaching academic writing, I paid attention to how to teach the patterns and forms introduced in the textbook that I used. If I teach the class with the same textbook now, I would attend more to how to 'advise' students to focus on the relationships between the author, the reader, and textual patterns in their discipline, using the tasks and exercises in the book. The skeleton textual pattern I used to teach academic writing has now lost its shine to me.

Now I teach academic writing as a social practice. Students have their own goals to achieve by writing in their academic worlds, and the rhetorical situations of their writing vary. Normalising their writing to a single textual pattern would not help their learning to write as a social practice. Academic writing is not 'teachable' but rather, I would consider it '*experienceable*'. I now teach academic writing to undergraduate freshmen at a university in Japan, who may only need 'academic writing' in their junior, or senior years to earn credits for some content subjects taught in English. A unified textual pattern does not await the students in their junior or senior years. Different teachers in different courses may have academic conventions in their minds, so the students may be faced with different types of centripetal forces across courses. The 'advice' I should give to these students would be to shift the students' attention from the textual pattern to the reader, to the goal of writing, and to their role as a writer. Those students need to be empowered by experiencing various impacts that their writing could bring upon the reader. In a genre approach to writing, the goal of teaching writing entails raising students' sophisticated awareness of text-context relationships (Cheng, 2018; Tardy et al., 2020). What my students need

most would be the awareness of the presence of various patterns, not a single textual pattern for them to memorise.

My agenda then would be to emancipate the students from the pattern-following mode of learning. Many academic writing course books are sold and many similar patterns of texts are 'taught' as if they were generic models for 'academic writing'. The centripetal force may lead students to binary thinking, just like it did to me: 'being normalised is good but deviating from it is bad'. Responding to this discourse of learning, my 'advice' should lead them to experience centrifugal and pluralising trends as promising trends to help their future development.

This duoethnography made me see a better picture of what 'advice' is to me, as a student and as a teacher, and to the students I teach. 'Advice' could differ contingent upon the relationships between the writer, readers, situations and context of the writing and teaching. At my institution, without much normalising pressure on individual teaching methods, I can advise students to experience five-paragraph essays not solely for test preparation but as one variation of academic writing to promote genre awareness (Kim & Belcher, 2018). The act of advising is social and this social aspect of advising needs further investigation at both students' and teachers' levels.

Kevin

My history and experiences lead me to agree that the flow of writing is enhanced when we think about how the reader will encounter the ideas. I don't believe these ideas are teachable in the sense that certain words should go at the start of topic sentences or that a final paragraph of the literature review should *only* contain certain information. Linked to the importance Naoko places on experience therefore, I value the understanding, intention and clarity of the writing rather than adherence to rules and patterns. I think there are intuitive and internalised communication patterns we have on-board already that can bring writing to this overall destination point without any reference to 'how-to' rules. Prescriptive texts may have a role as reference points or aids when we become lost, but dogmatic adherence to these will not lead to clarity for the reader and, to my mind, undermines communicative tropes we have already internalised.

Looking backwards now that my thesis is written, is there a single definitive guide text or texts that I would endorse as resonating with my student experience? No. What do I think a good *how-to* book or blog or presentation does now? I take out the PhD thesis and look through the contents page. I engage in a thought experiment and try to imagine that the design of this document was entirely the sum of my own thought processes. I pretend for a moment that the arrangement and construction of those chapters and of the sections within each chapter were surgically removed from supervisor feedback and constraints around time and resources. I pretend that a guidebook

could have led to that thesis. What would that book look like? It would be a book that detailed all of the decisions I made, the encounters with others and the reactions of readers. There would need to be incredibly long foot notes detailing my subject area(s), and detailing what I had read and experienced. There is a better alternative to such a detailed text replete with footnoted attempts to capture the process.

The benefit of a better understanding of writing as a discipline is now much more apparent to me. There is a language of genres, text and identity work, and a related critical scholarship that I wasn't aware of before. It was intriguing to hear that many of the issues I grappled with were the subjects of critical inquiry in other fields. This reasserts the need to share work and emphasise these shared points. Before, Naoko's work didn't seem relevant to me because we had different topics and research titles. I now see that on a different level, the work was very much aligned to my experiences and to those of our other colleagues. Previously, I did not fully understand the appeal for doctoral writing and supervision to be embedded in a research base (Starke-Meyerring, 2011; Starke-Meyerring et al. 2014); the rationale for this appeal is abundantly clear to me now. When working with writers in the future, I will remain cognisant of the benefits of encouraging students to think about these wider aspects of writing. As an example, a lot of time will be given to the question of 'why' advice is sought and offered as well as to ideas of how advice and conventions position the student.

A thread that runs through both accounts here is a simultaneous sense of remaining within the patterns and also of going beyond them. The models and skeletal documents are useful. They are points of reference and points of initiation into the writing. Writing a doctoral thesis is a specialised field of endeavour, not shared by many in the student's wider lives. We also recognise that students will be assessed or otherwise held to various conventions in their later lives, and so it would be a disservice to them to somehow reject all of the 'advice' we received rather than engage with how to speak of it with students. There aren't many alternatives if students aspire to the same career outcomes as we did. We have a limited number of readers and collaborators, who in turn only received feedback about their own writing from a small pool of individuals. We are caught in a bind between recognising we resist elements of the status quo, and yet remaining within the norms and expectations of an academic community within which we and our students work.

## **Conclusion**

A question from a colleague about PhD writing initiated a 'writing advice' conversation and a realisation that unquestioned adherence to writing advice in the past was problematic. We

remarked that much conventional wisdom, models and expectations held by influential PhD gatekeepers failed to recognise the complexities and incompatibilities where the focus of our theses precluded conformity with one framework. Our negotiation of these complexities has led us to a different relationship with advice, one based on an ethic of questioning and of reinterpretation in light of past experience. Foucault's writings about discourse with emphasis on the arbitrary and contingent nature of discourse provoked us to see the problem of PhD writing advice as one related to power and knowledge configurations.

We now have a heightened awareness towards what can be considered advice about PhD writing. Following from the initial colleague's question and our conversation, we thought first about specific published texts. We soon realised however that the advice which we negotiated and which had multiple impacts took a myriad of different forms far beyond such published texts. Nearing the end of this duoethnography, we think the term 'influences' better fits the forces that culminated in our finished PhD theses rather than 'advice'. These influences, in turn, gave us a space to develop critical awareness of the onto-epistemological gap (Hemmings, 2012; Oswald et al, 2022), namely, our deeper understanding and critical insights into a gap between institutional discourses about thesis writing reflected in advice and our lived experience (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014).

Through this duoethnography, we came to realise these advice influences were primarily normalising influences. Recommendations about what to do and about 'what works' acted upon us to normalise our work. We encountered ideas of sameness and conformity in relation to how the final thesis would look and in relation to the stages for passing through our doctoral journey. Similar to Oswald et al.'s experiences, we experienced the normalising influence as one that failed to see "aspects of us" (Oswald et al., 2022, p.123), especially our histories. No advice text will engage with how test taking experiences in an additional language, or how emergent ideas about essay writing in one's teenage years, will somehow inform later ideas about PhD writing. Supervisor feedback and tacit knowledge, progress reviews, conventional wisdom about the way 'things should be', and memories about earlier writing experience all feature as influences. Notably, we experienced these advice influences differently depending on the worldview shaped by past experiences.

These normalising influences of advice gave us a space to reflect on our relationship between our research writing, past experiences, perceptions of conventions, and positions in an institution and the wider society. Through these critical reflections, we gained "critical reflexivity" (Oswald et al., 2022). Rather than following prescriptive advice, we realised we had negotiated a multitude of normalising effects. During our PhD candidature, we were forced to confront truth formations that we and others had accepted as neutral. Naoko became aware of normalising-orientation

within herself as she encountered pluralism-oriented approaches in writing. Kevin, who hadn't previously encountered disciplinary fields like socialisation through writing, also observed a sense of gravitational pull towards a homogenised PhD thesis. Coupled with a developing awareness of pluralities in creativity research and the Foucauldian ethic of questioning what we accept as true, these normalising influences could be interpreted as sources of tension and conflict. We were caught in the tensions arising from opposing trends. Finding ways to negotiate these trends made us grow as students, thesis writers, and teachers.

Our duoethnography has shown a unique aspect of advice: it exists on a centre or fulcrum point between centripetal and centrifugal forces (Curry & Lillis, 2022; Kubota & Takeda, 2021). In other words, our contact with normalising influences led us to identify the inherent tension between generic advice and our wider experience. This tension between oppositional forces led us to seek out spaces for, and to act upon, our own agency. We could enact various practices and preferences: Kevin could divert from solidified methodological steps by appealing to the work of Foucault. Furthermore, he could draw on concepts like discourse and power/knowledge to tackle questions of why alternatives are presented. Learning about the effect of her own writing from supervisors' feedback, Naoko came to sense the fine line between deviation and creation. She learned to write what she wanted without crossing that line. In her thesis, she eventually included a narrative that was similar to one queried in a presentation during PhD candidature, but now wasn't questioned by anyone. This duoethnography paper, represents another practice that emerged from our agency against the backdrop of advice influences. Against the backdrop of normalising trends, we identified how we were able to insert another figure of truth (Foucault, 1994, p. 367) into our writing.

We conclude with the question of how this duoethnography about PhD writing advice and influences will inform our future work. As teachers now drawing on our experience, we are much more attuned to the impacts of those influences that come to bear on academic writing. Our place within 'advice' alters how we speak of it and share with students. Rather than dogmatically adhering to X model from the writer's perspective only, we make sense of these structures alongside others, understanding the feasibility of models and structures after sharing the products with readers. We have developed a suspicion and critical perspective on generic advice. Our suspicion manifests in our hesitancy to suggest a text or to provide closed answers about what to do, but it also leads us to questions of why there is an obsession with advice literature and a search among students. While previous studies on doctoral writing education (e.g., Kamler & Thomson, 2014, Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014) have demonstrated the shortcomings of dispensing normative advice to all, our experience shows it is still sought out.

Expectations from the academy, and our understanding of what students will need later, present as forces at play to structure how we approach advice with doctoral students. Structures and wisdom, and the quest to hear about what works, have become a source of agency here. For us, it initiated this duoethnography which will in turn inform how we articulate to students our stance on the influences on PhD writing. With this duoethnography, we tried to do our part in “recover[ing] writing from beneath its cloak of normalcy” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, p. 92), and will do so with our students. We argue for the teacher’s use of ‘advice’ as a tool to encourage students’ critical reflexivity as they proceed with the “epistemic and transformative practice” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011) of thesis writing.

Duoethnography brought us to a sense of a shared problem, beyond ourselves and of relevance to wider communities. Kamler and Thomson’s (2008, p. 512) rejection of prescriptive advice texts and appeal that “doctoral experience is better conceptualized both as text work/identity work and as a discursive social practice” encapsulate themes and observations from multiple fields. We pursued this shared problem through an innovation afforded by duoethnography: adopting multiple perspectives, and swapping each other’s analytical and theoretical lenses. Our experience and learning would indeed benefit from a process of “mutual reclaiming” whereby “individuals change, based upon their insights” (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 13). We witnessed that duoethnography enabled us to go beyond a simple addition of our individual insights.

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