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Authorial voice in doctoral writing: published advice vs. expert reader responses

Key words: Authorial voice; Scholarly identity; Doctoral writing; Published advice; Multilingual students

Introduction

As anyone who has written or is in the process of writing a thesis (or dissertation)¹ knows, it presents an enormous range of challenges. Amongst these “profound rhetorical, linguistic, intellectual, emotional, and psychological challenge[s]”, the ‘existential’ challenge has been identified as “perhaps the most daunting” (Paré, 2019, p. 81). This ‘existential’ challenge involves students dealing with questions about the nature of data, their relationship to it, as well as epistemological questions about what it is possible to know. These questions are articulated differently and pose different problems in different disciplines, but a common thread in academic literacy research is how students construct an academic/scholarly identity in their writing that allows them to be heard within the constraints of specific disciplinary conventions while also respecting their unique contribution.

One way of thinking about academic/scholarly identity is through the notion of authorial voice. We argue here that while scholarly identity can be thought of as the overarching concept including what the writer brings to the act of writing, voice refers more specifically to what is constructed in and through the text (cf. Canagarajah, 2015). Many scholars have attempted to define *voice*, and their definitions have taken on different shades of meaning in different times. For example, an early perspective on voice saw it as the unique

¹ In this chapter, we use the term *thesis* to refer to doctoral theses and dissertations as this is the term used in Australia. We acknowledge that these two terms are used differently in different parts of the world.

style or personal views of a writer (Elbow, 1994), whereas more recently it has been operationalized as the sum of particular lexico-grammatical features in a text (e.g. Hyland, 2008). We infer from this that authorial voice in academic writing is not something that can be divorced from context, but instead is highly situated and always rhetorical. Paré (2019) reminds us that part of the challenge for students in writing a thesis is that they need to negotiate multiple voices, including the scholars whose work they draw upon, but also their supervisors, advisors, and examiners.

For researchers investigating doctoral writing, the implication of this is that the thesis needs to be seen (and analyzed) as more than a text or a product; instead, as a complex set of processes and social practices. In a recent study investigating readers' perceptions of authorial voice in multilingual doctoral texts (Morton & Storch, 2019), we found that the readers, all experienced supervisors and examiners of doctoral theses from one broad discipline – Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, agreed that authorial voice is a crucial aspect of doctoral writing. These experts differed, however, in what they identified as markers of authorial voice in the students' texts. Although linguistic choices such as use of hedges/boosters and first person pronouns were viewed by all readers as clear markers of voice, they expressed different preferences particularly about the use of these pronouns. Most readers also reacted negatively to what they felt was either an absence of voice or when they perceived voice as too strong. We noted that even though all our supervisors were from the same broad discipline, their individual sociohistorical background (including their L1 and the language in which they had learnt academic writing) and their unique disciplinary identity appeared to be closely linked to how they defined voice, what they found salient in terms of voice, and how they judged this in the student texts. Authorial voice in doctoral writing, we concluded, is a complex rhetorical balance, an expression of authority and confidence by the

student writer, which is authorised and valued by the relevant disciplinary community of scholars and readers (see Morton & Storch, 2019; cf. Pare, 2019).

When contemplating the pedagogical implications of these findings, we turned our attention to guidebooks and online material that provide advice on authorial voice in doctoral writing. We were curious about the advice given and whether it reflected the complexity of the construct of voice and the differences in perspectives we found in our study. In this chapter, we report on this research that set out to explore the treatment of voice in six thesis writing guidebooks as well as in a range of online resources.

Before describing our study, first we look at how voice has been dealt with in the literature on advanced academic literacy, and at how guidebooks on doctoral writing have been evaluated in this literature.

Voice in doctoral writing: research and published advice

The concept of voice

There is a strong consensus amongst academic literacy scholars that voice is an essential part of successful academic writing (Hyland, 2008; Ivanič, 1998). More specifically, recent studies have also shown that voice is critical in the reception of doctoral writing. One such study that surveyed examiners' reports, linked "a particular kind of [disciplinary] voice" to "greater legitimacy in the scholar's knowledge claims" (McKenna et al., 2018, p.9).

Another study found that authorial presence, stance and self-representation – all aspects of writing related to voice – were influential in determining journal reviewers' perceptions of writers as novice or expert (Tardy & Matsuda, 2009). Despite this consensus, the definition of *voice* remains complex; a "slippery and often ill-defined concept" as Tardy (2016, p.350) notes. In relation to doctoral writing, voice it seems, is typically part of the tacit knowledge

and implicit expectations that constitute the often occluded or hidden practices of doctoral pedagogy/supervision. For many doctoral writers, voice is thus ‘troublesome’, and this is often especially so for multilingual international students writing in an additional language (Matsuda, 2001; Paltridge et al., 2016).

There have been two main approaches to the study of voice in academic writing. The focus of the first primarily quantitative type of research is text-based, examining the complex configuration of lexical, grammatical and/or rhetorical features associated with voice. Hyland’s studies (e.g. 2008) are an example of this approach, in which hedges, boosters, personal pronouns, and citation practices are examined to identify and quantify the distinguishing characteristics of voice in different disciplinary discourses. Such studies are looking for what Matsuda (2015) calls the ‘empirical reality’ of voice. The implication of much of this quantitative voice research is that it is teachable and that students will naturally and inevitably develop an authoritative voice over time. An alternative and complementary approach is qualitative. This type of research typically takes a dialogic view of voice – which seeks the ‘phenomenological reality’ of voice (Matsuda, 2015) – and is interested in the tensions experienced in the act of reading (Tardy, 2016) as well as those in the act of writing (Ivanič, 1998).

Our research on authorial voice in doctoral writing (e.g. Morton & Storch, 2019; Thompson et al., 2016) fits within the second approach and adopts Matsuda’s (2001) definition of voice as – “the amalgamative *effect* of the use of discursive and non-discursive features [such as citations] that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available, yet ever changing repertoires” (p. 40). In an early study (Thompson et al., 2016), we found that this amalgamative *effect* of a doctoral writer’s voice on a reader was not adequately captured by counting features associated with voice. Canagarajah’s (2015) voice heuristic offers perhaps a more useful and nuanced way of thinking about voice as a

negotiation between the reader, the writer and the text. Canagarajah's heuristic suggests that perceptions of voice are shaped by the identities (sociohistorical background, language, national affiliations), roles (e.g. as supervisor, examiner, student), subjectivities (ideologies about language and patterns of language use) and awareness of voice of both the writer *and* the reader. Our understanding that scholarly identity and authorial voice are inextricably linked in the academic life of our research students is respected in Canagarajah's (2015) heuristic, where voice (what is constructed in and through the text) is viewed as shaped by the scholarly identity of the writer as well as what the reader brings to the act of reading.

Published advice

In response to the challenges of writing a thesis, the last couple of decades have witnessed an abundance of guidebooks providing advice on 'how to write a thesis'. Many of these are generic, appealing to a broad cross-disciplinary audience, although there is also a small number designed for students from specific disciplines (e.g. Bitchener, 2010). Most of the books are aimed at students, framed as 'how to' or DIY guides, with only a few conceived as teaching resources for supervisors. Many of the student-directed guides are for multilingual students in particular (e.g. Cooley & Lewkowicz, 2003). Given the proliferation of thesis writing handbooks, it is important to critically evaluate their contents.

There is relatively little research that has systematically reviewed thesis writing guidebooks with the aim of assessing the quality of their advice. One such study by Paltridge (2002), which focused primarily on the organization or structure of theses, compared the contents of eight guidebooks with 'actual practice'. The guidebooks were published in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Britain between 1981 and 1998, and the 'actual practice' took the form of 30 postgraduate theses (15 doctoral and 15 masters) written by students in an Australian university. Paltridge concluded that none of the surveyed

guidebooks adequately reflected the range of options available to students, at least in the university where his study was conducted. These findings were similar to those of an earlier study which reviewed guidebooks for writing academic research articles and found that the advice offered was very generic in nature and tended “not to be borne out in reality” (Swales, 1984, p. 77). Paltridge recommended the development of pedagogical materials that reflect the range of thesis structures he identified. Other recommendations were the need for pedagogical materials to include actual samples or extracts from theses, and the importance of providing students with opportunities to discuss variation in thesis structures and the rationales for each ‘type’.

While Paltridge (2002) is critical of the prescriptive nature of guidebook advice on thesis structure, Kamler and Thomson’s (2008) review of thesis writing guidebooks is even more damning. Taking a discourse analysis approach, the authors examined the titles, sub-headings and themes of each chapter in 25 popular doctoral writing handbooks. Of particular relevance to the current study, Kamler and Thomson (2008; 2014) argue that developing a scholarly identity and authoritative voice are an indispensable part of the work (conceived as social practice) involved in writing a thesis. From this perspective, the handbooks they analyzed failed to discuss issues around disciplinary identity and the role of evaluation and stance when citing literature or to give credible advice on how to establish a writer’s voice that is scholarly. Instead, the books tended to overgeneralize and oversimplify the process, by “offer[ing] reductive tips and tricks, couched in a paternalistic, instructional style” (p. 512). Like Paltridge (2002), Kamler and Thomson (2008) recommend that thesis guidebooks should discuss variation and reasons for choices, as well as providing strategies to support students in foregrounding their voice and conveying knowledge claims in an authoritative way in their thesis writing.

Our study builds on this research by focusing specifically on advice on authorial voice offered in a range of online materials as well as thesis writing guidebooks. It compares this advice to recent research on expert understandings of authorial voice in doctoral writing.

Method

In this section we outline the process of selecting guidebooks and online resources and then describe our analytical procedures.

Choice of guidebooks and online resources

A number of criteria guided our selection of guidebooks and online resources. We wanted to include books addressing doctoral students (L1 English as well as second language (L2) writers) and/or supervisors. We also attempted to select books that were relatively recently published or reissued (post 2000). Given that our research on authorial voice has focused on theses written in the field of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, we narrowed our selection to books written by well-known scholars from the same or a related field (Education).

Table 1 lists the six guidebooks selected, the primary readers targeted (as stated by the authors), a brief summary of the kind of information they include, and the structure followed.

Table 1. Selected guidebooks (inserted here)

As shown in Table 1, of the six guidebooks we selected, the first four targeted students and the last two targeted supervisors. However, it should be noted that regardless of the stated targeted readers, most of the guidebooks claimed to be useful for both students and supervisors/teachers. Furthermore, although only the book by Paltridge and Starfield (2007)

specifically targeted supervisors working with L2 writers, most of the books claimed that they deal with issues relevant to both L1 English and L2 writers. Two books (Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Murray, 2011) had sections which addressed some specific concerns of L2 writers.

As the summaries of the books suggest, the books differed in their main focus, and hence the titles and order of the chapters. In guidebooks that focused on writing the thesis, the chapters tended to correspond roughly to chapters or sections (e.g. abstract, acknowledgements) found in a traditional thesis reporting on an empirical study (e.g. methodology, findings). Guidebooks following this structure treated each chapter as a genre (or a series of sub-genres) and provided advice on the kind of information to include, how to organise that information, language choice, and some more general information (e.g. length). The books that focused on research and milestones in the PhD had chapters dealing with the kind of decisions a doctoral student needs to make, before (e.g. choice of topic, supervisor), during (e.g. supervisor/student relationships) and after the thesis (e.g. publication). Only one book (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007) attempted to deal with both the research process and the thesis.

In selecting online resources providing advice on voice, we again wanted to include different types of online resources available to doctoral students, particularly in Australia where we both teach. Our selection included online material produced by writing centres in two leading Australian research universities as well as individual contributions published in popular blogs. Table 2 lists the five online resources examined and the date of the postings, where relevant. These resources tended to be relatively short, ranging in length from one to two pages.

Table 2. Selected online materials (inserted here)

Analysis

Our analysis was data driven but also informed by the findings of our previous study (Morton & Storch, 2019). Following Merriam and Tisdell (2015), we each independently analysed a randomly chosen guidebook and an online resource to derive coding categories that could capture how voice was dealt with. Given that the use of first-person pronoun was perceived as a clear marker of authorial voice in our earlier study (Morton & Storch, 2019), we included a category that looked at how the guidebooks dealt with the use of this pronoun. Our discussion led to four broad categories (listed below) which we used to analyse the remaining books and resources. We then compared our analysis to achieve reliability and uniformity in coding.

In coding our data, we analysed for:

- 1) whether voice (or any term that could be considered similar) is mentioned,
- 2) where in the text voice is mentioned and the space devoted to its discussion,
- 3) the nature of the advice given, including the tone used, and whether variability is noted; and,
- 4) advice given on the use of first-person pronouns.

Findings and Discussion

We report our findings for the guidebooks first. In our initial perusal of the Table of Contents and Index of the guidebooks that targeted students, we found that none mentioned the term *voice* when referring to authorial voice. Instead, the term *voice* was used to discuss the grammatical choice of active or passive voice (e.g. Bitchener, 2010; Cooley &

Lewkowicz, 2003). The terms that were more directly related to notions of a distinct authorial voice or writer identity were ‘style’, ‘originality’ and ‘stance’. However, a closer analysis showed that style and originality tended to refer to academic expectations, and to what would be considered good academic writing. For example, Bitchener used the phrase ‘communicative style’ in an annotated commentary on excerpts from a thesis to highlight how clarity or a logical flow of information was achieved. There was also very little author visibility in any of the thesis excerpts in his book. Eco’s advice throughout his book was didactic, particularly in Chapter 5, entitled Writing the thesis. Here a sub-section on academic pride provides advice on the notion of academic humility and confidence in writing, including when advising students about style which focused on sentence length: “You are not Proust. Do not write long sentences” (Eco, 2015, p. 147). Murray referred to ‘originality’ only when discussing thesis examination criteria but provided no advice on how to achieve originality.

The term ‘stance’ received greater attention, but often only in reference to Hyland’s (2005) taxonomy of metadiscourse markers. Whereas Bitchener reproduced the taxonomy, Cooley and Lewkowicz’s discussion of hedging went beyond a list of hedging devices, to include reasons for hedging and examples of hedging in different contexts, thus acknowledging variability related to disciplinary context. Stance was also dealt with by both Bitchener and Murray when discussing the literature review, and here we see an implicit reference to authorial voice. In discussing choice of verbs and adjectives when referring to the literature, Bitchener noted that this choice reflects the writer’s stance towards the work of other authors, stating: “Having reviewed and evaluated the published literature, you will want to make your stance towards it known to the reader” (p. 104). Similarly, Cooley and Lewkowicz discussed not only why to use source material but also how to show support or refute the work of other researchers, noting that it is often not enough to remain neutral. The

tone used in this advice is quite prescriptive, using second person pronouns and imperatives in order to tell the novice researcher (thesis writer) what they need to know to achieve their goal. The impression given is that authorial voice is a teachable skill, and that it is achieved via the appropriate choice of words to reflect stance. Given the variability in readers' perceptions of voice (Morton & Storch, 2019), this seems like an oversimplification of what is involved in a writer's ability to project their authorial voice when expressing their stance towards the work of others.

In the two guidebooks that targeted supervisors, on the other hand, the terms voice, writer identity or writer stance were much more prominent. Although these books do not provide advice on expressing an authorial voice per se, authorial identity receives substantial coverage in various chapters. Beyond dealing with stance (with a reference to many of Hyland's publications) and disciplinary differences, discussion of authorial voice is more nuanced. For example, Paltridge and Starfield (2007) discuss why writer identity is difficult for L2 writers who may be considered experts in their home countries but need to know how to sound both authoritative and yet show deference to other authors. Kamler and Thomson (2014) refer to identity as a multi-dimensional, dynamic construct which goes beyond lexical choices. Very early in their book (p. 16) they state that writing a thesis is text work and identity work, with the literature review chapter as the quintessential site of identity work. They note the importance of establishing an authorial identity for doctoral students, because "through their textual choices, they [students] signal the kind of scholar they want to be" (p. 16). This book also emphasizes that establishing a scholarly identity is complex, not only because it is "embedded in a tangle of cultural-historical practices that are both institutional and disciplinary" but also that these are often "the unspoken rules of the game" (p. 22). In their discussion, Kamler and Thomson usefully signal that novice researchers are entering 'occupied territory' unaware of hierarchies, key players and debates which shape decisions

about how to position one's scholarly work, and which scholars to align with or critique. Such discussion highlights the complexity of the construct of voice.

When we compared the treatment of first person pronouns in the guidebooks targeting students and supervisors, there were similar differences in terms of depth of coverage. The guidebooks targeting students (except Murray who did not cover this issue) either discouraged students from using first person pronouns outright or advised caution, noting disciplinary preferences. Bitchener (2010), for example, advised students to be aware that opinions about the use of these pronouns vary and that some believe that "the use of first person pronouns is too personal for an objective piece of academic writing" (p.53). He suggested the use of passives as a way of avoiding this problem and strongly encouraged students to confer with their supervisors who may have their own preferences about pronoun use. Cooley and Lewkowicz (2003) also cautioned about disciplinary variations, but their excerpts from different disciplines also include first person pronouns to emphasize these variations. The authors encouraged students not only to consult with their supervisors about disciplinary expectations but also to examine texts in their own disciplines for pronoun use. Thus, in terms of first person pronouns, there is a clear acknowledgement of variability and a less prescriptive stance adopted.

The use of first person pronouns is also discussed in the two guidebooks targeting supervisors. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) discuss the debates and disciplinary differences and suggest that supervisors need to provide advice about disciplinary expectations. However, it is Kamler and Thomson (2014) who provide the most in-depth discussion of the use of pronouns. In a chapter (Chapter 5) entitled 'Reconsidering the personal' they argue that academic writing always includes the personal, but that this is much more sophisticated than a discussion of the use of 'I'. They include examples of where 'I' is used in an unauthoritative way, where students make claims such as "Foucault agrees with me, when he

says...” (p.72), and draw distinctions between the personal ‘I’ and the discourse ‘I’ as in “I begin by ...”.

In the online resources we analysed, authorial voice is viewed somewhat differently with a focus on the use of sources. The focus here was upon the writer’s ability to make their own beliefs explicit, to distinguish between their own opinion and that of others, including the authors they are citing. The importance of this ability is emphasized in all the online resources we analysed. For example, information provided by Melbourne University provides instructions on how to use direct quotes, summarise and paraphrase sources, and warns against the overuse of others’ voices, which may suggest a lack of originality. One of the Doctoral Writing blogs (3/12/2015) suggests that prose that starts with the writer’s own ideas is often better than that driven by the literature. The advice (if any) offered by these online resources on how to achieve an authorial voice in one’s writing tends to be rather superficial, which could be partly explained by the limited length of these posts. Another focus of the online resources was tips about the linguistic features of academic writing that contribute to an authorial voice. The Thesis whisperer, for example, refers to the work of Hyland (2004) to suggest that ‘authoritative writing’ can be achieved with “small, but strategic changes” in words used to join sentences. The Melbourne University resource similarly uses the work of Hyland to explain how to express confidence in a claim by using hedges, intensifiers and evaluative adjectives. It also includes questionable advice such as “use a variety of voices in your writing.”

Information provided by the writing centre at ANU suggests that a distinct author voice is achieved via persuasive writing and thus the resource focuses predominantly on how to achieve clarity, cohesion, and a good layout of information, considered to be key elements of persuasive writing. Here at least we observe some acknowledgement of non-discursive features that could impact on the reader’s impression of an authorial voice. The blog

produced by Cayley (2013) echoes to some extent the concerns raised by Kamler and Thomson (2008) about the need to address the underlying problem of students' inability to express their authorial voice, namely their lack of confidence to evaluate the work of others. Cayley recommends shifting from discussing voice to discussing contributions, to argue that a clear articulation of one's contribution will ultimately strengthen voice. It is not clear how this can be achieved. Finally in a recent blog from Doctoral Writing (7/10/2019), the author reports on a workshop in which students were asked to negotiate definitions of *voice*, and to characterise features of an authorial academic voice by comparing short samples of their writing. While this blog consists primarily of a list of linguistic features that contribute to voice, the process by which this list was arrived at seems to acknowledge variation in student perspectives.

Conclusions

Developing a strong scholarly identity and conveying this through a confident authorial voice that is valued by disciplinary experts is clearly no easy task. Learning who to cite, when to hedge or critique, what information to include and what to omit is a time-consuming process that only gradually becomes easier as students become more familiar with a specific field of study. This process is made more challenging because the expectations and conventions about voice in academic writing tend to be tacit, and while expert scholars/doctoral supervisors are likely to know how to achieve this delicate rhetorical balance, they may not necessarily be able to articulate it clearly or indeed to teach it (cf. Paré, 2019). The increasing numbers of students and supervisors writing in English as an additional language further complicates this situation. In this context, clear and pertinent advice on how to develop and express authorial voice is much needed.

Our analysis of published advice in guidebooks and in a range of online resources suggests, however, that extensive discussion of authorial voice and representation of voice as a complex construct was only found in the guidebooks that targeted supervisors. This may be because these books are addressed to teachers. Books targeting students and more so online resources tended to provide simplistic and limited advice on authorial voice, advice that seemed to ignore the heterogeneity of the doctoral student population and disregard their diverse life experiences. Guidebooks targeting students also seemed to overlook the fact that contemporary approaches to voice highlight the reader's contribution. Supervisors are the first readers of students' writing, and so their voice preferences will need to be negotiated by student writers. This is important given that supervisors' voice preferences may reflect diverse perspectives even from within one discipline (Morton & Storch, 2019).

Arguably the quality of the advice offered in student guidebooks and online resources reflects the difficulty of teaching writers how to develop an authorial voice in de-contextualised fora. The conclusion we draw is that supervisors, with the support of academic literacy scholars, may be in the best position to guide their doctoral students on how to develop and express an authorial voice. Importantly, many supervisors may need support in making their own disciplinary conventions and expectations about writing explicit. Carefully selected excerpts from theses in their discipline can help the process of awareness-raising about how to express an authorial voice effectively. In addition, discussion of examples comparing and contrasting thesis extracts across different disciplines may be useful in highlighting variability and understanding the reasons writers make particular choices. Future academic literacy research deploying ethnographic studies of supervisor/student pairs could provide further insights into strategies that can contribute to effective pedagogy on developing writers' authorial voice.

We conclude by acknowledging that there are many factors at play in doctoral research/writing and that voice is but one aspect among many, including research paradigm, purpose, supervisor advice, disciplinary values and expectations. In addition, we acknowledge that the supervision and examination of doctoral theses is organised somewhat differently in different countries. On the other hand, it is important that any discussion of authorial voice and scholarly identity in academic writing takes place within an awareness of the changing socio-political context of higher education and how this impacts upon understandings of the role (and agency) of the student, the supervisor, and the process and practices of doctoral research and writing. The contemporary university is undergoing rapid changes, with increasing internationalization having particularly consequential effects on doctoral pedagogy. These effects include additional challenges for students and their supervisors (both of whom may be multilingual) as they attempt to negotiate diverse linguistic, cultural and educational practices.

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