Research, Writing, Rhetoric

On Doctoral Education as Literacy

Bill Green

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The Territory

- research as writing – more specifically, *doctoral* research as writing, drawing on notions of rhetoric and literacy

- doctoral education as *literacy* – as a higher-order literacy, embracing the textual production of knowledge and identity, and linked therefore to a reconceptualised view of curriculum

- curriculum and literacy, with specific reference to doctoral education
Doctoral Research as Writing?

“There has been little attention paid to the question of writing, that central, difficult and often trauma-ridden activity of the production of the doctoral thesis” (Lee, 1998: 121)

“For doctoral writers, as much for basic writers, there are new literacies to learn, new ways with words as they enter into the discursive practices of scholarly communities.” (Lee, 1998: 128)
The Trouble with Writing

♦ “For all the attention it receives in discussions about school reform and literacy achievement, writing remains poorly understood. Writing instruction at all levels of education continues to be informed by a narrow conception of writing as procedure and by persistent misconceptions about writing.” (Robert Yagelski, 2012: 189)
‘get it written, and then get it right’

‘write before you think’

‘how writing finds its own meaning’
Research Literacies

✦ a subset of academic literacy?
✦ addressed to formal research education – HDR
✦ reading/writing – literally & metaphorically…
  ✦ reading research – writing research
✦ qualitative/quantitative, etc
✦ disciplinary/professional/workplace
✦ learning/reporting (i.e. the dissertation, etc)
Research/Rhetoric?

♦ research as rhetoric

♦ the ‘arts of discourse’
  ♦ the study & practice of discourse to good effect

♦ doing things with texts
  ♦ exploring & learning
  ♦ gathering information & constructing data
  ♦ generating (new) knowledge
  ♦ reporting/displaying & communicating/persuading

♦ the textual staging of knowledge
A Swerve...

- From a focus on questions of text & genre – the dissertation itself, etc
  - a knowledge object

- To the writer/researcher, in formation
  - a/the Subject of Knowledge?
Thinking Writing Differently

“What if we understood writing as more than the production of text? What if we understood writing as praxis?” (Yagelski, 2012: 189)

“The common understanding of writing as a procedure for textual production is essentially teleological [...]. By contrast, I am proposing that we understand writing ontologically, as a way of being in the world, as an act of living. In this regard, the purpose of writing is simply to live more fully.” (Yagelski, 2012: 190)
Doctoral Writing

• “... an ontological approach to knowing and learning” (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2013: 6)

• “Recognising the ontological and identity issues involved in becoming research writers and, indeed, being research writers, makes such a practice unavoidably fraught and fragile.” (Barnacle & Dall’Alba, 2013: 10)
How does it feel?

“... writing as we typically understand it—that is, writing as a means to produce a text, *in which the act of writing and, significantly, the experience of writing are mostly ignored.*” (Yagelski, 2012: 190)

Writing as “a practice of being” (p190), “an ontological act” (p193)
Author-ity/Trauma...

- the fear of theory
- writer’s block
The Fear of Theory

- Theory as conceptualisation, complexity, abstraction, ‘difficult knowledge’ etc

- Theory as writing, as textuality (‘text’), as the practice of desire...
  - a “heterogeneous genre” (Culler, 1983: 8-9)
  - a “vehicle for ‘thinking otherwise’” (Ball, 2006: 62)
There is an inhibition with committing words to a blank page, but also there may be endless rewriting without reasons and a refusal to throw away what already feels useless, just in case a use can be found. The writer cannot decide what is important and unimportant. The judgments are harsh, self-berating and terribly premature. It is as if the writer’s compromise is self-erasure. The writer’s impossible theory for how to write seems to begin with the wish to possess the ideal conditions that must exist before one can write so that words too can be perfect. This rule that cannot be followed ends up in the service of blame, a feature of melancholic suffering. Words seem to turn against the self.” (Britzman, 2012: 49)
Becoming Somebody (Else)

- being & becoming
- change & (un)learning...
- refashioning the self

“Doctoral study makes available new subject positions to the student (e.g. qualitative researcher, producer of knowledge, writer) which in various ways may complement, extend, negate and challenge previously embodied subject positions.” (Petersen, 2014: 824)
Good Writing – Writing Well?

♦ the nature & quality of doctoral writing – of academic/research writing more generally

♦ “Research articles are famously incomprehensible to anyone other than researchers [...].” (Howley & Howley, 2014: 17)

♦ The concept of ‘good-to-excellent writing’ – ‘good-enough’ research writing?
The Challenge

“... to find ways around and beyond the institutionally produced timidities of doctoral research writing, to construct opportunities for engaging with actual communities of scholars beyond the shield of the university and its pedagogical relationships, such that the doctoral candidate comes to understand herself as a subject within a public community, as a licensed intellectual and, above all, as a writer.” (Lee, 1998: 131)