

From ad hoc to more Effective and Integrated Academic Dissertation Writing: Developing an Emergent Knowledge Building Corridor

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Abstract

Although postgraduate researchers make up a high percentage of the international students in higher education around the world, they are particularly vulnerable to the relatively high incompleteness and failure rates. Good research and academic writing skills are needed to avoid some of the many obstacles faced. This paper develops a framework and self-help guide which may assist PhD students in particular to achieve more effective academic dissertation design and writing. The approach outlined below has been further refined elsewhere in terms of the particular links between language and knowledge building, and also in relation to the second language learning challenges facing many international students (Richards, 2010). Here we focus on the integrated aspects of the design and writing process which might be developed with appropriate 'focus and structure' towards a chosen academic problem or topic of inquiry.

Introduction:

There are both 'macro' and 'micro' reasons why postgraduate researchers struggle to complete a research dissertation. The 'macro' factors consist of various environmental, attitudinal and personal issues which are often difficult for universities to support. Conversely, most postgraduate researchers also struggle with a range of 'micro' factors which relate to the obstacles involved in achieving a sustainable research design and effective writing strategies

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which articulate and disseminate or communicate a focus and structure of inquiry. These ‘micro’ aspects thus relate to the specific stages and aspects of how many postgraduate researchers seem to get disorientated and confused at any or all of the four key stages of research and writing – that is the stages of developing a topic focus, framing this in relation to a literature review, further grounding this in the empirical aspect of data collection and analysis, and finally in relation to the writing up process as an integral process of communication and not just a retrospective report. This paper is concerned with achieving or emerging a more integrated approach to the stages and aspects of the academic research and writing process.

Part 1. The emergent approach: An antidote for ineffective approaches to writing/research

The table outlines a contrast between a more ad hoc approach on the left to the academic research and writing process, and on the right a more integrated or emergent approach. The left column thus lists the often disconnected stages and aspects of what might be called a typically ad hoc approach. Such an example of a dissertation design and written output often fails to achieve or develop a clear inquiry focus which links a problem to a question and also some specific issue or perspective to a recognizably useful or relevant focus and structure. Likewise our example of an ad hoc approach typically involves a literature review which tends to read more like an annotated bibliography rather than an academic framework for locating the academic relevance and implications of the inquiry undertaken. Just as postgraduates often get lost in the attempt to

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find a relevant topic of research inquiry so too they can become easily disorientated by an unfocused reading strategy.

A more integrated approach will clarify the connections between a literature review contextualization of the chosen inquiry focus and the particular methodological design for an empirical contextualization through some specific process of data collection and analysis. This is often reflected in a superficially descriptive approach to the data building process which may also involve evaluation with no particular problem-solving or integrating purpose. In this way, we might characterize an ad hoc approach as a somewhat hasty and superficial as well as retrospective or disconnected approach to the academic research and writing process.

Table #1: From an ad hoc to a more integrated or ‘emergent’ approach to academic research and writing.

<p>Typical ‘non-relevant’ (descriptive and/or ad hoc) approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ No key focus question – general topic or vague perspective (and/or too many conflicting foci/questions) ❖ Literature review also descriptive and sample/case study either decontextualised 	<p>Antidote: a relevant research problem/focus question should more integrally link sections of thesis of paper</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Introduction – a viable focus question links specific problem/context and general relevance ❖ Literature review situates the research focus and design in ‘exemplifying’ academic
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<p>or context-specific/confused</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ All stages of research process and elements of thesis/project defined in isolation (write-up of research is ad hoc or disconnected) ❖ Methodology merely descriptive (i.e. retrospective or non-relevant evaluation) ❖ Overall, an ad hoc, retrospective and ultimately hasty or superficial notion of the inquiry process, and contribution to human knowledge 	<p>contexts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Different stages and elements are meaningfully linked in terms of an integral or cohesive design ❖ Methodology thus above all else refers to an appropriate design strategy for exploring and responding to an organizing focus question ❖ Supported by appropriate methods of ‘triangulation’ ❖ The writing up of a dissertation/paper thus also tells the ‘story’ of how findings/outcomes/ conclusions (etc.) are related to initial focus question and research problem
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Adapted from Richards 2009

The inherently important role of language in the knowledge building process should be emphasized in the writing up process. An effective research design focus and structure should be reflected in more integrated aspects of interpretive as well as descriptive triangulation. This should also be linked to integrated aspects of *grammatical cohesion* (e.g. the use of connectors to

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link paragraphs, sub-sections and the main sections of a coherent academic dissertation) as well as the *lexical coherence* of a prioritized and linked set of key words and related concepts – which link as well as inform each of the key sections of a dissertation. As developed elsewhere, this provides a framework for not only linking ‘Academic Discourse’ (ranging from a general form such as ‘Academic English through to the particular discourses of different areas of knowledge) and research methodology, but also each of the particular sections of a dissertation.

An emergent approach to the writing process thus lies in between the poles represented by the spontaneous or innovative approach known as ‘process writing’ on one hand, and on the other the more disciplined approach to structuring writing through such techniques as the use of headings and subheadings. An emergent approach will thus involve both directly structured and organically connected links between sets of keywords supported by an the unfolding as well as direct links of a dissertation’s grammatical cohesion. On this basis, the different sections of a dissertation should all contribute to academic research and writing process as an integrated mode of knowledge building. This might be imagined in the pyramidal convergences between the design purposes of an introduction, the concept or topic infrastructure of a literature review, the data accumulation and the information pyramid of the data collection and analysis.

In the emergent approach postgraduate researchers are encouraged to recognize that the writing process and the dissertation itself is not something which just happens in a hasty or retrospective way at the end of an inquiry process. Rather writing should begin at the outset of the inquiry

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process and reflect the effort to identify a relevant problem and articulate a research question on one hand, and on the other to refine a 'focus' and then develop this into a working structure of 'thread of inquiry'. In the initial stages of writing researchers should not worry too much about getting the form correct. Rather they should attend to 'emerging' a sustainable direction and overall structure of inquiry in terms of a developing sense of both understanding and explanation. The middle stages of an applied research design and the writing process should converge as a knowledge building process which integrates the various elements of the dissertation. The importance of revision is emphasized especially in the later stages in terms of (a) the polishing, refining, and 'further prioritizing' of link between overall focus and specific parts and examples (e.g. adding further details and examples); and (b) the dialogue with a particular 'reader' as a way of making more accessible, coherent and clear as a 'thread' of inquiry or argument.

Table 2 below outlines an 'academic writing' checklist using the emergent approach to achieve more effective focus and integration. As developed more fully in Part B below, it also provides a means for considering how the elements and stages of academic writing are meaningfully linked in terms of an integral or cohesive design based around a relevant focus question. The background to and rationale for this should be indicated in the introduction. The literature review should provide the framework for locating or situating the academic relevance of the inquiry within a recognized area as well as an established 'hierarchy' of knowledge of some

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kind. The methodology of evaluation should be pertinent to the methodology of design – in turn, reflecting the strategy needed to respond effectively and appropriately to the initial focus question. All the elements of the written thesis or paper should recapitulate, inform and frame the developed thread of inquiry – that is, represent the ‘story’ of the inquiry as well as explain the connection between the focus question and specific findings or outcomes.

Table #2: Emergent method - academic thesis/writing checklist

- *Does the writing directly or indirectly address a central focus question which provides some particular angle or perspective on an area or topic of relevant inquiry?*
- *Is the focus question framed in relation to some relevant ‘aim’ linked to a particular context and implied audience?*
- *Is the focus question ‘unpacked’ in relation to series of guiding sub-questions (we recommend three)?*
- *Does the introduction contextualize both the general and particular relevance of the inquiry or study?*
- *Does the literature review or selective referencing effectively situate the academic or intellectual relevance of the central focus – in terms of either a general topic or specific area of recognized significance ?*
- *Does the research or inquiry design represent a methodology or strategy to*

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appropriately and effectively address an implicit or explicit focus question, issue or problem - in terms of a relevant means or process of evaluating the response to this?

- *Does the critical discussion which reports on the inquiry process (and, if appropriate, data analysis) progressively and meaningfully address the key components of a focus question in terms a structured connection between evidence and findings?*
- *Does the conclusion pull the threads of inquiry together in terms of an overall response to a central focus question – with a particular emphasis on how the inquiry has productively contributed to human knowledge-building with either links back to the literature review/established areas and/or forward to possible further implications and inquiry?*
- *Does the writing effectively use transition words, headings, and introductory/concluding sub-sections to reinforce the sense of a progressive thread of inquiry which has internal integrity and relevance?*
- *Above all else, is there an overall and developing sense of the writer putting a series of discussions, ideas and references into their ‘own words’ to reflect a sense of convergent understanding?*

Adapted from Richards 2009

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Part B. Revisiting the key sections of academic thesis writing and research/project design

Introduction (including an initial abstract)

The primary function of an introductory section or chapter is, of course, to provide a background context to the rationale and prioritized outcomes and audience for a particular chosen focus of inquiry. A common mistake in many postgraduate dissertations is to make the introduction a shortened version of the literature review section to follow. The introduction section is an opportunity to meaningfully contextualize a chosen focus in terms of the distinct or related aspects of practical context, personal interest and projected applications of the general study to be undertaken. In other words an introduction should serve to explain the relevance of chosen research problem or question and associated inquiry in mainly concrete, common-sense and meaningful terms and not just academic references. An effective introduction should also ground the main research problem or issue and either directly or indirectly verbalize this in terms of a central research question and key (we recommend three as a generic structure of inquiry) supporting research questions. Many postgraduate dissertations fail to do this. The abstract is arguably the most important section of a dissertation and should summarize the whole introduction section in relation the overall development as well as purposes of both an academic project and the dissertation as an integrated writing process.

Literature review

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Many postgraduate research literature reviews tend to read like an annotated bibliography, either an ad hoc record of reading or descriptive listing of readings linked to a central and related topics. A central purpose of literature reviews in dissertation writing is to academically contextualize and also ‘situate’ a chosen focus of either applied or fundamental inquiry in relation to a framework of established topics and related concepts both general and particular. The most effective literature review will thus reflect a trajectory from the general to the particular in terms of locating the key concepts of a particular research question. Dissertations without a clear focus question, or related topic, issue or problem tend to result in descriptive and general literature reviews which do not have a great or effective link to an applied focus of inquiry. Such a tendency is exemplified by the provision of some models to new researchers which advise two distinct literature reviews which do not ever really connect – one an ‘empirical’ literature review and the other a ‘theoretical’ literature review. Whilst perhaps a provisionally useful distinction in some projects, this is often an artificial distinction which cannot ultimately be sustained. It is also an approach which particularly encourages a disconnected view of the relation between theory and practice (and thus ‘mind-body’, ‘thinking-doing’, rationalism-empiricism, etc.).

Methodology

The best way to appreciate the guiding notion of methodology and how it relates to the overall design of a thesis (or other writing) as well as an applied project is perhaps in the following

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terms: *the methodology of an inquiry-based research project or writing pertains to the overall strategy of the research design to address an implicit or explicit focus question, issue or problem in terms of an appropriate and relevant means or process of evaluating the response* (to the initial or central question). In short, the concept of methodology of academic research design ultimately refers to an organizing strategy of knowledge-building which precedes and should inform the methodology of research evaluation. However many postgraduate research students are required choose either a quantitative or qualitative method of evaluation before they have research problem, question or design. Thus the concept of methodology is often confused with the particular methods chosen to achieve some kind of data collection, analysis and triangulation of evidence. The more relevant contrast is rather between descriptive and interpretive applications of methodology and this applies both to quantitative and qualitative approaches to research evaluation.

Data analysis and/or findings

Generally speaking, this section or chapter – as well as stage of project development - serves to organize different kinds of evidence conceived to assist with answering a focus question grounded in a particular context of relevance. An *ad hoc* approach will typically present data in a de-contextualized vacuum and/or project findings in a discrete with little or no systemic let alone strategic connection to either “the data” or any informing inquiry purpose or focus. As well as encouraging a trajectory of analysis and knowledge-building proceeding from the merely

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descriptive to a more strategic, convergent and (dialogically) interpretative approach, the method outlined above (i.e. of focusing on a central question linked to three supporting questions) provides an exemplary strategy for organizing the analysis of any relevant data and generation of findings. The use of research questions as a meaningful knowledge building framework to organize the sequence and connections between data-gathering questions constitutes what might be called a data-gathering framework which also usefully prioritises and focuses on who, where and how relevant data and information might be collected. Such a framework is very efficient and effective in generating findings in terms of a sequence, order and relevance which lends itself to an emergent approach to the writing process

The process of writing thus replicates the inquiry design process either directly or inversely in terms of building on evidence-related responses to a series of guiding questions transformed into related topics and headings. In short, the method above is useful because it encourages both ‘thinking’ and ‘writing’ in terms of building progressively and interpretively on succinct, related and increasingly explicit and direct responses to a central question, issue or aim. Depending on the kind of project or inquiry undertaken, one would expect to see a meaningfully constructed chapter or discussion which either leads up to and includes an overall response to the central focus question or a basis for critical further discussion in a separate section or chapter.

Discussion and/or conclusion

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‘Critical further discussion’ may take the form of either directly expounding on the implications of the ‘findings’ of a critical inquiry or, rather, taking a more direct and speculative focus. In any case, depending on whether the project is more practically or conceptually/theoretically orientated, the focus of critical discussion can be linked to distinct or convergent notions of ‘practical implications’, ‘new frameworks’ of understanding, or relevance in terms of established or possible future links and interventions vis-à-vis an earlier review of ‘the literature’ (i.e. fields and debates of focused academic relevance). Thus, if ‘critical further discussion’ is not included or developed in either a findings section/chapter or a separate section/chapter, it may be briefly gestured to in a short concluding section or chapter. In sum, whether extensively developed or only briefly outlined, the main function of the concluding sections of academic inquiry and writing is to get to the very heart and substance of a meaningful response to a central focus question.

‘Re-vision’ process (editing and revision)

The revision (or rather re-vision) of any effective academic inquiry and writing will ever leave open or take up the opportunity for further refinement of ‘focus and structure’. If this is not a retrospective ‘rescue job’ then hopefully the meaningful focus and direction initially outlined at the outset has generally been translated into a dynamic and integral series of stages and sections or chapters – so that only minor refinements are needed. In contrast to how the editing process focuses on formatting and error correction, the revision process focuses on the overall coherence

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and cohesion of academic writing as a form of communication. Thus the notion of revision alternately refers to a projected audience on one hand, and on the development of an initial into an integral ‘thread of inquiry’ linking all the elements and part of a dissertation. These connections are clarified as much as possible through the wording and sequence of headings and sub-headings on one hand, and the structured transitions in each section or chapter epitomized most importantly by introductory and concluding/summarizing paragraphs on the other. In this way ‘the thread’ of an inquiry *vision* is developed in a way that tries to ensure as much as possible that a reader (or examiner) will not get lost and will be able to recognize the focus, structure and basic integrity of your academic inquiry and writing.

Summary

Many postgraduate researchers tend to struggle with the ‘micro’ aspects of undertaking a postgraduate dissertation degree which relate to the specific stages and aspects of the academic research and writing process. In this way many tend to get disorientated or confused at any or all of the four key stages of inquiry which correspond to the main sections of a dissertation. In this paper we have outlined a strategy for achieving a more integrated approach from the outset of the inquiry process. This involves the initial design of a relevant focus and structure which is then supported as an emergent process of unfolding inquiry along the integrated lines of interdependent dissertation aspects linked to a particular ‘thread of inquiry’. In this way the academic research and writing process might be conceptualized as a corridor of relevant

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knowledge building linked to a particular authentic problem or relevant purpose and outcome – a corridor which might also be supported by academic supervisors or mentors as well as the above as a kind of self-help guide. Such an approach might also be productively used to better assist the learning of ‘academic English’ - especially by international students for whom English or any other language is a second or foreign language.

References

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Dr. Cameron Richards is a Professor within the Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy studies within the University of Technology Malaysia (UTM). His current academic work and interests especially focuses on policy studies and research on one hand, and assisting both postgraduate students and colleagues with more effective models and practices of academic research inquiry, academic writing and general ‘knowledge-building’ on the other. He

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retains long term interests in rhetoric, cross-cultural communication and methodology studies which inform his interdisciplinary interest in the global convergence of different knowledge systems. As well as having worked previously at the Queensland University of Technology and the University of Western Australia, he has also worked extensively in Asia including past positions at the Singapore National Institute of Education (NTU) and the Hong Kong Institute of Education.