Thriving Not Just Surviving: Integrated remedies for the ways and stages in which postgraduates struggle with undertaking doctoral research and writing

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ABSTRACT: Postgraduate researchers undertaking a project and writing up a dissertation often feel lost and frustrated. This paper will outline some practical suggestions and advice which follow from how a good research problem design is a key to success. It will examine the ways in which doctoral students can directly 'lose' themselves and their readers at various points along the four main stages of the process of undertaking research to write a dissertation. Some of the common symptoms of the 'lost' syndrome include: unfocused or non-prioritised research topics, literature reviews which read as annotated bibliographies or mere list of references, confused methodologies, and an inability to 'integrate' their writing and revision. It will discuss some simple remedies or strategies for resolving such afflictions which can assist towards successful completion and achieving the most effective academic knowledge-building. An effective 'focus and design structure' from the outset is one of the more effective ways of approaching both the process of undertaking academic research and that of writing it up as transferably relevant knowledge.

Key words: academic writing, research design, problem-based inquiry

1. INTRODUCTION

Many postgraduate researchers struggle to complete a research dissertation. There are both 'macro' and 'micro' reasons for this. 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 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.

2. THE FOUR KEY WAYS AND STAGES IN WHICH DOCTORAL CANDIDATES GET 'LOST'

As outlined in table 1 below, the four key ways and stages in which doctoral candidates typically get lost correspond also to the four key sections of a dissertation: the introduction, literature review, methodology framework, and the transformation of empirical data collection and analysis into meaningful knowledge or findings of some kind. In the first stage, many doctoral students get overwhelmed and disorientated as they either directly seek the ideal PhD topic for them within an endless array of possible foci or rather passively wait for it to somehow be revealed or found. Such unrealistic or perfectionist stances are in contrast to a view of PhD research and writing as being a process of emergence or refinement as well as clarification of potentially viable yet also personally or professionally relevant interests.

Many doctoral candidates are initially discouraged from seeking out an initial or working research problem and question and advised rather just to start reading widely 'the academic literature' in order to 'find' an appropriate topic. This often inadvertently causes greater confusion – the sense of being lost in the literature. Likewise, students are typically required to choose a methodology of

evaluation before or without the kind of 'methodology of research design' which arguably should precede the selection of specific methods of data collection and analysis. This often leads to a descriptive tendency in both quantitative and qualitative research evaluation which may translate into a condition of 'getting lost in data or information accumulation for its own sake'. Finally, after assuming that academic writing is something which you simply do to somehow retrospectively report on an empirical project, many doctoral candidates discover too late: (a) that the most effective dissertations should at least indirectly exemplify a particular inquiry focus and an associated 'thread of inquiry' which effectively connects the different stages and aspects of research and writing, and likewise (b) the importance of writing and communication tips or techniques to avoid 'losing the reader' .

Table 1.The four main ways and stages of losing yourself (as well as your reader) whilst undertaking the doctoral process

1. Lost in the search for an appropriate focus or viable topic of research inquiry *[the vague or 'directionless' introduction]*

2. Lost in endless academic references and 'literature' *[tending to annotated bibliography rather than meaningful literature review]*

3. Lost in data-gathering and 'mere information'*[process of methodological evaluation not sufficiently linked to an effective research design]*

4. Lost in the process of 'writing up' a cohesive thesis... which might provide a relevant 'thread of knowledge-building inquiry' to also meaningfully guide the reader [*ad hoc, segmented and merely 'descriptive' approach to academic research and writing]*

2.1 LOST IN THE SEARCH FOR AN APPROPRIATE FOCUS OR VIABLE TOPIC OF INQUIRY

It is perhaps true to say that most postgraduates who feel lost never really 'got lost'. They simply never find their way in the first place.As indicated above many conventional 'PhD survival guides' do tend to reflect on some of the psychological as well as environmental and other 'external' obstacles to undertaking the doctoral process – such as feelings of isolation, access to appropriate resources, and the relationship with supervisors. There are some related 'mindset' factors which more directly relate to the general problem of 'getting started' with research inquiry and academic writing, and the specific challenge of 'finding' an appropriate research focus or topic. As Table 2 below

suggests, there are multiple and various ways in which the human capacity for procrastination and effective self-sabotage dovetail with passivist tendencies or failures to more confidently and productively dealing with the inevitable stages of confusion and frustration in various related forms human learning, inquiry and general knowledge-building. The ultimate or severest condition of what might be referred to as the *negative cycle* of academic disorientation is inquiry and writing 'paralysis'. As will be discussed further, this may be a provisional stage followed by productive progress or it can become a perpetual or permanent condition of not just 'failure to complete' but with long-lasting career implications and personal sense of worth and self-confidence.

Table 2. Initial symptoms of being 'lost' when undertaking academic research and writing

- Endless 'excuses' for not getting started (lack of time, conflicting commitments, etc.),
- Cannot find a suitable topic or a suitable opportunity to undertake any kind of research , OR
- Waiting for the 'big topic' , the 'right topic, or some sense of a clear direction before starting (never really starting but always 'about to', wanting to be 'told what to do', and in some a crippling sense of perfectionism or related conditions of 'passivity')
- Not feeling confident to the task (*how can we possibly make a significant contribution?)*
- Failing to recognize that (or value) one's prior knowledge or work experience can usefully link to a legitimate and even innovative focus
- General anxiety, increased stress levels and general sense of feeling intimidated at new requirements to increase academic outputs
- Overall, processes of research and/or writing perceived in negatively intimidating terms (e.g. as traumatic, difficult and frustrating)
- Negative reinforcement also in the form of inherently 'passive', ad hoc and/or descriptive views of learning and knowledge-building

Adapted from Richards 2009

In short, for various reasons many doctoral candidates do not successfully or effectively overcome the initial stage of getting lost. Even if they do implicitly choose or develop a relevant 'focus and structure' of academic inquiry, the lack of an explicit or formal 'research design methodology' to specifically reflect this will encourage ongoing tendencies for getting lost at subsequent stages of the doctoral process. Conversely, if they do somehow progress without such a focus this will tend to be demonstrated by the vague or 'directionless' introduction. In other words, any initial or provisional efforts to actively reflect upon, to critically refine, and to cohesively focus a direction and structure of research inquiry and

associated aspects represent the key ingredient for a general remedy or antidote to the multiple and various ways of getting academically 'lost'. Thus it might be argued that the art and science of developing a viable academic inquiry design to potentially inform and organize the writing as well as thinking process is perhaps the most important 'PhD survival skill' of them all.

2.2 LOST IN ENDLESS REFERENCES AND 'THE LITERATURE'

PhD supervisors often do not have the time or the opportunity to assist with the emergent process of doctoral candidates' coming up with or otherwise clarifying an academically viable research question and associated inquiry issue or problem. Yet even where supervisors recognize the importance of providing such a 'dialogical' focus for doctoral candidates to develop a relevant and viable research focus or topic, this is often done 'later rather than sooner'. Lost doctoral candidates clearly would benefit from much 'sooner'. In any case, it has become established supervisory practice in universities around the world to suggest that doctoral candidates undertake an extensive literature review first before venturing to choose or refine a research question and academic inquiry focus.

Such a process can indeed be productive, especially where there is undertaken with at least an implicit inquiry focus or sense of critical direction if not an actual working research question open to possible refinement. However even for those are generally not lost in terms of a general academic area or topic, the unfocused or unstructured exploration of 'the literature' can cause significant problems. In the worst cases, candidates may get comprehensively 'lost in the literature'. This may either be reflected in either endemic or permanent confusion or rather the symptom of continuing to 'jump around' without being able to effectively choose or concentrate on one relevant topic or focus. Either way, if such candidates somehow still progress to undertake some kind of empirical inquiry then the literature review or associated academic rationale for the overall inquiry or study will tend to be inherently ad hoc, segmented and generally disconnected from the applied phase. The most tell-tale sign of how candidates got lost in either 'the literature' or endless references is that the literature review stage or segment of their dissertation tends to read as merely an annotated bibliography – rather than an academic contextualization of their particular research focus or question.

2.3 LOST IN DATA-GATHERING AND INFORMATION OVERLOAD

In contrast to the concept of a research *methodology of evaluation*, the notion of a research *methodology of design* represents the cohesive or integral as well as focused inquiry into an academically viable as well as relevant research question or problem. Clearly the methods of data collection and analysis should be appropriate to or follow from a particular research focus or direction and structure. Yet doctoral candidates often vaguely choose a particular quantitative or qualitative methodology of evaluation without actually having any implicit let alone explicit sense of a particular design to link this to. In this way, their 'research methodology' may: (a) have little or no connection to the academic rationale identified or literature review undertaken; (b) either quantitatively or qualitatively epitomize an unfocused strategy of simply collecting lots of data in the expectation that 'findings' will somehow simply present themselves; and (c) also impose on this unacknowledged preconceptions and/or waiting endlessly for some relevant pattern or conclusion to emerge by itself from the data collection.

In short, the third key way in which doctoral candidates often get lost is in an unfocused or merely descriptive process of data collection and analysis. "Information" is considered to be *meaningful relations* established or described within any data collection. However, *understanding* linked to relevant interest or application is needed for information to be also transformed into meaningful knowledge (e.g. Fricke, 2009). Likewise doctoral students need a sense of focus or direction to avoid either being confused by or being tempted to merely impose on any data collection process.

2.4 LOST IN THE PROCESS OF 'WRITING UP' A RESEARCH INQUIRY

Many doctoral candidates tend to assume that the writing up of a dissertation is primarily a process of reporting at the end stage on the results of an empirical or applied project – that is, the findings derived from the collection and analysis of data. Many only became aware at this late stage of the lack of the overall disconnection between the parts of their doctoral inquiry or rather the need for a more integrated connection between the sections of academic writing. Such cases are often characterized by a last-minute panic to try and belatedly or retrospectively to: (a) indicate the particular contribution to some recognized academic are, and/or (b) to identify more effective and explicit connections between the empirical or applied study and the theoretical or academic context chosen to frame this. Table 3 below outlines the

related symptoms of such 'disconnected' academic thesis writing.

Table 3. Symptoms of a 'lost' or 'disconnected' thesis

- No central focus question or organizing research problem (and/or too many conflicting foci/questions) - vague or directionless introduction
- Literature review tends to read as a merely annotated bibliography, and does not sufficiently frame the academic context or relevance of a particular focus of inquiry.
- Methodology merely descriptive (i.e. retrospective or non-relevant evaluation). Empirical or
- Empirical or applied project is not sufficiently linked to chosen theoretical or academic context. Sample/case study tends to be either de-contextualized or confused with a specific context.
- Write-up of research as an overall thesis or dissertation is ad hoc or disconnected. All stages of research process and elements of thesis/project tend to be described or defined in isolation.
- In sum, a generally ad hoc, retrospective and ultimately hasty or superficial notion of the inquiry process, and contribution to human knowledge

In other words, the fourth key way in which doctoral candidates often get lost is in the *writing up process*. This is partly a matter of having failed earlier to adequately establish an integral 'thread' of research inquiry. It is also as much a situation of perhaps also failing to adequately outline, to edit and to revise the written thesis as a form of communication which in an integrated way should aim to *cohesively* (lexically), *coherently* (grammatically and semantically) and *relevantly* (rhetorically) engage and direct a projected reader or audience. As will be discussed further below there are many suggested tips for and techniques of effective academic writing and language use which may assist in both respects. This may be somewhat difficult to do this as part of a last-minute rush or retrospective plan. However, an effective convergence of academic communication and productive knowledge-building is more readily achieved with a viable focus of inquiry design developed as part of the writing process from an early stage. In sum such an approach provides an antidote to the either/or separation or lurching between top-down and ad hoc perspectives in a negative version of the academic cycle of inquiry and writing.

3. THE EMERGENT APPROACH: AN ANTIDOTE FOR THE FOUR WAYS OF 'GETTING LOST' ACADEMICALLY

The four key ways in which candidates tend to get lost in the doctoral process all reflect different stages and ways of generally becoming disorientated and lost. Implicit to the related discussion above has been a notion that a relevant inquiry focus or direction from the outset can provide an integral remedy for various symptoms of academic disorientation. Put another way, we might potentially and relatively 'failproof' the doctoral process by designing and developing a 'thread' of knowledge-building inquiry. The discussion below emphases an *emergent* approach to productively building knowledge in a relevant and focused fashion which is meaningful both personally and in terms of some wider notion of academic community. As indicated earlier, a negative cycle of academic inquiry either tends to arbitrarily demarcate or even lurch between rationalizing top-down or ad hoc bottom-up perspectives which may culminate in inquiry or writing 'paralysis'. In contrast an emergent approach more productively, integrally and developmentally seeks to integrate top-down theory and bottom-up practice or application.
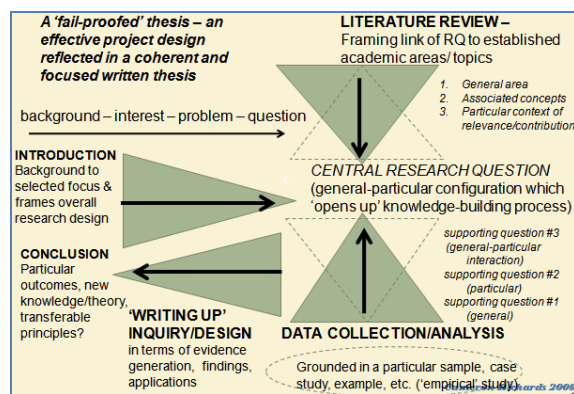

Figure 1. An overview of how 'an integral thread of inquiry' might inform the aspects and stages of academic research and knowledge-building

Figure 1 above serves as an introductory overview of some related aspects of an integral remedy to the four key ways of getting lost in the doctoral process discussed in the first part of this paper. It depicts the progressive as well as inter-related nature of what might be referred to as the process of 'fail-proofing' a doctoral dissertation and the dissemination of other academic inquiry. By this we refer to a general strategy and some related methods for academically developing an integral thread of inquiry in a way which supports, clarifies and informs the aspects and stages of academic research and general knowledge building. Such an approach may enhance the prospects of success in various ways, and likewise make it less likely that a prospective examiner will fail a particular dissertation or paper. Supporting the overall inquiry and writing strategy of developing a *thread of inquiry* which a reader might follow, then we might identify three other specific

thinking remedies which link together as well as discretely serve address the key stages of academic disorientation. As discussed below, the art and science of posing a *relevant research question* may greatly assist with both the initial stage and the overall structuring of an inquiry. Similarly, the capacity and focus of *pattern recognition* is a key to linking the key concepts and keywords both internally and between the literature review and data analysis sections of any thesis. Above all else, the development of an integrated research design should be somehow expressed in terms of the variously *triangulated link* between some particular example and general terms or principles of the overall inquiry.

3.1 FOCUS AND STRUCTURE FROM THE OUTSET: THE VERBAL PREDICATION OF A GUIDING 'THREAD OF INQUIRY'

Many doctoral candidates have a vague or uncertain notion of possible research topics or directions. Good supervisors often assist such students to negotiate possible areas of interest in terms of academic viability as well as potentially useful outcomes and implications. In short, the most effective way to develop an initial working focus and related structure is to: (a) link or derive some particular problem in a possible area of interest; (b) convert this into possible inquiry focus questions; and (c) further translate this into both academic concepts and potential outcomes as a means of evaluating its potential viability as a direction and emergent structure of research investigation.

Thus a powerful key to getting lost at the outset of a doctoral candidature is the attempt to explicitly formulate a prospective central research question. The 20th Century philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1981) has identified how the predication of a question is ever the most effective way to open a productive new line of knowledge-building inquiry. This is within the shared social structures of any kind of knowledge community as well as in any individual process of learning. The selection or combination of key words or key concepts within a possible research question should inform some specific linking of a recognized *general* academic area of knowledge and some *particular* perspective, issue or problem which allows investigation or exploration in a particular context. As well as assisting those who are not aware of some particular underlying interest, such an approach is also helpful for prioritizing possible topics, concepts and questions for those who are swamped by and unable to choose from abundant possibilities.

The most important function of a central research question thus lies in how this should represent a specific research design methodology. It should articulate the link between a particular example and general context of inquiry as the basis for an appropriate research methodology of evaluation. We have found that the range of research questions is perhaps most effectively organized around a central question being supported by three guiding questions which organize and prioritize either writing or discussion as a knowledge-building 'pyramid'. This will be or should be reflected in the selection and combination of the key concepts or 'keywords' of a particular inquiry on one hand, and on the other the various information or data 'gathering' questions which reflect the 'who, what and where' of any academic research inquiry. Thus the natural knowledge-building trajectory represented by a core group of research questions should move from a descriptive or empirical foundation through to an overall process of synthesis, interpretation and applied problem-solving. A central research problem also provides a focus for linking academic theory and practice, innovation and discipline, and also the corresponding methodologies of design and evaluation. Translated into an effective central research question this should represent some configuration of and link between both a particular aspect and general focus or area of knowledge. In this way a productive process of knowledge-building inquiry might be grounded in the local and specific provide a platform for generating universal principles or useful transferable applications.

3.2 RESEACH LITERATURE REVIEWS AND HE ACADEMIC CONTEXTUALISATION OF AN INQUIRY FOCUS

Just as doctoral students are often advised to go and do a lot of reading of the academic literature before considering a possible focus or direction, an inordinate number of postgraduate theses include a literature review section which either read like an annotated bibliography about related topics or even sometimes as simply an ad hoc and disconnected list of readings covered (Ref). A relevant working research question can greatly assist are more concentrated and effective literature search and theoretical knowledge-building (even if this is modified or changed in the process). In related fashion, so too the effective writing up of a literature review should serve to contextualize both the central research question and also how this links a particular issue, perspective or problem to a recognized area of knowledge in some productively useful or even innovative way. Many completed theses struggle or simply fail to adequately connect an empirical or applied focus of inquiry to an appropriate

theoretical contextualization of this. Figure 3 further illustrates how a central research question (and an associated or implied design methodology) provides the *focus* for theoretically contextualizing any empirical or applied study as a problem-solving exercise of some kind. As an act of predication which links as well as opens up the connection between the general and particular, it should also exemplify a related 'structure' of inquiry from complementary directions and perspectives of theory and practice.

3.3 FROM DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS TO KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

Without a corresponding research design methodology which is relevant and focused, the empirical or applied aspect of a research project may well be undertaken as an ad hoc rather than strategic process of data 'accumulation'. Getting lost in data accumulation or information overload would seem to be a common doctoral syndrome where an empirical project gets out of hand, where the time and effort to not just collect and analyze but meaningfully organize research data is grossly underestimated, and where the effort to relevantly link this to a relevant or appropriate theoretical contextualization becomes a 'bridge too far'. When linked to the notion or a relevant research design the concept of a methodology of evaluation may be understood as the strategy adopted to investigate and collect evidence in ways which are appropriate to the particular question or problem addressed.

As depicted in Figure 2, what is needed to make the process of collecting and analyzing data much more efficient as well as meaningful is a 'data gathering framework'. This is a framework for productive knowledge building which focuses, prioritizes and sequences the set of data collecting questions in terms of the information needed to develop meaningful response to the set of guided research questions which support a problem-solving inquiry. Such a framework represents a relevant sequence of more effectively, efficiently and directly linking organized data-gathering to the writing up process of a data analysis and findings section of a thesis – that is, the conversion of data into evidence and findings. Such a framework should inform the selection and application of potentially diverse or mixed methods of data collection, rather than the other way around. The process of translating research data into knowledge should thus be framed not as a descriptive vacuum but as a transformational process of interpretation and problem-solving. In this way an emergent model of knowledge-building corresponds to the *constructive* rather than *accumulation* notion of

the process or model known as the *data-information-knowledge-wisdom pyramid* (Fricke, 2009).
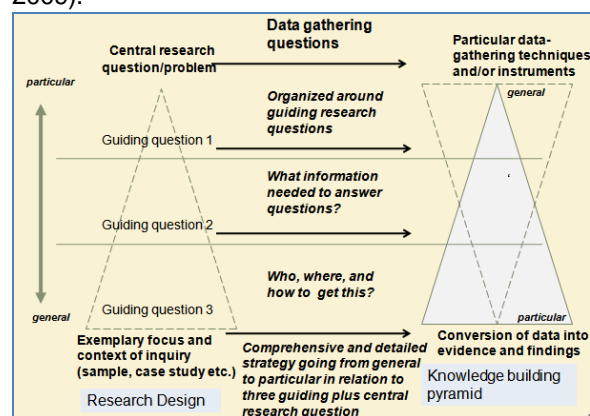

Figure 2. The strategic importance of developing a 'data-gathering framework'

3.4 TRIANGULATION AS A KEY TO EFFECTIVE KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING

Whether used in qualitative or quantitative contexts of evaluation, such related concepts as *triangulation, reliability*, and *evidence* reflect the aspiration of all academic research aims to achieve *transferability* beyond a particular case, example or sample in hopefully some kind of universal fashion. Both qualitative and quantitative methods and models of research evaluation are beset by a more fundamental distinction between more superficial or descriptive (i.e. low-level) approaches to translating data into knowledge on one hand, and the interpretive understanding and application needed for deep level analysis and problem-solving on the other in both the natural and human domains of research. In qualitative terms triangulation is often referred to as a sufficient diversity of methods to achieve reliability. Conversely the quantitative notion of triangulation is typically understood or approached in both spatial and de-contextualized terms of 'valid' measurement.

There is third basic notion of triangulation which corresponds to the earlier mentioned concept of an integral thread of inquiry. Triangulation in time is only superficially linked to such notions as longitudinal studies of either 'before and after'. In terms of research inquiry it might also be linked to how a relevant research question provides the enduring reference point for both a sustained research inquiry and the academic writing process of likewise organizing both theoretical contextualization and an empirical or applied study data into a meaningful and convergent knowledge-building process. In both the natural and human realms of research, inquiry-based problem-solving typically investigates the dynamic interaction of 'internal'

(intrinsically patterned or self-organizing) and 'external' (e.g. environmental) factors which typically inform causal as well as categorical notions of knowledge-building as alternately the interpretation of patterns and the description of classification schemes. In other words, the deep temporal notion of triangulation precedes and informs the spatial concept in academic knowledge construction. As will be discussed further below, this is evidenced by how many of the language aspects of more effective academic writing refer backwards and forwards to an emerging process of inquiry as well as knowledge building.

There is a general tendency to equate universality in research with the ideal of de-contextualized knowledge. However, as outlined above, an integral notion of triangulation as a process of relevant interpretation (e.g. pattern recognition, applied understanding, and generation of transferable principles) recognizes that universality in human knowledge is intrinsic rather than extrinsic to how any kind effective knowledge-building is ever based on some configuration or link between the 'particular' and 'general' in human experience. In this way the concept of triangulation might also be approached in terms of the interplay of dependent and independent variables (quantitative) or factors (qualitative). An integrated approach to triangulation issues also serves to avoid conflicts or contradictions which might potentially 'pollute' the reliability of emergent findings in relation to some particular focus issue of inquiry.

3.5 AN EMERGENT APPROACH TO THE ACADEMIC WRITING PROCESS

Many candidates undertaking the doctoral process tend to view the research inquiry process as a quite separate and indeed 'prior' process to that of academic writing. That is, they often think writing is something you quickly do at the end to report on your findings. However it might be argued that the achieving of doctoral accreditation is generally based on the evaluation of the writing up of an empirical or applied project rather than the latter per se. In this way, the basic structure and convention of thesis writing is strongly linked to the dissertation as a form of communication. Effective academic writing represents a process of knowledge building which is integrally linked to the inquiry process. This was well understood by the process writing movement in schools which recognized that even more informal or draft modes of writing represent a powerful means of learning and knowing in terms of organizing and translating ideas into effective understanding 'in one's own words'. Doctoral candidates should therefore be actively writing

from the outset of the candidature as a means of clarifying and developing both the inquiry process itself and an increasingly more refined and revised draft of a dissertation.

In contrast to the 'associative thinking' elements of a process writing approach, there is a conversely more logical and disciplined approach which might be referred as 'structured writing'. Elements of such an approach are implicit to the concept of designing an effective research focus question and associated inquiry structure. In short, elements of both approaches are typically and implicitly integrated in the most effective academic writing as well as inquiry process. As implied in Figure 3 below, elements of process writing framed by an effective research design exemplify an emergent as well as convergent model of academic writing and also thinking. This is also the most effective practical way of approaching the dissertation as an exercise in communicating with a projected reader or audience and not justa process of academic knowledge-building.

There are various ways in which language use is a key to more effective writing as well as thinking. Keywords or key concepts represent one of the main ways in which different sections of a dissertation are organized around the interplay of both horizontal or associative and vertical or logical axes of thinking. This is as much the case at the level of paragraph and topic sentence construction as it is in terms of the overall organization of a literature review or data analysis section of academic writing. There are a range of other language tips and functions which can assist to clarify the overall purposes and link together the discrete sections of a dissertation. For instance, *connectors* (e.g. such phrases as 'therefore' or 'as a result' to convey a relation of *cause and effect*) are particularly crucial to both developing and achieving related senses of cohesion and coherence in academic writing.

As outlined in Figure 3, the specific functions of the different sections of a dissertation exemplify distinct aspects of an integral knowledge building pyramid or framework for academic research and writing. For instance, the particular function of a literature review to provide a theoretical or general academic context for framing a central research question is best exemplified as a process of building distinct although related 'keyword' pyramids, concept pyramids and topic pyramids. Likewise, data analysis sections potentially represent an information pyramid linked to an overall knowledge-building structure or framework. Thus a polished dissertation should represent the culmination of a knowledge building process which integrates different stages and functions in relation to a particular

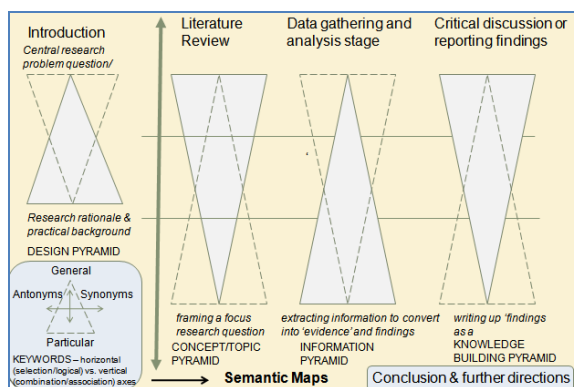research design framework outlined at the outset of both the inquiry process and written document.

Figure 3. The convergent knowledge building pyramids of academic thesis writing

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 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 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?*

4. CONCLUSION

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 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.

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