

## CHAPTER 6

# MAKING SENSE OF MY THESIS: MASTER'S LEVEL THESIS WRITING AS CONSTELLATION OF JOINT ACTIVITIES

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I would like to thank Sue Smith,\* for her patience, and seemingly never ending questioning to make me decide what really interests me.

*\*Sue Smith is a pseudonym for the supervisor*

The above quote is an acknowledgement preceding a master's thesis. The author, Vera, was a sociology master's student when I met and interviewed her about her thesis. This acknowledgement underlines Vera's perception of her supervisor as playing a key role in the evolution and success of her thesis. What is remarkable about this case is how Vera was encouraged to draw on her creative writing experience which she gained through her leisure time activities in the past. Vera incorporated aspects of this experience when writing her thesis largely as an autoethnographic account. Moreover, her supervisor not only expressed her excitement about the project but also engaged with Vera's topical interests. In the following, I will introduce Vera and aspects of her thesis development. The focus will be on the interaction with her supervisor and their negotiation of standards for thesis writing within the institution and the sub-discipline they were working in. I will demonstrate how, unaware of the existence of an academic literacies perspective, Vera and her supervisor exemplified certain key aspects of the transformative approach that academic literacies aims to encourage. These were the exploration of different ways of knowledge making, the role of creative approaches to language use and the negotiation of accepted institutional norms. In broad terms, "transformation" here pertains to opening up textual forms that are understood to be standards of thesis writing, both by the institution of higher education and the writer.

The discussion is based on a notion of "doing a thesis" as a constellation of activities that are carried out jointly by the student and other co-participants, and as influenced by students' past experiences and future-oriented goals. My aim is

to show how master's theses viewed as a constellation of joint activities (Theodore Schatzki, 1996) potentially provide a space for a dialogic pedagogy and, in this process, contribute to ever evolving understandings of what it is to do a thesis.<sup>1</sup>

## VERA AND HER THESIS

I met Vera on a postgraduate module on research methods and asked her later if she wanted to participate in my study on academic writing of master's theses. In our three subsequent interviews we talked about her thesis development based on samples of her academic writing. We drew links to past writing as part of her literacy history (David Barton & Mary Hamilton, 1998) and imagined futures (David Barton, Roz Ivanič, Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge, & Karin Tusting, 2007). Vera researched a particular British seaside resort as place of liminality and carnival. Her thesis commenced by describing the status and historical reception of the place. The main part focused on an analysis of her personal experience of the resort. Vera explained her methodology in a separate chapter where she linked it to feminist autobiographical approaches. Her autoethnographic section was written in a style that oscillates between literary fiction and sociological theory complete with flashbacks to childhood episodes. Writing her thesis made her reflect not only on her experience of the place but also on how to use language in order to convey this as experiential narrative yet with academic rigor. Vera's work on her thesis thus highlighted issues at the heart of an academic literacies approach, such as reflecting on and exploring alternative ways of meaning making (Theresa Lillis & Mary Scott, 2007). To gain a fuller understanding of Vera's work within the sociology department, I observed departmental thesis workshops, researched literature foregrounded in our conversations, and interviewed Vera's supervisor and other students.

Education was very important to Vera. She had attended a grammar school, then started an undergraduate degree in psychology and theology, changed university and completed a degree in sociology. As her secondary and undergraduate education was influenced by having to deal with illness, she described starting the sociology master's at her new university to be a great achievement. What struck me most about her story was her wealth of experience in creative writing. In our first interview, she told me how, as a teenager, she wrote poems, songs, an autobiography and, together with a friend, material around a sci-fi TV series. She finished off this list proudly announcing that she submitted a piece of fan fiction for her GCSE<sup>2</sup> in creative writing and received a very good mark. With this mark, her leisure time writing had been validated by a formal education institution and it seemed important for her to add this point. Being complimented for her writing style was a recurring topic in our conversations. She mentioned how she had

regularly been chosen as scribe for group work assignments in her undergraduate studies and how her supervisor expressed enjoyment in reading Vera's work. From the start, Vera insisted that in both her writing for leisure and for formal education she was creative in the sense of "putting something into the world". In our third meeting, she explicitly returned to this link and mused on how writing the autoethnographic part of her thesis reminded her of her past autobiographical writing. Nevertheless, her references to her undergraduate writing activities also underline her practical knowledge and experience in academic writing.

At the same time, Vera was uncertain about her thesis. As suggested in her acknowledgement (at the beginning of this chapter), finding a suitable topic was complicated and lengthy. She felt that Sue accompanied her in this process with "patience". She had indicated a topic area in her proposal that was to be handed in before May, the start of the dissertation period that lasted till the first week of September. Yet it took her until June before she felt able to outline her topic. This insecurity became most visible in a work-in-progress meeting at the end of June. Here students presented their topics to-date to each other. When it was Vera's turn, she appeared rather nervous. Bent over her paper, she read out her presentation quickly while showing some photos from the research site projected to the whiteboard. My field notes of the day describe my impression of her presentation:

Vera was very uncertain about it all, started reading a print out very quickly, her supervisor said 'slow down' and then it got better. This idea apparently just came a week before or so. Vera later said that it felt like the creative writing piece for English lit.

Seems to be at the periphery in the academic culture although she used complex expressions and lots of theory stuff that made it hard to follow at the start. (Extract from field notes, 23 June 2010).

This impression of insecurity was supported by Sue's comment in our interview in which she characterised Vera as "a bit shy".

Yet, Vera had not chosen a safe and traditional topic but worked, encouraged by her supervisor, at the periphery of what was possible under the wider umbrella of sociology and within the specific subfields and neighbouring areas represented in the department. She perceived it as connected to a more literary, impressionistic approach which was familiar to her from her creative writing. At the same time, her text was dense with abstract, sociological concepts. The interweaving of a more literary style and more mainstream academic elements are particularly evident in the following excerpt from her thesis. The passage is part of her introduction to a section on the meaning of the beach as a constitutive element of seaside resorts:

There is a kite hovering skilfully in the sky, young children paddling in the pools that have settled full of seawater near the steps, a few people have dared to venture into the sea, but not as many as are in the pools. Some of the children, and the adults, are building sandcastles. In the paper “Building Castles in the Sand ...”, Obrador-Pons wants to create a “livelier account of the beach that incorporates a sense of the ludic and the performative” (Obrador-Pons, 2009, p. 197). He argues that descriptions of the beach are focused on the visual; and that they are unable to fully explain the meaning of the beach. (Extract from Vera’ thesis, p. 30)

In the initial description of this extract Vera evokes the dynamicity of the scene. People are involved in numerous activities. They paddle, venture and build. There is a change in pace from the peaceful “hovering” and “paddling” to the dramatic “venture.” Starting with the wider scene, she zooms in on the focus of this section. With this scene-setting based on her experience, Vera leads into a discussion of an extended meaning of sandcastles orientated on academic literature. She uses a direct quote and a paraphrase, standard conventions of academic writing, to indicate different ways of theorizing the beach. This was not just a story. Vera provided a theoretical discussion. As suggested by my observations above, Vera was clearly negotiating the boundaries between her experience and expectations of what sociological work entailed and new possibilities that had opened up for her gradually. Specifically during her master’s course, she encountered and deepened her understanding of new research approaches through participation in course modules, literature, conversations and guidance from her supervisor.

In our third meeting Vera spoke more confidently about her choices. When I mentioned this to her, her mixed feelings towards her approach became apparent:

V: It’s probably because I’ve actually written the autoethnographic—started the autoethnographic. Because that was the bit I was scared about.

K: The stepping into the unknown.

V: Yea. Yea. It was like, ok, let’s take a great big jump into something crazy. (Extract from interview 3).

Vera acknowledges her initial insecurity. She talks about it in the past tense indirectly acknowledging the change. She characterizes her work not just as something different and new, as I suggested, but also as “something crazy”. Vera enjoyed

her fieldwork and her writing building on her creative work but she was also aware that she was following a more risky route as she had not worked in this way before academically and she did not consider her approach as mainstream.

## **VERA'S THESIS AS SPACE FOR DIALOGUE AND NEGOTIATION OF STANDARDS**

As indicated in the acknowledgement, this “jump” was supported by her supervisor, Sue. Vera appreciated that she had been asked many questions to clarify her own interests. This seems to point to an open dialogue between supervisor and student, a genuine engagement with the interests of the author (Theresa Lillis, 2003). I did not have the opportunity to observe a supervision session as Sue felt it would not be a good idea with Vera being shy. Nevertheless, the interviews with Vera and Sue provide a number of insights into the nature of the dialogue that characterized their relationship in supervision.

A concrete example of how Vera felt supported by her supervisor, besides discussing literature and data was given in our second meeting. At that point, Vera had written a draft of her first chapter and started to write about her methodology. She had discussed her draft with Sue the day before. When we talked about the way she wanted to approach the autoethnographic part, Vera commented on the previous supervision:

I said to [Sue] yesterday, I should have done a creative writing degree because she um she started reading it and she goes, oh, don't you write nicely. And I said, people have said that before. I should have done creative writing not, um, not sociology. And she said, well, in a way, sociology is creative writing and this is definitely creative writing. Because if I hadn't got some sort of—if I hadn't got an ability to write then I wouldn't be able to do an autoethnography at all. (Extract from interview 2)

In this “small story” (Michael Bamberg & Alexandra Georgakopoulou, 2008; James Simpson, 2011), Vera recounts a conversation about her writing on a meta-level in which Sue complimented her style. For Vera this fitted with previous comments on her writing and the pride she expressed in listing her past leisure time writing in the previous interview. Moreover, she repeatedly characterized her academic writing as less mainstream and underlined her enjoyment in playing with words. Vera had encountered feminist approaches before. And she had read critiques and challenges of autoethnographic approaches. Thus, she was aware that more than her experience in creative writing was required for her project. Sue did not only encourage Vera in rejecting Vera's sense of insecurity but also linked cre-

ative writing explicitly to sociology, specifically the methodological approach of feminist-inspired autoethnography. With the above story, Vera demonstrated how her desire to be creative in her writing matched the value system of the sub-discipline in which she and her supervisor worked. In reporting her supervisor's speech, she constructed an authoritative legitimation.

On the other hand, it's clear that Vera also acted on her idea about existing conventions that would still apply for her thesis. This aspect can be illustrated poignantly in an instance from our conversation about her draft in the second interview. Looking at her draft, Vera quoted some language related feedback from Sue:

V: "Don't use the word don't" and "paraphrase some quotes."  
Because it makes it sound better if I use "do not" or "cannot."

K: Ok.

V: Which is a fair enough comment, really.

K: Yea. Which is interesting though. Because it—it puts it back to kind of standard.

V: Yea, well, that is the standard section, though. (Extract from interview 2)

Here Vera immediately evaluates Sue's feedback by providing reason and agreeing. Although Sue's comments first of all refer to the surface structure of the text, they reveal that in all its freedom there are still certain expectations that are shared or easily accepted by Vera. When I voice my surprise about this convention, Vera opens up a distinction between her initial two sections, which she identified as "standard," and her autoethnography.

Both Vera and Sue were aware of tensions between the possibilities afforded by the approach and those afforded by the thesis as assignment format. They did not discuss these differences explicitly—contrary to pedagogic initiatives based on an academic literacies approach (see Mary Lea & Brian Street, 2006). Instead, Vera had realized this because of the different purposes of sections in her thesis:

I wanted that more traditional sociological bit so that it had still got, you know, some of the features of a real [thesis]. Because it needed the history in it and I don't think I could have done that autoethnographically and I don't think I could have done the research method bit autoethnographically. It had to be different. I just don't think it would have worked. (Extract from interview 3)

Vera had a notion of a generic "traditional sociological" thesis formed through a mixture of her undergraduate experience, her expectations, and the initial thesis

workshop in which general advice was given and sample theses discussed. Again, she positioned her thesis as different, yet felt she needed to fulfil some requirements. She could not imagine introducing the background and the methods section in an alternative way. Moreover, she could not imagine writing a thesis without such elements. In her and Sue's understanding of the thesis, these were necessary.

The idea of unconstrained creative writing was challenged even within her autoethnographic section. Vera listed in her thesis some features she found in the literature to be included in an autoethnography such as reflexivity, others' voices and theoretical analysis. These guidelines provided some orientation for her as a novice in the field as well as a quotable legitimisation for her approach: "It's cause I do want it to be academically acceptable and I don't want them to turn round and go, it's not." In this quote she also positions herself as less powerful than the faceless "them," an institutional body who decides about academic acceptability. She felt compelled to play to their rules but within the logic of her alternative approach. Sue facilitated this experiment through encouragement and providing space for an open dialogue. Vera's case demonstrates a two-way interaction between working with more diverse approaches that become established at the periphery of mainstream academia (Mary Hamilton & Kathy Pitt, 2009) as well as "accommodating to institutional norms" (Mary Scott & Joan Turner, 2004, p. 146), more specifically, marking regimes and conventional expectations.

## **TRANSFORMATION IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY, FUTURE AND NORMATIVE STRUCTURES**

Vera's thesis was influenced by a plethora of factors some of which have been discussed in this chapter. She expressed this point when looking back at her work: "Well, I think I wouldn't have done it had I not been at [xx university]. I'd never have done that," that is, she would never have considered drawing so extensively on her experience and love for using language more playfully. She felt that possibilities of knowledge making were opened up to her at this particular university in which she completed her master's studies through the combination of people and theoretical perspectives she encountered here. Her ability to use these possibilities for her own purposes also depended on her interests as well as the practical experience and knowledge she had acquired while participating in various writing-related activities within and outside formal education. Building on these repertoires (Jan Blommaert & Ad Backus, 2011) to the extent she did entailed reflections on the way she was using language. Our interviews certainly contributed to this too.

The format of one-to-one supervision sessions together with Sue's approach provided space for Vera's specific interests and perspectives. Within the assessment format of a thesis, Vera was able to make choices about her topic, her method-

ological approach and her language. The specific way she chose to structure her autoethnography, rejecting other possibilities, was intricately connected to who she wanted to be in her work. After talking about the relations of her thesis to creative writing, she half-jokingly explained how she wanted to write her autoethnography: “I have got this like imaginary thing like vision in my head of me just some sort of bohemian in a café on the seafront with my laptop”. With the word “bohemian” she signaled an imagined self as artist, underlining her affinity to creative work. She could now see how to use this side of her as a resource for her academic work to an extent she could never do before. Her approach, which emphasized a narrative style, could incorporate this image.

As there were possibilities, there were also constraints. Norms emerged in the interplay of the requirement for the thesis to be assessed, Sue’s notions of surface features of academic texts, the values of the sub-discipline indexed in the guidelines for autoethnographic research, and Vera’s expectations of what a “real thesis” entails (see also Badenhorst et al. Chapter 7 this volume). While each thesis is unique in its specific constellation of activities influenced by a variety of historically situated factors, these norms allow us to make sense of a piece of writing and to recognise a “thesis” (Anis Bawarshi & Mary Jo Reiff, 2010). For instance, Vera started her autoethnographic section with a description of pondering questions that came to her mind at her arrival at the seaside place. I immediately interpreted them as research questions which she confirmed. While Vera’s instantiation of a master’s thesis contributed to the constant evolution of understandings of what it is to do a thesis, these changes are constrained through normative structures that govern what can be imagined as a thesis. These norms derive from historically situated shared understandings of thesis practices, that is, activities, ways of writing and feelings that can be accepted as belonging to what it is to do a thesis. These understandings also include practical knowledge of how to do something and are connected to a range of goals and desires the order of which can shift from situation to situation (Schatzki, 1996). Explicit guidelines can therefore only be orientations and never capture every possibility. Vera’s choices and interpretations of advice made sense to her and Sue as part of the thesis research and writing. Thus, Vera’s case demonstrates that master’s theses can provide a space for negotiating alternative ways of knowledge making within a complex web of activities, experiences, expectations and purposes as well as notions of norms in academic writing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/H012974/1].



## NOTES

1. This chapter is based on my PhD research. See Kauffhold, K. (2013 unpublished PhD thesis) *The interaction of practices in doing a master's dissertation*. Lancaster University.
2. Qualification in English secondary education usually taken by students aged 14 to 16.

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