

Priceless conceptual thresholds: beyond the ‘stuck place’ in writing

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This paper explores the idea of conceptual threshold crossing in the writing process and in particular stuck moments and the process of moving on, valuing the pricelessness of prefinality, the vision of a possible movement through a portal and the creative learning leap into focused, formed writing. Our work to date is based on formal and less formal collections of narratives from academics who write, including ourselves, and from those who support and supervise the writing of both academic staff and doctoral students.

Keywords: academic writing; conceptual thresholds; development

Introduction

The study presented here represents early work. It takes place in the context of increasing demands on and expectations of academic staff and doctoral students, and more specifically the demand that scholarship, academic processes, research and professional work should be articulated in and communicated through various forms of writing as part of their changing academic identities. The research explores the idea that there are moments of conceptual threshold crossing (Kiley and Wisker 2008; Savin-Baden 2008) in the writing process. It focuses on ‘stuck’ moments (Lather 1998) and explores the process of moving on; the shift into focused, formed articulation in writing. In the process of this work, and as a result of a recent small-scale study (Wisker and Savin-Baden 2008) reported here, we have located concepts and practices which we believe may sometimes hinder and/or sometimes help the writing process. A major aim of this ongoing research is to build on our discoveries to aid development processes.

In the writing practice of both doctoral students and academics, who are the focus of this research study and development, we have discovered the existence of ‘stuck’ places or prefinality – a state before the development of successful modes of writing; and conceptual threshold crossing – moments of moving through and beyond the ‘stuck’ places, through liminal spaces of change and development. We have also discovered categories or patterns of behaviour which participants in the research indicate enable them to pass from the prefinal position of being stuck, through the transformative place of the liminal into embodied, articulated writing. Several important points have also emerged, which will need further work. It seems that some of the activities and states which we define as prefinal and being stuck are often seen by participants also as essential stages before they begin to write, and/or to write at enough of a complex, conceptual level.

Theoretical perspectives

A key area of theory underpinning our research emerges from work conducted on the writing process itself and in some respect, from the area of academic literacies. Reading to write,

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research into doctoral learning journeys (Kiley and Wisker 2008; Wisker, Robinson, and Kiley 2008) suggests supervisor and student awareness of using reading to underpin writing, and the importance of articulation in 'writing through' and finishing. An academic literacies approach suggests that a dialogue is necessary between reader and text (Lea 1999) and that it is understanding the nature and development of this dialogue which can help us see how writers use their reading in their academic writing, and how reading affects our own writing. These approaches also emphasise the development of the writer's discursive voice (Ivanic 1998) and how this is shaped by both the reading that is undertaken and the context in which it is done. Being aware of yourself as a writer, stuck or in full flow, is all part of metalearning in practice (Flavell 1979). Theorising can help to build on the understanding of 'stuckness' and how people manage this in order to become 'unstuck' and move to articulation through writing. Such awareness should enable writers in the development of confidence and voice in their articulation through writing.

Threshold concepts and conceptual thresholds

Literature concerning threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2006) concentrates on the identification of discipline specific concepts which are in a sense essential in the acquisition of the thinking, learning and communication of understanding within specific subject learning. For example, to think like a mathematician, or to think, learn and express oneself like an economist. Developing understanding and use of these concepts is, it is argued, crucial for student learning and knowledge construction. Building on theories of threshold concepts developed in undergraduate disciplines, notions of conceptual thresholds have been developed to identify those moments at which postgraduates make 'learning leaps', develop their identities as researchers, and start to work at a critical, conceptual and creative level suitable for the achievement of a doctorate.

Research into conceptual threshold crossing in doctoral learning journeys (Kiley and Wisker 2008; Wisker, Robinson, and Kiley 2008) has some parallels for understanding the writing process in academic practice more generally. This ongoing research indicates supervisor and student awareness of using reading to underpin writing, and the need to develop dialogue with other people's work in order to identify one's contribution to the construction of knowledge at a conceptual rather than a merely factual or incremental level. Research with postgraduates and supervisors indicates moments in the development of research and thesis writing which enable and encourage conceptual, critical and creative contributions. They also indicate the importance of articulation, expression and organisation of what is being said, in 'writing through' and finishing the thesis.

There is a feeling of excitement if the writing's good because, and I want it, people to read it, I think this will be something that people want to read so... and feeling particularly that you have been creative perhaps, so there is a difference between you know, if you have to write a formal report that is just a compliance with something, it might be OK but dull. (Kay)

Methodology and methods

For this study we adopted narrative inquiry, since stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature. In this case we seek stories about writing practices and identifying and overcoming 'stuck' places in writing. Narrative inquiry is seen in a variety of ways transcending a number of different approaches and traditions such as biography, autobiography, life story and more recently life course research. It is frequently used in studying educational experience. Humans are storytelling organisms who lead

storied lives and those who use narrative inquiry argue that stories are the closest we can come to shared experience.

Experience... is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. (Clandinin and Connelly 1994, p. 415)

Some would argue that narratives are structured with a beginning, a middle and an end, held together by some kind of plot and resolution (Sarbin 1986). However, not only are they 'not necessarily in that order' but narratives, we would argue, do not necessarily have a plot or structured story line, and can be interruptions of reflection in a storied life. What counts as 'story' varies within methodological fields, for different ends. The biographical–interpretative method was first developed by German sociologists to produce accounts of the lives of Holocaust survivors and Nazi soldiers. This method is part of the narrative tradition and its main theoretical principle is that there is a *gestalt* – a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, a 'meaning frame' informing each person's life. It is the job of the biographers to elicit this 'meaning frame' rather than follow their own concerns. We suggest that when using narrative inquiry it is important that the researcher is not only able to ask questions that elicit stories, but also that they are able to position themselves so that stories can be analysed effectively. For example, some researchers within the ethnography tradition would argue that stories largely emerge from interview questions asked by the researcher. However, there are those within the interpretive tradition who disagree with this stance, and would always ask participants to tell and define their story in a way that would convey the meaning which they, as participant, would wish to be heard. Stories constructed by the narrator (written, oral and film) have been used by anthropologists and sociologists who label their work as ethnography. It can be argued that the distinction between different types of narrative inquiry tends to be in the co-construction and strategies for interpretation rather than between the traditions; in other words ethnography can be carried out with a modernist (non-interpretive) stance or with an interpretive one.

In narrative inquiry the focus of analysis is the people who tell us stories about their lives; the stories are the means of understanding our participants better. Story telling tends to be closer to actual life events than other methods of research that are just designed to elicit explanations. Therefore, stories are created and recreated in the interview and then negotiated, so that both researcher and participant do not assume that the stories necessarily reflect a pre-existing reality. The meaning-making through story construction and interpretation firstly happens between the narrator (person who had the experience) and the listener (researcher). In a next step, this process is re-enacted on a different level (one that might be understood to be less personal in nature); the researcher assumes the role of narrator whilst the listener will be the consumer/reader of the published research. Because we wanted those interviewed to reflect on and tell their stories of their writing experiences, narrative inquiry and the co-construction of meaning and interpretation were chosen as appropriate for this research.

Our work with the stories of writing academics aims to elicit reflective accounts of their experiences with the writing process, and to identify both themes which emerge and points on their writing journeys. These themes and points we hope will illuminate our shared understanding about any experiences of being stuck in writing, and ways of moving forward beyond being stuck into embodied articulation, the writing process. We begin with our own stories, which began our interest in the topic and display both the preliminality of being stuck, and then identify moments and some strategies which helped the writers to become unstuck and engage with the writing process. However, we are also aware that not every writer is necessarily stuck. Stuckness and preliminality, if experienced, could be quite different for different writers, and so could ways through and out of that preliminal state.

The research intentions were therefore to:

- (1) Identify significant factors to inform the wider academic community of the processes and practices that could facilitate (1) the management and overcoming of barriers to writing; (2) overcoming and getting through 'stuck' places towards the achievement of the writers' own voices; and (3) successfully articulating through writing.
- (2) Isolate factors that contribute towards 'stuckness': explore stuck moments in writing and locate reasons for such stuckness; identify what might be the catalysts both for being 'stuck', and for the support to move on.
- (3) Locate and identify strategies for overcoming 'stuckness' and for developing confidence in articulation through writing, that can be generalised to other and new writers.
- (4) Identify the kinds of strategies that are re-employed if and when 'stuckness' occurs again, and what new strategies are developed.

Methods

Based on an initial reflective analysis of our own experiences and stories we believed that there were particular practices and concepts that might be shared with other writers, these were:

- (1) *Busy work*: which substitutes for conceptual, focused ideas and completion and provides necessary stages and momentum. It operates through a semblance of progression involving detailing, collecting, analysing information and data, planning, charting, and logging.
- (2) *Reading to write*: research into doctoral learning journeys (Kiley and Wisker 2008) indicates supervisor and student awareness of using reading to underpin writing, and the importance of articulation in 'writing through' and finishing.
- (3) *Mimicry*: a stage in writer development involving forms of expression initially lacking the writer's understanding or ownership, and may be a precursor to the patchwriting stage and, once the discourse is owned by the writer, lead to further development of articulation.
- (4) *Patchwriting*: the process of combining the work of others with one's own. This appears to be a phase through which writers progress on the way to developing a writer's voice.

The research began by exploring these areas in order to unpack the identification and crossing of conceptual thresholds in writing. Our interest and motivation for study was based on formal and less formal collection of narratives from academics who write, including ourselves, and from those who support and supervise the writing of both academic staff and doctoral students.

Sampling

A purposive (or theoretical) sampling method was adopted and will continue to be adopted in future work, to recruit participants among academics and postgraduates who are involved in writing as part of their working practices. For example, the '*maximum variation*' sampling technique (Patton 1990) will allow a small sample to be selected on the basis of diversity in an attempt to reflect the research context, incorporating factors such as age, gender and ethnicity.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought from the relevant university ethics committees. The significant ethical and moral implications related to this study will be acknowledged, in particular with respect to the negotiation of and interpretation of the data to ensure that the rights and opinions of

those involved in the study are respected. An information sheet will be provided to all participants giving details of the research, the researcher, and the implications for all participants, along with a participant consent form to be agreed and signed. Where English is not the first language of participants an interpreter will be used on behalf of the participants. Data will be stored on a password protected PC and the identities and locations of participants coded and altered to ensure anonymity.

Data collection

This began by asking participants about their writing processes and practices through semi-structured face-to-face interviews (40 with staff and 20 with research students). A question schedule was developed (Appendix A) which prompted participants to explore their 'stuck' places and the trajectory of moving beyond and through these places. A similar questioning style was adopted across all interviews but the use of semi-structured interviews also allowed for the spontaneous generation of questions.

Data analysis

Data were analysed interpretively to examine the subtext of data and identify themes and patterns of response in relation to the areas of enquiry. Findings were transformed into developmental models and practice materials.

Findings

Following reading in the literature on learning, academic literacies, writing practices, threshold concepts and conceptual threshold crossing, we based this early stage of our research in formal and less formal collection of narratives from academics who write, including ourselves, and from those who support and supervise the writing of both academic staff and doctoral students. This early stage also included the inclusion and reflection on our own stances and voices as researchers and writers.

Our stories

Gina

I have always loved writing and found that it has helped me sort my thoughts out, seeing them articulated, moves them on, clarifies. But I get stuck all the time and I have had to try and work out some ways to become unstuck and move on. I can get stuck in my writing if I am writing something I would prefer to avoid such as an annual monitoring report. Suddenly the desire to Hoover takes over (rare). I can get stuck if I feel that I have nothing to say or it has all been said by other people much better and all I can do is re-write their words. If someone has told me my writing is poor then I am paralysed. It doesn't matter if I have written journal articles and poems and books – negative and destructive criticism, especially from someone whose views I respect, makes me feel utterly undermined and speechless. I also feel angry about this and that does not help the stuckness. So confidence, time for conceptualising and reflecting, time for honing the words to make them better and more fitting – all of this is needed for me to move on. Sometimes I can come un-stuck if I stop what I am writing and write something else, maybe something more mundane but essential, while I am in the midst of a complex conceptual piece. Sometimes I can write particularly creative pieces – drafts of poems or stories if I am doing a piece of bureaucratic writing. Sometimes, however, I am stuck over a particular essay for months on end and manage to forget all about its existence but have a sense of guilt in the background.

Sometimes I can release the energy to write even what I am trying to avoid by promising myself short bursts and enjoyable things to do as rewards. I can start a big book if I carve out some extended time to do it, even setting aside parts of days and weekends, and planning how to do parts of the book in these helps. My 'to do' lists, well I'm afraid, always have 'write book' or 'rewrite book' on them. I find it hard to sustain a conceptual level of work through a journal essay or book, so I need to manage the jigsaw or patchwork behaviour of writing different pieces each to set off energy and productivity against the other. I allow myself to say things really simply, I go for a walk around the garden or make a meal, or pop to the shops or go and teach – any of these will help unlock it. It is like a downloading file reduced on the top margin of the computer while something else is going on. It can tick away and when I return to it, the words have been found. Sometimes of course they appear in the middle of the night or while I am driving – so I capture them if I can. Being stuck then is necessary, helps me to move on and up and yet it is a terrifying part of writing, as if one could dissolve into silence.

Maggi

For me getting stuck in writing is both helpful and deeply frustrating. It is helpful because if I am stuck I feel as if I am on the cusp of some new and interesting ideas and that makes me feel excited. It makes me feel as if I do have things to say and that I have a voice and that I should say it. Yet the frustration comes from not knowing what it is I want to say or how to say it. In former years I used to be very bad tempered when I was about to start a new piece of writing, I think it was because I know that I was soon to be in a stuck place and that resolution was unlikely to come quickly. I used to get cross and involve my self in busy work – redrafting, fiddling and trying to make things work. I then decided that this was largely fruitless and began to realise that doing something else was usually more helpful. So instead I would cycle, iron or cook, which helped me to begin something I referred to (to myself) as 'think-writing'. This was the process of writing about what I was feeling and thinking, and invariably began with phrases like 'I am here again, stuck' or 'I have been trying to write this thing about... but I can't seem to understand what I want to say'. Thus there was a sense of almost writing to myself to explain that I couldn't say whatever it was that was hidden inside me. This process of 'think-writing' has now become central to writing and continues to help me. So stuckness is now a place of beginnings and I welcome it as a special space, and liminal position that I believe I should not react against, but live with.

The other activity is sort of mulling time, a space reflection which doesn't necessarily mean I sort out the ideas, but I just sort of sit with the stuckness some more. I have a strong belief at this stage that I know that the thoughts and ideas are on the way out of me on to the page. I think my frustration used to be about a fear that I couldn't write or the ideas wouldn't come, but now I know they will, but I am not sure when. Being able to write then has become something I live for and live with, but the confidence to write and the compulsion to get things on the page is something that brings both pain and mystery.

Themes and issues

Themes regarding stuck places and writing practices emerged initially from early informal discussion with other writers and our own stories. Latterly, participant writers interviewed have indicated that the practices are both stuck places and possibly useful, even necessary stages towards engaging with the writing process. On the one hand they are ways of diverging from writing, substituting for writing or producing relatively inchoate or mundane work, and on the other they are developmental stages which release writing energies. Although we began with some

idea of some of the concepts we might discover, these were largely challenged but also confirmed in ways we did not expect. The findings we present here are:

- (1) Ontological insecurity: stuck moments.
- (2) Levers through the conceptual threshold: (a) patchwriting; (b) valuing prefinality; (c) the vision of a possible movement through a portal.

Ontological insecurity: stuck moments

The notion of ontological security or insecurity derives from the phenomenological work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. In the early part of the twentieth century investigations by these philosophers into a sense of being in the world produced various differently expressed disjunctions between received experience and the uncertainty of labelling, naming and dealing with that experience, which was itself related to a sense of relationship between the self and whatever counts as shared reality. Questioning the sense of the relationship of self to the real world leads to ontological questioning and can result in insecurity. This ontological security or insecurity fundamentally relates to a sense of identity and stability, although such senses differ at different times in context and between different people so that, as the literature suggests, some people relish and some are undermined by certain levels of insecurity of self in the world.

Being stuck in your writing is, we feel, and many of our respondents have also said they feel, an experience of questioning of self, of ontological insecurity, in other words, feeling troubled and insecure in one's sense of being in the world. For example, Julie was an experienced member of staff who had published a few articles, and who spoke of the shift of managing her stuckness and developing increasing confidence in managing it in relation to recently completing her PhD:

And what about getting stuck, do you ever get stuck?

Oh yes, yeah absolutely. Yeah even when I've felt more confident latterly, I've still had to sit there because all of a sudden I'll get absolutely overwhelmed with 'what am I saying again, you know I've lost it again?' and it's that, trying to keep, keep a hold of it you know what it is I'm trying to say. (Julie)

Well it's headache material you know [being stuck], it's head in hands sort of thinking... I never think oh I'm going to throw it all in, it's never that is just, you know, how can I move this forward, how can I, how can I... yeah try and make sense of it, I guess I've, perhaps I've had to leave it and go away and pick up a book, I have been lead to some very good references and I think they helped me come out of stuckness, I've read something. (Julie)

Moving on beyond that stuck place as the words start to shape themselves and the ideas to flow can also be challenging, a problematic opening up of new areas of troublesome knowledge. This can occur as Kay, an experienced writer remarked, through redrafting:

I think well that doesn't make sense and you know I might need to do some editing and so then it gets tricky and you might have to get yourself into a 'loop' where you can't see how you are going to get out of this, you know you maybe need to write your way out of it or whatever, so that is to do with getting stuck I suppose.

This starts to help shape the idea of self anew. Rejection of a piece of writing can be a damaging critique, as can the feeling of drying up and not being able to write in the right tone, format and length, or get the ideas and words out. All of this can all be unsettling for a writer whether they are relatively new to the process or highly experienced and prolific as our respondents are. For example, Kay explained:

I felt very stuck about six years in, it took seven years [my PhD], and I got... yeah, I did do quite a lot of writing and some of it was frustrating because it didn't seem to be saying anything and my supervisor who gave me quite a lot of critical feedback, seemed to say well it's 'lumpy' it's

'jerky' – there is no 'meat' here and I began to think 'am I up to this?' you know so there was quite a lot of that around and there are times that I got stuck.

But many talk of a writer's identity, the identity which is formed by recognising and being recognised as a writer, another form of ontological change and ultimately perhaps of security. The security is always some kind of contested statement however, if the writer is constantly doing something new, writing new pieces for new reasons and outlets, and working of course with new people or even established colleagues who referee and shape and change the work. For example, Sarah, who had been writing since she was eight and writes across many diverse genres, explained her notion of stuckness in a way that displays a sense of confidence:

So when you are stuck, what does it feel like?

I'm not sure... you see in one sense I want to say hitting a blank wall but in another sense it isn't because it, it's only a very momentary experience, when I'm thinking 'oh where am I going with this, what's happening' because I just keep going and doing something until it makes sense.

However, it is not clear how much permanent damage has been done to other writers of academic publications, by damning reviews cutting comments, undermining responses or refusal – along with many other negative experiences which could affect the writing process and hence the sense of self which is bound up with it, the sense of ontological security.

Levers through the conceptual threshold

This theme locates diverse levers which enabled writers to breach stuckness. Although we identified places in which some writers become stuck, some of the activities they are involved with can, it seems, be both elements of being stuck and also stages and/or strategies they use to move through that preliminal stuck state and get on with the writing. What became apparent was that there were elements of the writing process itself which helped writers to lever their way into writing, over the conceptual thresholds of being stuck and into forming the written work. These included the process of moving on, patchwriting, valuing preliminality, the vision of a possible movement through a portal and the creative learning leap into focused, formed writing. Two of the major issues involved in this process were recognising and going through conceptual thresholds, and developing writer identity.

Patchwriting

We have developed the notion of patchwriting to patchwork writing, an idea building on both the work of Howard (2001) (where it is linked with plagiarism) and Percorami (2003) (exploring patchwriting in postgraduate students), relying on the language of the source. For example, Julie spoke of drawing on other more experienced writing styles to locate her own style and voice:

So how did you get from 'there' to 'here'?

... through persistence I think, through – and the guidance of other people, people telling me that it you know, it's, trying to make sense, I need to make sense of what's being written, what's out there and reading things that I like, I like how that's been written, so I guess drawing on the writing styles of others has influenced me but I think that it is just a gradual journey of starting to realise where your voice is in your own writing... (Julie)

It is seen as a process through which students and academics pass as they develop a writer identity and voice, and was evident in all those we spoke with. This is augmented by our own writing experiences or experiences of working with academics seeking support for the development of their writing. Sometimes this is by drawing on a wealth of experience and reading, as Sarah pointed out:

I think it has to be, everything that I write taps into a huge amount of past experience and past reading, I can't... the way that I coalesce it is original but I am drawing on all sorts of other earlier experiences and reading all the time, I couldn't disassociate myself from that. (Sarah)

In patchwork writing, writers are encouraged to break the energy draining blocks and stuck places by moving to do some work on other parts of their writing project(s). For others, breaking their stuckness occurred by moving into discussing the data or scribbling new ideas in order to untangle the inchoat-ness, as Sarah described:

I might collect ideas wherever I am I will scribble things down so even in the middle of the night in the dark I'll scribble things down, or if I'm travelling and I don't have a laptop I'll scribble things down, so I will collect those but those would normally be phrases or short thoughts that I would then translate into something on the laptop.

Patchwriting is, we suggest both a rather fragmented approach to writing and actually an essential phase through which writers progress as their voices emerge. Managing the different patchwork of writing is particularly enabled by working with files on the pc and using 'track changes' to insert and alter one's own text. Yet often writers need help to move from patched identities in ways that encourage development of a writer's voice:

I've realised it's about my voice and I know that sounds so, you know... of course it's about my voice but I think I've relied more on having to speak through the literature and present my writing in a way that was academic enough and actually my most enjoyable time of writing is now just going with my thinking and my thoughts. (Julie)

Valuing preliminality

Many of those we spoke to argued for different processes that help them in their preliminal phase, which comprised activities such as reflecting, busy work and mimicry. This phase was a stage that manifests itself in different ways for different people. For example, Julie saw it as a reflective process:

So that just instantly sprung to mind and also I just commented this morning on how frustrated I get with my writing, when I seem to spend hours just when I look back at what I have done in maybe two hours of work, it's been focused in on one paragraph that I can't let go of and you know and – and it's not necessarily just getting the sentence structure right, it is just the amount of thinking that has to go into that paragraph and I think re-drafting is such a challenging thing to do, you know getting it out of my system's one thing, the sort of head dumping is one thing, but then the re-drafting of that is such a time consuming process. (Julie)

Busy work both substitutes for more conceptual, focused, ideas and completion *and* provides necessary stages and momentum to enable them. It operates through a semblance of progression, involving detailing, collecting, analysing information and data, planning, charting and logging. For example, Sarah and Paula noted:

It's not necessarily a conscious thing, that I go for a walk, although I think sometimes it is actually, occasionally it is, to go for a walk actually, I used to sometimes find, well, well anything that actually isn't writing that shifts it...

Cooking, listening to a play on the radio, even going out with some people, having a glass of wine, so but, but anything that is relaxing, rejuvenating, can move it... that kind of image that I was having is that it's like looking at a kaleidoscope you know, and things go out of focus and suddenly they come back in again... and you can see the pattern. (Paula)

A different form of preliminality occurred as mimicry (Bhabha 1994), which is a stage in writer development involving forms of expression initially lacking understanding or ownership, necessary activity and rehearsal stage preceding or accompanying development of the writer's own voice and repertoire. For some academics, writing and becoming a writer is a constant

source of disjunction; they always feel stuck, finding it difficult to know what to put on the blank white page. For some, thoughts are always jumbled. For others, success in moving beyond the stuck place provides a repertoire of ways through for future stuck moments – and gives confidence which fuels movement. This is exemplified by Julie's notion of writing as a journey:

I think it [the writing journey] is about accepting that you will go through different phases of feeling confident and you know if I was setting out on my journey again I think I'd probably have to do it in a similar way really you know I was influenced by the writing of others and how things... you know that it was academic enough. (Julie)

Writers often move on by using critical friends, reading further, listening to other writing, stepping back and seeing the pattern.

The vision of a possible movement through a portal

Many of those we spoke with argued that often, even if they were unsure or stuck that they had a vision, a sense of where they were going. For more junior writers this was often spoken of in terms of a journey or place to reach or stand, as Julie describes:

I do see that I've been climbing you know, a mountain and I've got past base camp and I have got to some of the other earlier camps up the hill and I do... that confidence has grown and I do actually feel so different than I did at the start so you know, and I can understand that as being you know, overcoming something difficult, moving onto the next bit of difficulty you know, so I do see, understand and believe in that sense of working at different thresholds, yeah exciting, trying to get to that peak! (Julie)

For others there was a sense that having completed a major piece of work such as a book or PhD that some hard journeying has already been done and that moving, both physical and metaphorical was always part of writing, also knowing that the journey was central to creativity and to writing, as Sarah explained:

Travelling actually, travelling is quite interesting, I can travel myself out of the stuckness, even on the Northern Line. Sometimes I think that it's such a pits of an underground line that something creative has to come out of travelling on the Northern Line. (Sarah)

Discussion

Literature concerning threshold concepts concentrates on the identification of discipline specific concepts which are in a sense essential in the acquisition of the thinking, learning and communication of understanding in the subject learning, for example, to think like a mathematician, or to think, learn and express oneself, like an economist. While most work on threshold concepts has been undertaken with undergraduate students and in specific disciplines, we are suggesting that theirs could be specific threshold concepts which relate to the writer's identity, expression and achievement.

One of these is the articulation, i.e., the moment of achieving the words, shape and form of the expression, so that articulation is both finding and expressing the words in the writing process and articulating them; like an articulated truck, ensuring they are appropriately organised in a coherent manner so that they are readable and can convey their message, impact and argument. Participants talking about finding the right words in editing their work seem to us to be focussing on and expressing this threshold concept. However, there also seems to be a sense of conceptual stuckness:

Silvia argues that writers block, a stuck place (not the only one) is an impossible experience for academic writers since, Academic writers cannot get writer's block' because they are 'not crafting a deep narrative or composing metaphors that expose mysteries of the human heart'

(Silvia 2007, 45). Rather, writer's block is a dispositional fallacy: 'writer's block is nothing more than the behaviour of not writing... The cure for writer's block – if you can cure a specious affliction – is writing' (ibid. 45–6). Badley (2008) has pointed out that this is something of a circular argument, 'So writer's block only affects those who believe in it whereas 'scheduled writers don't get writer's block, whatever that is' (ibid. 46), and are prolific writers because they stick to their schedule whether they feel like writing or not. Many academic writers, unlike Silvia, do believe in writer's block.' Badley goes on to cite an example used by Ely, of a writer who was concerned about possible failure:

Suddenly I felt like I didn't know anything. All my confidence withered. I became hyper-critical. For every sentence I wrote, I'd think of all the reasons someone would find fault with what I said... I would be a failure. (Ely et al. 1997, 12)

Badley comments on the internal self-censor, and notes Murray's point about being stuck in the sheer enormity of having to work the whole writing project out in advance, a stage which can help scaffold the writing but is not absolutely essential (see Murray 2002, 163). Badley has some suggestions for becoming unstuck, which we believe are useful starting points:

- realise that producing acceptable writing demands much rewriting;
- realise that no one process works for everybody;
- just do it, just get something, anything, on paper;
- write about questions, uncertainties, or contradictions in our data or sources;
- write self-reflective memos to critique our own work;
- write analytical memos on what we already have from various vantage points;
- jump start our writing with an anecdote;
- write a poem;
- write a scene for a play that would dramatise what we are studying;
- start with a critical incident (adapted from Ely et al. 1997: 12–56). (Badley 2008)

However, there is also a sense that conceptual thresholds are central to writer identity and development. Work carried out with postgraduate students in terms of their development of conceptual level thinking engagement with the question and the interdisciplinary disciplines – the disciplinary mix in their writing of the thesis has identified moments of 'learning leaps' (Wisker, Kiley, and Aiston 2006; Kiley and Wisker 2008, 2009) where they perceptibly and audibly cross conceptual thresholds to raise the level of their critical thinking and expression. Some of this is articulated orally, and it then has to take place and be embodied in their research writing, so that its expression in their thesis is at a level sufficiently conceptual, critical and creative enough to achieve a PhD. Conceptual threshold crossings are moments when students make the learning leaps start to work at this higher, more conceptual, critical and creative level and seems to be taking place at several points in their research and thesis writing. Other moments of conceptual threshold crossing which are emerging from the research include the editing and finalising of the expression when such refinements of text enable it to operate at a higher level of articulation of their thoughts and arguments, which they wish to express. In terms of coherence, quality of expression, elegance, argument and organisation, Kiley and Mullins, (2006) note that the twin issues necessary in a good PhD thesis are presentation – for which we mean coherence organisation and expression – and conceptual level.

Conclusion

Our work to date is focusing on the identification of stuck places, the preliminality, and ways in which writers move through and beyond these into articulation and the writing itself. The research to date has generated new knowledge which:

- Provides theory, understanding and research and experience informed models to underpin support given to staff on writing for academic purposes.
- Uses concepts of metalearning in practice to build on the understanding of 'stuckness'.
- Uses theories of conceptual threshold crossing to identify different phases of preliminality, liminality, moving through stuck places and postliminal states in the writing process. Could be generalisable across all organisations and professions and could be ultimately of benefit to anyone who needs to write.

Writing is never stable and as such, it can be a troublesome process. For some academics, writing and becoming a writer is a constant source of disjunction; they always feel stuck, and this may relate to finding it difficult to know what to put on the blank white page. Yet for others there is a sense of thoughts always being jumbled, with little idea of what is important and what is not. Perhaps valuing stuck places and being able to identify phases of liminality may enable the increasing acceptance that writing is not *just* a question of practice and discipline.

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Appendix A. Interview questions

What do you write?

How do you start writing?

How do you know when you are writing well?

Do you ever get stuck?

What does it feel like?

What might have set it off?

What do you do?

If you get through it, how have you moved beyond the stuck place?