
Helping Doctoral Students Write

Pedagogies for supervision

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Persuading an octopus into a glass

Working with literatures

Working with the literatures is not, as some doctoral researchers in desperate and cynical moments suggest, about showing their examiners that a lot of books and articles have been read, summarized and bracketed. We believe that there are definite purposes in doctoral study for working with literatures.

We propose that the key tasks accomplished in literature work are to:

- 1 sketch out the nature of the field or fields relevant to the inquiry, possibly indicating something of their historical development and
- 2 identify major debates and define contentious terms, in order to
- 3 establish which studies, ideas and/or methods are most pertinent to the study and
- 4 locate gaps in the field, in order to
- 5 create the warrant for the study in question, and
- 6 identify the contribution the study will make.

In stating the functions of literature work, we do not want to suggest that there is universal agreement about the dimensions of any field and its themes, debates and terms. There is no one correct way for the literatures to be interpreted. As Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997: 29)⁴ put it ‘... there is sufficient fluidity and ambiguity in any topical literature to allow it to be authentically interpreted and shaped in a number of different directions’. It is the doctoral researcher’s task to canvass and interpret the field and to construct her version of its terrain. However, there are often particular disagreements and developments about the boundaries of fields of knowledge, and it is possible to locate unresolved or contentious topics. Supervisors, of course, make these issues clear in the preliminary readings they suggest to students. And there are now increasing numbers of ‘Introductions to ...’, ‘Readers in ...’ and ‘Handbooks of ...’ which do flag the key scholars, themes, issues and debates.

In a recent review of dissertation literature reviews, Boote and Beile (2005) deplore both the poor quality of student reviews and the lack of serious pedagogical attention given to this act of scholarship in doctoral education. A thorough,

substantive literature review is, they argue, ‘a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research’ (Boote and Beile, 2005: 3).

Our work with doctoral researchers in Australia and the UK suggests they understand its pivotal importance, but are plagued by an excess of anxiety and expectation about literature work. There are many reasons for this angst. There are writing myths which complicate and make writing about the literatures a task to be endured, rather than enjoyed. And there is a lack of recognition of the intensity of identity work involved at this site of text production. We would go so far as to say that literature reviews are the quintessential site of identity work, where the novice researcher enters what we call occupied territory – with all the immanent danger and quiet dread that this metaphor implies – including possible ambushes, barbed wire fences, and unknown academics who patrol the boundaries of already occupied territories.

Doctoral researchers have an emergent relation to the territory (the fields which inform their research) and its occupiers (the more senior, experienced scholars of the academy). Yet they are expected to find the courage to assess the work of the occupiers – some of whom, in time, may well examine and judge their own theses. The novice researcher is not only an alien in foreign fields, but is unaware of the rules of engagement, and the histories of debates, feuds, alliances and accommodations that precede her entry to the field. This is not work for the faint/feint-hearted! There are so many decisions to make. Where to start? Which fields? Which landmines to avoid? How to be ‘critical’, who to be critical of, and how to escape being tangled in the barbed wire? How to negotiate the complexities of power relations in a strange land? Who to include and exclude in the negotiations? Who to engage with, who to ignore and with what effects?

While the metaphor of occupied territory may be dramatic, perhaps even overstated, it stands in opposition to a taken-for-granted view of literature work as a relatively straightforward, if time-consuming, task. It is also a metaphor which we believe gets closer to the affective experience and intensity of identity work many students experience when ‘reviewing’ the literatures.

This chapter focuses on the processes of naming and framing the literature ‘review’. We want to both unsettle a naturalized view of literature work and also challenge advice that is too rational, too wise after the fact. But we begin by looking at examples of students’ literature work that exemplify the difficulties they face and the issues that we as supervisors must address.

Literature reviews – what’s the problem?

What follows are brief excerpts from literature review drafts of two doctoral researchers. It is difficult to select brief segments from such a long document, as ‘problems’ often range over paragraphs and pages. So our guiding principle has been to select ‘pithy bits’ that represent typical problems we and our colleagues encounter in relation to text and identity work.

Vera is a doctoral researcher writing about deconstruction and its relationship to both structuralism (using theorists such as Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan) and poststructuralism (Barthes and Foucault). This excerpt occurs midway through her review as she struggles with Lacan and Barthes.

According to Belsey (2002: 57), Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud in the light of Lévi-Strauss and Saussure – ‘to delineate a subject was itself the location of a difference’. Belsey goes on to explain that, for Lacan, the human being is ‘an organism in culture’. According to Lacan, speech was central to psycho-analytic practice. He argued that during the first two months of life a child’s emergent sense of self was formed in relation to subjects, capable of signifying. Lacan calls this the ‘Otherness of language’. ‘The big other’, states Belsey, ‘is there before we are, exists outside us and does not belong to us’. The early writing of Barthes, says Norris (1982: 8), was aimed at a full-scale science of the text, modelled on the linguistics of Saussure and the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss. In *Elements of Semiology* (1967), Barthes takes the view of structuralism as a kind of ‘mastercode’ capable of providing higher-level understanding. Culler (1976: 58) states that Barthes, in *Elements of Semiology*, speculated upon the ways in which ‘langue and parole’, ‘signifier and signified’, ‘syntagmatic and paradigmatic’ might apply to various non-linguistic phenomena. Culler goes on to say that, for a semiologist studying the food system of a culture, ‘parole’ is all the events of eating, whereas ‘langue’ is the system of rules that underlies all these events. These would define, for example, what is edible, which dishes would be combined to create a meal and the conventions governing the syntactic ordering of items.

We might characterize Vera’s text as ‘crowded’ by the literature (Becker, 1986: 146). She is traversing complex theoretical terrain, but seems to be ‘drowning’ in the detail. She stands as an outsider, piling up layers of ‘who said what about what’ as a strategy for highlighting key theoretical ideas. ‘According to Belsey (2002: 57), Jaques Lacan reinterpreted Freud in the light of Levi-Strauss and Saussure The early writing of Barthes, says Norris Culler states that Barthes ...’ Vera does not appear in this text at all. She has not added any evaluative comments and her somewhat confused summary is dominant in this and the writing that precedes and follows the extract. The reader has no idea how these ideas inform her study nor whether any ideas are any more important than any others.

The phenomenon of the ‘invisible scholar’ can also be seen in the next example. Geraldine is a doctoral researcher writing about the school effectiveness literature and while she seems more on top of the ideas in the field she is entering, her relationship to it remains hidden.

Mortimore (1998) also contributes to the school effectiveness research agenda. He explains that school effectiveness researchers aim to ascertain

whether differential resources, processes and organizational differences affect student performance and if so, how. He is also of the view that school effectiveness researchers seek reliable and appropriate ways to measure school quality. Hopkins (2001) suggests that one of the earliest studies that was done compared the effectiveness of some secondary schools on a range of student outcome measures. Reynolds and Cuttance (1992) also point out that the effective schools research entitled 'Fifteen Thousand Hours' characterised school efficiency factors as varied in the degree of academic emphasis, teacher's action in lessons, the availability of resources, rewards, good conditions for pupils and the extent to which children were able to take responsibility. It was emphasized that effective school researchers claim that there are significant differences between schools on a number of different student outcomes after full account has been taken of students' previous learning history and family background. Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991) also endorse the view by stating that there is evidence to support the argument that the characteristics of individual schools can make a difference to pupils' progress since certain internal conditions are common in schools that achieve higher levels of outcomes for their students.

We characterize Geraldine's text as 'he said, she said'. Every sentence begins by naming the researcher, followed by a fairly neutral verb: 'Mortimer also contributes ... Hopkins suggests ... Reynolds and Cuttance also point out ... Hargreaves and Hopkins also endorse ...'. Syntactically, the lack of connection between sentences makes this more like a list, a summary of ideas. The writer piles up one study after another, but there is no evaluative stance. When, a few paragraphs later, Geraldine tries to insert some critique, she again relies on what others have said.

Scheerens *et al.* (2001) claim that many critics appear to misread the scope and limitations of what school effectiveness is all about. Therefore, they point out that school effectiveness research is about instrumental rationality, that is, how to do things right and not so much about substantive rationality of how to do the right things. The purpose of school effectiveness research raises some concerns. While it is very important to know how to do things right, it is of greater importance to know how to do the right thing because one bad decision can ruin an organization and it would take an even greater effort to set things back on the right track.

Clearly there is a debate in the field about school effectiveness as an instrumental rationality, but Geraldine does not stake a claim here. She stands aside and allows other researchers (Scheerens *et al.*) to introduce the idea of critique, but her position in all this remains oblique. The distinction between 'how to do things right' and 'do the right thing', a common phrase within the field, allows the writer to take no position, while trying to give the impression she has been critical.

In both Geraldine and Vera's texts, the literature is neither used to locate their studies, nor to advance an argument about the state of the field in order to make the case for their own work. This is characteristic of diffident scholars who lack authority and who are literally overwhelmed by the work of others.

It is our argument throughout this chapter and the next that there are two sides to reviewing literatures: knowing the genres, conventions and textual practices; and assuming what we call a 'hands on hips' subject position. When the doctoral researcher writes about literatures, she is constructing a representation of the scholar and her scholarly practice. **The struggle with writing occurs because of the difficulty of negotiating text work and identity work simultaneously. The challenge is to learn to speak/write with authority, standing back with 'hands on hips' in order to critically survey and categorize texts and the field itself.**

To better understand why doctoral researchers find this work so difficult, we asked them to describe how they felt about literature work.

Metaphors that students live and work by

We have run several workshops for graduate students in Australia, South Africa, Norway, Canada and the UK on writing literature reviews and we find students inevitably anxious about the task of positioning and justifying their own research in relation to The Literature. We begin our workshops by putting identity issues on the table as a starting point for the text work that will follow. One strategy we have used is to ask: When you think about doing a literature review, what is it like for you? What image or metaphor⁵ comes to mind? These metaphors are written on small cards, collected and discussed amidst the whole group. We approach the task with humour and some irreverence, as we are keen to make visible the feelings of inadequacy shared by many students and identify these as a genre problem, rather than as simply an inadequacy of individual writers.

To give some structure to the discussion, we ask questions of the metaphors:

- How is the literature represented?
- What is the researcher doing?
- How powerfully is the researcher represented?

We use the term representation to emphasize that metaphors are a particular way of using language, not 'the truth' but a way of seeing and understanding and therefore acting.⁶ That there are many ways of seeing is evident from the multiplicity of metaphors used across the group. These metaphors have power. They influence how doctoral researchers approach the task of literature work and how they think of themselves as writers. They are therefore worth eliciting and interrogating in order that supervisor and student can together confront and change them.

For the purpose of our discussion here, we have pooled metaphors from three workshops to highlight commonalities. These include a myriad of ways in which

the doctoral researcher is represented as lost, drowning and confused while the literature is pre-eminent, strong and needing, somehow, to be conquered.

Water images are particularly popular, where the literature itself is figured as dangerous territory and unmanageable:

- a chaotic whirlpool
- an ocean full of sharks
- a stormy ocean

and the researcher as unprepared or impeded from taking action:

- trying to swim with concrete blocks on my feet
- setting off across the ocean in a canoe
- floating on the ocean without an anchor
- diving into a pond of water weeds and trying to find my way out
- tossed between currents in the sea, all pulling in different directions
- trudging through a mangrove swamp.

The puzzle/maze metaphor also features widely as a representation of the literature, nuanced by images of light and dark. Here the researcher is lost, stumbling, unable to find their way:

- walking into a tunnel
- walking through a maze blindfolded
- walking in the dark
- going through a maze in search of hidden treasure
- searching the night sky without a telescope for connections between illuminated stars.

Students also use bodily pain and discomfort imagery to represent the process of literature work, with popular clichés dominant, including:

- pulling teeth
- sweating blood
- being hit by a truck
- sinking in quicksand
- getting caught in knots of other people's writing.

While such images dominate the groups we've worked with, highlighting a lack of agency and being overwhelmed, a small number of students have offered more benign images of searching the literature, as:

- gold mining: extracting the golden threads that provide the value
- collecting seashells

- digging in the ground for precious metal
- building a brick wall, laying down one brick at a time until this magnificent wall has been created.
- looking into a kaleidoscope, a mosaic which keeps shifting.

These images highlight the value of the search and the satisfaction of the process, but possibly romanticize the labour involved. The rewards (gold threads, precious metals, magnificent walls, lovely mosaics) have an Enlightenment ring which suggests that for these students, some kind of ‘truth’ resides somewhere in the texts with which they were working.

For us, however, the richest metaphors are those that attribute the difficulties in writing to the nature of reviewing literatures. Two of the metaphors we find most delightful use animal imagery:

- eating a live elephant
- persuading (selected arms of) an octopus into a glass.

These metaphors differ qualitatively from the others in that they highlight the almost absurd difficulty of the task, with humour. Feelings of inadequacy or lack of preparedness are absent. Rather, the obstacle is huge and unruly (the live elephant, those unmanageable octopus arms), and the researcher is active. She is ‘eating’ and ‘persuading’ – doing what she needs to do in the face of what seems an impossible task.

Such metaphor work is powerful for tapping into student anxieties. It has the potential to create a pedagogical conversation through which supervisors can orient doctoral researchers to the importance of identity work in the project of becoming a scholar and, more specifically, doing the literature work. Our aim as supervisors is to shift disabling metaphors so that students can begin to imagine other subject positions where they might be in charge of this journey, however hard it is. Beginning a conversation about literature work with a discussion of metaphor is a way to start a different kind of conversation with doctoral researchers, one which addresses their intellect and emotions, and which takes up the tangled nature of text work/identity work.

We think at least part of the problem, however, lies in the term itself – the literature review.

Literature review – what’s in a name?

Just as we were concerned in Chapter 1 to question the phrase ‘writing up’, because of its negative and mythologizing effects on the process of thesis writing, here we reflect on and reject the notion of *the literature review*.

A few things stand out about the phrase. First it is singular, preceded by the article *the* or *a*, suggesting that it is a single object of importance which occurs in one place in the thesis, conventionally the second chapter. Whether we are talking

about *the* (as in one and only) or *a* (somewhat less definitive but still singular) literature review, it is linguistically marked as a unified piece of writing, rather than being used throughout the dissertation.

Even more worrying is any implication that the writing of the review occurs only once at the beginning of the doctoral research, with only minor editing and tidying after the fieldwork has concluded. There is no doubt that at the outset of doctoral candidature, an intensive immersion in literatures is essential. But most commentators (e.g. Dunleavy, 2003; Hart, 1998, 2001) stress that literature work is an evolving and ongoing task that must be updated and revised throughout the process of writing the thesis. We rephrase this advice to suggest that reading and writing are integral to all phases of doctoral study.

The term literature itself is also curious, as it seems to elevate research reports, books, articles and monographs to the status of canon – *the literature*, with all its evocation of high culture and importance. We don't ask doctoral researchers to do a review of *research*, but of *literature*, and usually of literature as singular, literature *not* literatures.

Finally, the verb *review*, which has been transformed to a noun, implies a collection, a showing and summarizing of what others have done. The doctoral researcher is to create a review by 'doing' one (Hart, 1998) or 'writing' one (Murray, 2002). When the term review is used as a verb, as in *to review* the literature, the researcher is positioned linguistically as onlooker. Our emphasis, by contrast, is on positioning students as agents who *use* and *evaluate* the research of others, in order to make a place for their own work.

As we progress our discussion in this chapter and the next, we return to some of the issues raised here, including what it means to *use* the literature, rather than be used by it and where/how literature work might be located in relation to the overall structure of the thesis. As our aim is not to invent new terms unnecessarily, we continue to use the term literature, but always in the *plural* and with a lower case l – literatures. This is to signal that there is neither one monolithic research *canon*, nor necessarily one place only in the thesis where it belongs. At times we will also use the abbreviation LR to further defuse and undermine the potency of the taken-for-granted terminology.

We now consider how literature reviews are discussed in the advice books in order to clear the way for more productive metaphors and strategies.

Literature reviews and the advice books

Advice books on how to write the LR are rife with intimidating expressions and exhortations to be rigorous, systematic, respectful (but critical), and comprehensive (but not all inclusive). Burton and Steane (2004) are a prime example of how not to help. Writing from the field of management, they construct what we would call an excess of expectation about the significance of the LR. Calling it alternately 'a critical part of the thesis' and 'the foundation of the research project' (2004: 124), and crediting it with doing an enormous amount of work, they say:

All parts of the thesis are strengthened by the comprehensiveness and rigour of your review of relevant theories. Understanding the literature sharpens the focus of your argument and will help to clarify your proposition or research question ... define the arena of your study, and can suggest hypotheses that you need to test, methodologies appropriate for your study and perhaps even a sample size.

(Burton and Steane, 2004: 125)

This is high stakes LR. This is a make-or-break activity. While we agree that getting a grip on literatures is important, this kind of heightened do-or-die focus hardly helps to make the LR project seem doable.

Burton and Steane also use a journey/water metaphor to represent the process of reviewing, warning of the dangers of getting lost or trying to include everything.

The task of identifying the relevant literature can be likened to a journey of discovery, like tracking a river to its source. If you are exploring the river, there will be tributaries and creeks that invite exploration, but these are side trips and diversions from the main task and from the general direction – some of them fruitful and some of them not. If you explore every creek and stream that flows into a river, you will have a much greater understanding of the whole river, but you also run the risk of becoming so distracted by the small streams that you will never reach the source. So you need to decide what are the important branches of the river that need to be explored, and to decide what branches are less important and can be ignored.

(Burton and Steane, 2004: 126–7)

This river metaphor constructs a rational landscape, a considered set of choices. The literature (singular) is represented as a river with branches and is subdivided in a fairly orderly manner. Somewhere there is a source (or sources) out there to be found. All the journey person need do is navigate, decide whether to move this way or that, here or there, and decide how long to stay. While the position of navigator has agency, navigating is presumably hard to do if, as our students suggest, they are wearing concrete blocks on their feet or they are caught up in the weeds and sludge of the river bottom, entangled and lost or on the verge of drowning.

Burton and Steane send their student out on a journey with no map, into uncharted waters, with little guidance about how to approach the plethora of decisions to be made. On what basis does she decide which streams are worth exploring? How does she avoid being stuck on a mud bank, or swept off course in white water? This river metaphor, and others like it, construct an overly rational version of what is possible after the fact. Once the writer knows the river and can presumably see its tributaries and branches, she can navigate them.

It is little wonder, we suggest, that advice such as this does little to help students and probably adds to their anxieties. It is crucial to move LR conversations with

students in more positive and enabling directions. We think of this as re-naming and re-framing. In the remainder of the chapter, we consider two metaphors for rethinking the practice of working with literatures.

More helpful metaphors: tables and dinner parties

Not all advice books are so unhelpful. Becker (1986) in a chapter aptly entitled ‘Terrorised by the literature’, suggests that students need to think of scholarship as a cumulative enterprise. They are adding to something that already exists and they re-use scholarship in order to advance their own study. Rather than sending students out on a river in a *Deliverance*⁷ style test of endurance, Becker uses the metaphor of a table to get at what is new, and what is old or borrowed/used. He says:

Imagine that you are ... making a table. You have designed it and cut out some of the parts. Fortunately, you don’t need to make all the parts yourself. Some are standard sizes and shapes – lengths of two by four, for instance – available at any lumber yard. Some have already been designed and made by other people – drawer pulls and turned legs. All you have to do is fit them into the places you left for them, knowing that they were available. That is the best way to use the literature.

(Becker, 1986: 142)

Becker suggests that the LR is a particular kind of text, an argument. (This is a genre we explore in more detail in Chapter 6.) Here we allow Becker to make the initial point:

You want to make an argument, instead of a table. You have created some of the argument yourself, perhaps on the basis of new data or information you have collected. But you needn’t invent the whole thing. Other people have worked on your problem or problems related to it and have made some of the pieces you need. You just have to fit them in where they belong. Like the woodworker, you leave space, when you make your portion of the argument, for the other parts you know you can get. You do that, that is, *if* you know that they are there to use. And that’s one good reason to know the literature: so that you will know what pieces are available and not waste time doing what has already been done.

(Becker, 1986: 142)

One positive feature of the table metaphor is that of familiarity. We have all used tables and know what they are, whereas not many of us will have paddled a river from top to bottom. A table is also of a manageable size because it has to fit into a room: even the grandest table can be seen in entirety and walked around. The table

metaphor thus makes the LR appear doable. And, making a table is a crafting activity. It is pleasurable work with the hands, both mental and manual, aesthetic and utilitarian. This resonates with the notion of writing that is honed and polished through labour that is both aesthetic and functionally directed. Of course, there is always the occasional hammered thumb to contend with, but that is a far cry from being submerged or being stranded oarless up the proverbial creek.

In our own search for useful metaphors that might put some agency back into the process yet foreground the crucial identity work involved, we have been particularly taken by a metaphor developed by our Australian colleague John Smyth. It is of literature work as a dinner party. We have elaborated this metaphor in our workshops with students to counter the overwhelmingly *swamped, lost* and *drowning* images they usually offer.

We like the domestic, familiar image of the dinner party and its emphasis on conversation with a community of scholars. The party occurs in one's own home, in the familiar territory where one belongs (not the ocean or the swamp or the river). The doctoral researcher invites to the table the scholars she would like to join her for a conversation over the evening meal. The emphasis is on the company and the conversation that happens at the table. The candidate has selected the menu, bought the food, and cooked the dinner which she offers her guests. As host to this party, she makes space for the guests to talk about their work, but in relation to her own work. Her own thesis is never disconnected from the conversation, for after all it lies on her table. It is part of the food the guests eat, chew and digest.

And because it is her dinner party the doctoral researcher has a great deal of agency. The dinner party metaphor makes it clear that she cannot invite everyone because they will not all fit at her table. She is not just a bystander or 'reviewer' of the conversation, but a participant. While she may not always comprehend the conversation or catch all its nuances and complexity, she is present. And she can reflect on these conversations later, mulling them over as one might do at the end of a good night out. But having made the contact and the connection (between their work and her own), there is a starting point for other dinners, coffees, conversations and the option of not inviting some guests back or including others.

We find students warm to this metaphor because it is such a stark contrast to the more powerless images they offer. It does not seem out of reach. Its very domesticity makes the LR seem doable. Most importantly it creates a very different subject position for the writer. It is the doctoral writer who does the inviting, it is she who initiates the conversation with her scholar guests and it is she who *uses* what they have said, rather than just being grateful that they have come.

Of course, counter metaphors, as important as they are, are not enough in supervision pedagogy and so we move on to strategies that help students operationalize the dinner party organizer as subject position, that is, to find agency through text work. But our argument throughout is that identity work is as central as the text work and should not be underestimated. This is not just an added extra, it is part of the work of writing the thesis.

Adopting a critical stance

As we noted earlier, most advice books suggest that the LR needs to be critical. On the surface, the term *critical* positions the doctoral researcher more powerfully as judge and evaluator of the research that has preceded her. But we have found this is where many students come undone. Critical is taken to mean *critique*, to find what is *wrong*. Many students are intimidated and sometimes paralysed by the prospect of being critical of (esteemed, elevated) scholars who are senior, more powerful and acknowledged experts in their fields.

The seemingly innocuous and commonplace phrase *a critical review of the literature* carries with it a set of presuppositions that create a particular stance for the doctoral writer, what we call a difficult subject position, which makes the task of writing more onerous. Doctoral researchers often revert to writing summaries, we believe, because they are nervous about taking on the subject position of ‘critic’. They are often cautioned (through advice books, supervisors, university websites) that the LR is not a summary genre, that it involves making a case for their work and finding which research literatures are like/unlike/connected to what they are doing. But such advice is often not sufficient.

The dinner party metaphor can help here. The doctoral researcher can make her dinner party a dull affair where all the guests speak one after another, but engage in little interaction, debate or challenge. Or her *soirée* can be one in which she serially holds the floor, ridicules all of the guests and prevents them from talking back or to each other. Of course, all students know that in reality neither of these events will be entertaining or informative. Getting the mix right is not easy.

We can capture this dilemma by considering a text where the doctoral researcher has difficulty achieving a critical stance. The text is written by Gina, a senior school administrator who is researching what is ‘known’ about school reform.

Fullan (1993) proposes some paradoxes about change that would help one to understand and deal with the complexities of change. He claims that you can’t mandate what matters since the more complex the change, the less you can force it. He also explains that change is a journey, not a blueprint and that we will encounter problems. However, we should see problems as our friends. Can one ever regard problems as good? This could be the most feared thing and could become an obstacle for some, knowing the stress and headaches that problems can cause. Nevertheless, the author is of the view that because they are inevitable, we can’t learn without them. In this light, I share the author’s view because the old adage goes ‘experiences are our greatest teacher’.

Here Gina shows a grasp of the issues and debates about school change, but a difficulty in positioning herself in relation to the writer Fullan, a senior scholar in the field of educational reform. In this passage she talks of herself as ‘one’ and ‘I’ and of an anonymous ‘you’ and ‘we’ as the audience the writer is addressing. She

is critical of the proposition Fullan is making, but in order to make the critique she resorts to rhetorical questions. Gina then absents herself from the text to make another critical comment which is based on her own considerable professional experience, but which she is reluctant to assert, saying ‘knowing the stress and headaches that problems can cause’. She does not produce counters from other literature at this point. She reasserts herself, as the ‘I’, only when in agreement with the author.

It would be easy to respond to this text as a piece of ‘bad writing’, but a closer reading shows that the problem is not primarily about style and expression. The lack of intertextuality and some of the tongue-tied-ness derive from Gina’s inability to find a comfortable ‘hands on hips’ stance. She is mute at her own dinner party.

For Gina to move forward, an expanded notion of critical, beyond praise and blame, is required, together with the adoption of a stance that we characterize as appreciative.

Becoming critical

To be critical is not just about praising and demolishing the work of others. To continue with our dinner party metaphor, the task is not to invite the guests in order to poison, gag or humiliate them. Nor is it simply to contradict in the style of the famous Monty Python argument sketch, where ‘Yes it is’, ‘No it isn’t’ constitutes an argument. These are commonsense versions of critique and argument. The scholarly meanings of these terms are different.

Being critical involves making a number of judgments and decisions about which literatures to engage with, and which to ignore, which aspects of texts to stress and which to omit or downplay. Adopting a critical stance to a text means paying attention to: definitions; underpinning assumptions; theoretical resources mobilized; epistemology and methodology; method (who, what, where, how); and findings. These perspectives can be brought together to establish points of similarity and points of difference. It is through such focused interrogation and intertextual work that students come to identify major debates in the field.

But to be critical is also to be respectful of what others have done, to look at what they have contributed, rather than going on the attack. A key question to ask is: What does this work contribute? Rather than, what does it fail to do? This creates an evaluative frame which does not privilege ‘criticism’ as negative or destructive behaviour. The following example, written by doctoral researcher Sean, illustrates what an appreciative stance might look like.

The Stages Heuristic is widely acknowledged to have been the first formal policy theory established in the ‘new’ field of policy science (Deleon, 1999; Sabatier, 1999; McCool, 1995). Although it is no longer in active use, I mention it here as an historical antecedent to later policy theories. Originally conceptualized by Lasswell (1951), the *stages* approach was refined by Brewer

(1974) and identified six key stages: (1) policy initiation, (2) estimation, (3) selection, (4) implementation, (5) evaluation, and (6) termination. The Stages Heuristic represents a delineated, sequential policy process framework where some overlap between stages is possible, but where each stage has distinctive characteristics. While much of the policy research since the 1970s has been shaped by this framework, its critics now characterize the approach as disjointed, episodic and linear (Deleon, 1999; Sabatier, 1999).

For all practical purposes this theory has become outdated and irrelevant in that it is no longer studied by scholars. But the *stages* approach represents a point of departure for other theories and more stringent and holistic models. It also served to open policy studies to a range of academic disciplines and provided space for later ideas based on social norms and personal values (Deleon, 1999).

Here Sean demonstrates a grasp of a body of literature which was important to policy scholarship. While noting the critiques of scholars who built their work in dialogue with and against this body of work, he is able to insert his own evaluation of its importance. Without resorting to ‘I agree (or disagree)’, or ‘Deleon says’, Sean puts forward his assessment of the body of scholarship, namely that the work was important as a kicking-off place for others and as the beginning of a new field.

This is a graceful recognition of the work of other scholars. It is neither deferential nor obsequious nor harsh. But it does, nevertheless, point out that the actual theory in question has largely been superseded.

Some students arrive at a generous and generative criticality by themselves. Others benefit from a more direct pedagogical strategy. The work of Jon Wagner (1993) is particularly useful in establishing an analytic framework for criticality that moves beyond liking or disliking, agreeing or disagreeing. Wagner distinguishes between what he calls the ‘blind spots’ and ‘blank spots’ in others’ research. What we ‘know enough to question but not answer’ are our blank spots; what we ‘don’t know well enough to even ask about or care about’ are our blind spots. ‘areas in which existing theories, methods, and perceptions actually keep us from seeing phenomena as clearly as we might’ (1993: 16).

So, for example, surveys typically give a broad snapshot of a phenomenon using respondents’ perceptions. What they cannot do is provide in-depth reasons about why those particular answers are the way they are. This requires a different kind of investigation. The lack of in-depth reasons are a blind spot of this type of research (and indeed, are typically why mixed methods are seen as preferable to single surveys). To identify the blind spots in others’ research, students need to focus on the things a particular methodology or method does not do, that is, areas that have been overlooked for theoretical or methodological reasons.

Identifying blank spots, by contrast, involves asking what this research could have seen or done that it does not. That is, what are the shortcomings of the research? So, if a survey omitted questions or failed to take up opportunities for informative cross-tabulations, then these are arguably blank spots.

This distinction assists students to see the difference between research that is poorly executed, and research that can only provide a limited data set. Furthermore, when there is a limited data set by virtue of a blind spot, the student is then able to check the blind spots against the claims made of the findings to see if they stack up. Combining the notion of blind spots and blank spots with an appreciative stance allows doctoral researchers to focus on what the research contributes and how/where/why more might be required. The combination also provides evaluative detail beyond summarizing content and themes.

In workshops we encourage doctoral researchers to assess the individual texts of other scholars by asking such questions as:

- what is the argument?
- what kind/aspect of x is spoken about in this article?
- from what position?
- using what evidence?
- what claims are made?
- how adequate are these (blank spots and blind spots)?

Asking and answering such questions allows students to write about the specific contribution, and then to compare it with other texts that have been written, possibly as a history of the field, or as a synthesis of the current state of understanding. Working with blank and blind spots across many texts provides important understandings about the gaps and spaces in the field, one of which the doctoral researcher will occupy.

Modelling good literature work

It is helpful for supervisors to collect examples of student writing, including texts that don't work, as well as texts that do (and negotiate permission to use these). Supervisors can thus make concrete how identity issues surface in text. Doctoral researchers and their supervisors can look together at this writing as a set of strategies, asking: What does this text accomplish and what does it fail to do? Such writing becomes part of the resources of a writing-centred supervision. It makes writing-in-progress more public and less a source of embarrassment. It creates an opportunity to get specific, rather than provide only general feedback to students.

Here is an example of student writing which demonstrates what a sound LR looks like. Anne, a senior public servant, is focusing on traditional and critical perspectives on the role of bureaucracy. In this excerpt she demonstrates that she can handle with facility and generosity complex ideas and an important corpus of scholarship.

The question of whether senior bureaucrats play an active role in policy development or if their influence is more limited, even an impediment to the

will of elected ministers, is contested. There seems to be a pervasive view that ministers set the policy agenda of government with the bureaucracy represented as a 'necessary evil' for enacting policy. Meanwhile, there is literature that positions the bureaucracy more favourably, even suggesting a more authoritative role in policy development. But, there appears to be no concurrence on the extent of involvement. While many scholars agree that bureaucrats, either actively or tacitly, do play an important role in policy development, it is safe to say that this does not represent the consensus view (Levin, 2002; Stone, 2002; Birkland, 2001; Lynn, 1996; Majone, 1989; Goodsell, 1985).

The casting of politicians as policy leaders assumes that a public servant, senior or otherwise, is a 'servant' to the public, but more to the point, a servant to the minister. Some see senior public servants as instruments of political processes but with a severely limited role in policy formulation (Wilson, 1999). This theoretical orientation is consistent with new corporate management ideologies that are believed to foster a stronger separation between public administration and politics but, as I will argue, do more to motivate bureaucrats to seek a more direct role in government policy. As Cohn (1997) suggests, under such arrangements ministers rely on deputies and other senior administrators to provide direction and advice on policy, but the actual decisions are made at a political level. In framing policy development in this way, there is some recognition of the role of the permanent public service, to be sure, but it is one of implementation, stopping short of policy formulation.

We could characterize Anne's text as 'in charge of the literatures'. Anne frames her discussion from the outset as a debate, a set of ideas in competition with one another. This allows her to make ideas central, rather than other researchers, and to take the lead in guiding the reader through the different positions in the field. She uses evaluative language to sort and clarify positions: 'There seems to be a pervasive view; there is literature that positions the bureaucracy more favourably ... there appears to be no concurrence ...'. She also makes links to broader discourses, 'This theoretical orientation is consistent with new corporate management ideologies ...', and to her own argument, '... as I will argue, do more to motivate bureaucrats to seek a more direct role in government policy'.

This is a dinner party where the host is orchestrating the conversation and calling the shots in an elegant and respectful way. Such writing, together with other examples, might serve as a model for students. It stands in contrast to the work by Vera and Geraldine with which we began this chapter. It demonstrates that the doctoral researcher is neither overcome by the literatures, nor in possession of unrealistic expectations of their finality and unity. It shows a healthy degree of appreciation and criticality, and a clear sense of where the doctoral research argument is to go.