

Writing Across Boundaries: An opportunity for researchers to reflect on the process and anxiety of academic writing.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/10/29/writing-across-boundaries/

10/29/2013

The process of writing-up one's fieldwork data can be daunting for even the most seasoned researcher.

Bob Simpson and **Robin Humphrey** discuss the *Writing Across Boundaries* initiative, which is aimed at supporting early career researchers who are seeking to engage more effectively with the practical and intellectual issues involved in social science writing.



Some years ago, we hit upon the idea of developing ways of supporting Ph.D. candidates using qualitative data with their writing. The stimulus was a call from the ESRC as part of their [Researcher Development Initiative](#) back in 2006. We recalled what a struggle it had been in our own doctoral work to move from heaps of field material to something that looked like a coherent and persuasive account of the worlds we had stepped into, and only recently stepped out of. Somehow a supervisor's casual request to produce a draft chapter didn't equate with the struggle that ensued. Yes, we could write, in the sense of producing literate communication, but could we write with authorial as well as intellectual confidence? Indeed, were we really up to the job?



The ESRC call also caused us to reflect on the fact that PhD candidates get a lot of support and training prior to entering the field, and latterly when in the field. However, there is little to prepare them for the impact of fieldwork and particularly the expectation that the raw data of experience will be easily and tidily transmuted into ordered and insightful text. Moreover, this is an expectation that is becoming ever sharper as pressures mount to complete theses on time. As supervisors with a good deal of experience of managing post graduates and their training, writing up qualitative data – and how we might move beyond a 'sink or swim' approach – seemed to us a useful area to address.



The upshot was the [Writing Across Boundaries initiative](#). The centrepiece of the initiative was an annual residential workshop to which we invited post-fieldwork doctoral students in the full thrall of 'writing-up' their research. It appears to have been very well received, if participant evaluation were anything to go by ([Simpson and Humphrey, 2008](#); [Humphrey and Simpson 2012](#)). It seemed that we had tuned into a widely shared and deeply felt source of anxiety for doctoral candidates at this stage in their development. Whilst we all too aware that we couldn't make this anxiety disappear, we could provide participants with an opportunity to reflect upon tools, strategies and analyses which could make their concerns more manageable. Anxiety, it would seem, could be made into a productive ally. As one participant put it: 'a scary gap was transformed into a creative playground'. The WAB workshop continues to be run annually, now as an Advanced Training Workshop of the [North East Doctoral Training Centre](#).

The workshops have also been a great success for us because it has made us reflect upon writing more generally and what is actually going on when we write. Our curiosity in this regard led us to wonder what goes on when others write, and so we asked them. We contacted social scientists whose writing we admire and who have had considerable impact both in and beyond academia and asked them to provide us with 1000 words or so on how they go about writing. The results have been both intriguing and illuminating. The essays appear on the web site in a section called [Writers on Writing](#). In these short gems we are treated to reflections ranging from the personal (the blank page induces deep fear and paralysis) to the practical (start early and eat porridge). There is also a view which rejects the WAB premise altogether: all you need to be able to do to write well is to read – what's all the fuss

about!

The WAB initiative began with a simple agenda concerning qualitative data and writing. We have since realised, however, that it touches on a much wider one. In recent years, there has been acceleration in the way researchers progress from one kind of writing to another – doctoral thesis to articles to monograph to more accessible forms of dissemination. The pressure to do in couple of years what an earlier generation might have done in a couple of decades has a variety of external drivers. These mostly come down to funding and the competition for scarce resources on the one hand, and the demonstration of public accountability on the other. The impact agenda falls somewhere between the two and is currently having its own significant impacts on academia. Of interest here is the way in which early stage researchers are expected to write for a variety of audiences in the hope of opening up ‘pathways’ to impact. Two insights that arose from the workshops are of relevance here. First, for many participants it came as an important realisation that there wasn’t only one kind of writing – the one found in the classical, canonical and often imaginary thesis – but many. Second, it was instructive and liberating for participants to have the opportunity to express their ideas in different voices, from different positions, in different tenses and using different narrative structures.

We are delighted to be able to link up with the LSE’s Impact of Social Sciences blog and hope that the materials on the WAB-site will prove useful for all social science writers. We would welcome contributions to the Writing Across Boundaries initiative, and in particular if the [Postgraduates on Writing section](#) of our website enthruses any doctoral candidates to share their thoughts, feelings and/or insights concerning how they are dealing with writing up their fieldwork data. Any other feedback is most welcome, too!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Authors

Bob Simpson is Professor and Chair of BoS in the Department of Anthropology at Durham University. His current research interests focus on Bioethics, Biomedicine and Biotechnologies in developing world contexts. One of the main research settings in which he has explored the encounter between challenging technological developments and local systems of values and beliefs is Sri Lanka.

Dr. Robin Humphrey is a Reader, and Director of Postgraduate Research Training, Newcastle University, UK. He started his academic career in research centres at Durham University and in the Medical School at Newcastle University, before becoming a lecturer in social science research methods at Newcastle. When doctoral research training expanded in the 1990s, he left undergraduate teaching and started to develop and direct a wide-ranging, Postgraduate Research Training Programme in the social sciences and humanities, which now incorporates researcher development into interdisciplinary research training modules and workshops.

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.