Key writing challenges of practice-based doctorates

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Abstract

Building on the increasing interest within English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in postgraduate literacy development, this article examines the complexities of writing research at the academic/professional interface. It analyses two literature reviews by professional doctorate students at an Australian university who were writing research in their first language, English, about issues arising from their areas of professional practice. One of the student texts received a mostly negative evaluation from the disciplinary marker while the other received a mostly positive evaluation. Our analysis of the two texts identifies some key challenges of writing practice-based research, namely, framing a real-world problem as a research issue; incorporating one’s own (and others’) professional knowledge; and using the literature to contextualise and theorise the issue under investigation. We propose that EAP-style pedagogies involving guided analysis of issues like these within research texts may benefit not only students writing in an L2 but also those struggling to write in their L1, and that more nuanced understandings of the textual expectations of practice-based research are needed so that student writers can learn to produce knowledge that will count within the academy.

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1. Introduction

In English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and related fields, interest has been steadily growing in identifying and addressing the research writing needs of students undertaking postgraduate (or, in US parlance, graduate) degrees (see, e.g., Casanave & Hubbard, 1992;...
Paltridge, 2002; Starfield & Ravelli, 2006; Swales, 2004; and many others). From publications such as the 2003 *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics* special issue on “Thesis and dissertation writing at postgraduate level: Theory and classroom practice” and the 2005 *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* special issue on “Advanced academic literacy,” it is clear that academic literacy specialists across institutional and regional contexts are increasingly being called upon to design a variety of developmental programmes in order to assist research students—of any language background—in becoming more effective research writers in English. This article seeks to contribute to the knowledge base underpinning such research-writing programmes by examining the complexities of writing postgraduate research at the academic/professional interface.

The explosive growth, in recent years, of research projects and degree programmes with strong industry links has generated much discussion in the higher education literature (e.g., Neumann, 2005; Usher, 2002; Winter, Griffiths, & Green, 2000), yet in the EAP literature there have been few detailed investigations of the textual requirements of practice-based research (see, e.g., Hocking, 2003). This article is part of a larger study that investigates the literacy practices, needs, and development of practitioners writing work-based doctorates, by examining the main writing challenges faced by a cohort of professional doctorate students at an Australian university (Nelson & San Miguel, 2003). This article analyses two literature-review assignments by two students who were in their first semester of the degree programme and who were writing in their first language (L1), English. One of the student texts received a largely negative evaluation by the coursework marker—a senior academic in the students’ broad disciplinary area, nursing and midwifery—while the other received a largely positive evaluation. In attempting to account for this difference, we aim to generate a useful analytic framework for critically discussing key writing difficulties evident in the texts of students undertaking practice-based research. Because this is an in-depth rather than a large-scale study, it should be noted that the writing challenges selected for discussion here have been evident throughout our larger research corpus, and also through our work at a university’s academic development unit where, between us, we have taught writing to hundreds of postgraduates undertaking practice-based research in various disciplines.

The key writing problems that we identify and examine in this article involve framing the research and structuring the text, referring to oneself (and one’s colleagues), and using the literature. Our analysis indicates that practitioners undertaking research degrees and the academics assessing their texts may have divergent understandings about what counts as legitimate knowledge types, knowers, evidence, intertextual practices, and argumentation. We conclude by proposing some implications for the literacy development of postgraduates who are researching issues from their professional practice.

2. Professional doctorates and their discursive requirements

Our analysis of two student texts needs to be understood within the broader context of an increasingly globalised knowledge economy, within which the academy is under pressure to join forces with industry to produce what Sorrells-Jones and Weaver, (1999, p. 12) writers of the healthcare industry, have referred to as “a workforce of knowledge workers.” These knowledge workers need to be able to “acquire and use theoretical and analytical knowledge in highly sophisticated ways” (p. 13; see also Barnett, 2000; for a discussion of implications for EAP see Dovey, 2006). It is within this broad context that
a plethora of new professional doctorate programmes have been created over the past decade in a number of countries (see, e.g., Maxwell & Shanahan, 2001; Usher, 2002).

Professional doctorate degrees are designed for mid-career professionals who do not aspire to become academics but rather to undertake research that emerges from, and will be useful to, their own workplaces and professions (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001; Usher, 2002). In the literature on professional doctorate programmes it is often claimed that what distinguishes these from Ph.D. programmes is the high value placed on generating practice-based knowledge to address ‘real-world’ problems. Whereas traditional Ph.D. programmes aim to produce “professional researchers,” the new professional doctorate programmes aim to produce “researching professionals” (Bourner et al., 2001, p. 71). Professional doctorate programmes typically comprise some coursework that is meant to facilitate the main requirement of the degree—a major research text investigating a problem that has emerged from a student’s area of professional practice (Manathunga, Smith, & Bath, 2004).

It is clear from the professional doctorate literature that this major research text is meant to differ in significant ways from a Ph.D. thesis or dissertation (Bourner et al., 2001; Maxwell & Shanahan, 2001). Yet despite an oft-cited call for ‘new research literacies’ situated at the intersecting domains of the workplace, the profession, and the academy (Lee, Green, & Brennan, 2000), the textual expectations of these new degrees remain quite vague. Whilst some programmes require a thesis, others require a series of publications, or a portfolio of work (Bourner et al., 2001). What exactly constitutes a portfolio has been the subject of some debate. Malfroy and Yates (2003) found that some professional doctorate supervisors considered a portfolio to be quite similar to a thesis, “whereas others see it as also possibly quite distinctive from the Ph.D. and including a range of documents produced during workplace practice with an overarching critiquing document” (p. 127). Neumann (2005) reports concern among academics that the lack of clear expectations regarding professional doctorate portfolios “was liable to give rise to confusion and ambiguity—for students and potentially for examiners” (p. 183).

There seems to be little, if any, applied linguistics or EAP research investigating the types of texts that are being written for professional doctorate degrees. In the EAP literature, Thompson (2005) underscores the impossibility of defining what exactly constitutes a ‘Ph.D. thesis genre,’ given the variety of theses evident not only across disciplines but also within a given discipline. He suggests that a thesis is “the result of a negotiation of practice, convention and expectations between the writer, the supervisor and other readers of the text in its formative stages” (p. 320). How, and how successfully, these complex negotiations are instantiated in two professional doctorate texts are the central focus of analysis in this paper.

3. Research design

Taking the view that texts need to be analysed in the context of their production, interpretation and evaluation (Fairclough, 1992), for our larger research study we created a multi-dimensional research design by collecting and analysing a variety of data types from a cohort of nine students and two academics. Data were collected over a 2-year period and included the following: student texts and written feedback from academic markers; audio-taped interviews with students and academics; and teaching materials and our field notes from doctoral schools that comprised academic seminars and writing
workshops. This article presents a detailed analysis of a small, select subset of these data in order to investigate differences in two student texts that provoked very different responses from the marker.

Data drawn on in this article were collected six months after this student cohort began the doctoral programme. First, we collected copies of the literature reviews that students had submitted for a first semester research subject, as part of the coursework component of their degree; these student texts included feedback from the coursework marker written in the margins. Then we conducted an open-ended interview with the coursework marker, Eve (pseudonyms have been used for confidentiality), in order to elicit her overall impressions of the literature review assignments. During the interview, Eve brought up, and spoke at length about, two texts in particular: Kate’s, which she characterised as “awful” and “a mess,” and Leanne’s, which she considered “quite good” and “quite interesting.” Eve told us she had struggled to provide written feedback on Kate’s problematic text: “I was having trouble trying to… work out… what was driving me crazy about it.” Lastly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual students in the cohort in order to elicit their perspectives on the early stages of writing a professional doctorate; this article draws on transcribed interviews of Kate and Leanne, the two writers whose texts were selected for analysis here.

A detailed, iterative process of data analysis and triangulation was then undertaken, which involved: analysing the overall structure of the two student texts by examining the topic and function of each paragraph; analysing in detail those aspects of the texts that Eve, in her written feedback to the students, had identified as problematic; analysing the interview data, coding key themes in the transcripts, and focusing on those instances where Eve, Kate and Leanne had talked specifically about the literature reviews; and, finally, re-examining all of the data in order to identify points of commonality and contrast. In this article, we use Eve’s comments on the two texts as a starting point for our analysis, and as a means of critically discussing some of the complexities of writing practice-based research.

As to the research participants, the two students were midlife and each had a master’s degree in nursing and a senior position in health care—Kate as a midwife and Leanne as a nurse consultant. At the time the assignments analysed here were written, they had taken part in one introductory writing workshop that we had given, at the faculty’s request, for the cohort during their first week of candidature (the literature review assignment was not specifically discussed in that workshop). The coursework marker, Eve (whose first language was also English), was a senior academic in nursing who had considerable experience supervising Ph.D. students and several years’ experience supervising professional doctorate students.

4. Analysing the student texts

The first assignment that candidates had to complete for the coursework component of the degree was described in the subject outline as a “preliminary literature review” that “[locates] the candidate’s proposed work within the literature.” The assignment was intended to help the students develop “a sound research proposal for the portfolio,” which would “address[es] concerns drawn directly from their critical reflections on professional practice.” Because a number of students remained confused about the assignment, they were given further written guidelines by the subject lecturer, explaining that they were to
“incorporate, review, and to some extent critique, existing literature on their research topic.” No expected word length was provided.

This section critically analyses two student texts in relation to framing the research and structuring the text, referring to oneself, and using the literature.

4.1. Framing the research and structuring the text

In EAP research, linguistic analyses of literature reviews have focused mainly on the journal article, identifying moves that writers typically make in reviewing the literature and using it to establish a niche for their own research (see Swales, 1990, 2004). However, little is known about the moves that writers typically make when the research focus is on a practical work-based issue and the genre is a postgraduate thesis. In the professional doctorate literature, a study of doctoral degree programmes linked to professional practice areas (across 70 universities in England) recommends that professional doctorates begin by framing the practice-derived problem, as opposed to the gap in knowledge that is more typically associated with scholarly writing (Bourner et al., 2001). However, in our study, the student text that did frame the research in the context of the writer’s workplace clearly failed to meet the marker’s expectations, whereas the text that framed the research in the context of the literature received a much more positive response (see Tables 1 and 2).

As indicated in Table 1, Kate’s introduction sets the scene by describing her workplace setting, professional role and beliefs before introducing her research topic—the establishment of a hospital maternity unit based on a collaborative model of care between obstetricians and midwives. The body of her text is structured around four main issues that contributed to establishing the hospital unit. In discussing each issue, the experiences and beliefs that influenced Kate’s efforts to establish this unit are interwoven with relevant

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<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>“Opening the door to collaborative care: A thumbnail sketch of some of the factors influencing the setting up of a maternity unit in a small private hospital”</td>
<td>Writer’s workplace, role and beliefs; this text</td>
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<td>1–3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Background to writer’s workplace, professional role and beliefs; outline of this paper</td>
<td>Writer’s workplace, role and beliefs; this text</td>
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<td>4–11</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Issue 1 in establishing this particular maternity unit [writer’s belief in ‘woman-centered care’]</td>
<td>Mostly the writer’s workplace, experiences and beliefs—interwoven with literature that supports these</td>
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<td>12–21</td>
<td>Issue 2</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>What the paper did; how the writer feels about the research</td>
<td>This text; writer’s emotions</td>
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literature. Her concluding paragraphs sum up the text and her own emotions about undertaking the research. Thus Kate’s text does incorporate academic references in discussing issues broadly related to her professional practice, but the central focus is the writer’s own workplace project and role.

In contrast, Leanne’s introduction (see Table 2) sets the scene by describing a generic workplace setting—in this case, a hospital unit for patients being treated for a particular illness. There is no explicit or even implicit mention (anywhere in the text) that Leanne herself works in this type of hospital unit. The body of the text is organised according to various aspects of the literature on suffering and the conclusion introduces her research, which aims to find ways of alleviating patient suffering. Thus, the central concern of Leanne’s literature review, unlike Kate’s, is academic literature on her topic, suffering.

In analysing these contrasts between the two texts, it is useful to consider the two modes of knowledge identified by Gibbons and his colleagues (Gibbons et al., 1994): Mode 1 knowledge is generated within universities and then applied to practical, ‘real-world’ problems in the broader society, whereas Mode 2 knowledge is generated in the broader society. Barnett (2000, p. 18) calls Mode 1 “knowing-in-theory” and Mode 2 “knowing-in-action.” Kate’s text clearly prioritisises action knowledge (Mode 2), while drawing on theory knowledge (Mode 1) as a means of explication and justification for her own workplace practices (Mode 2). However, Leanne’s text prioritises university-generated knowledge (Mode 1), evaluating its usefulness to her intended work-based research (Mode 2). It could be argued that in a literature review in particular, theory-knowledge (Mode 1) would be expected to predominate, as it does to a much greater degree in Leanne’s highly rated text than in Kate’s poorly rated one.

However, in doctorates that are examining a problem arising from the research writer’s own professional practice, matters such as the problem under investigation, the workplace context, and the positioning of the researcher/practitioner vis-à-vis the research site and participants, may need to be introduced early in the literature review so that the impetus

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<td>1–2</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>“Literature review”</td>
<td>Generic workplace setting (a type of hospital unit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>General orientation to topic [the suffering of patients with a particular illness]</td>
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<td>3–10</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Definitions of suffering</td>
<td>Mostly literature—with discussions of key concepts interspersed with brief assessments of their applicability (or otherwise) to nursing this type of patient</td>
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<td>11–13</td>
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<td>Aspect 1 of suffering ['spirituality']</td>
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<td>14–18</td>
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<td>Aspect 5</td>
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<td>27–31</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Introduction to the research to be undertaken; elaboration of workplace problem</td>
<td>A specific workplace setting (no mention that author works there)</td>
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for the research is clearly articulated and the theoretical knowledge is clearly linked to the practice problem that it is meant to illuminate. Even though Eve’s overall evaluation of Leanne’s text was very positive, by paragraph 22 she seemed to be wondering about the relevance of the literature to Leanne’s research, noting in the margin “AND? What has this [literature] got to do with your work?” This suggests that Eve was expecting the literature Leanne discussed to be more explicitly linked to the practice-based problem she was researching. This point was confirmed in our interview with Eve, who said she tells students that their literature review should “[serve] the needs of the research” and “grow out of” a professional problem rather than a gap in the literature.

The marker’s negative assessment of Kate’s text also raises questions about how work-based researchers can effectively foreground or background their own subjectivity in their texts. Although Nelson (2005) is discussing language education research, not nursing research, the argument may be pertinent here nonetheless:

[A] researcher’s subjective experiences, thoughts, and impressions can be articulated in a research text to good effect as long as their meaningfulness to knowledge work, and their relevance to that particular text, have been made clear. My point is that the central focus of a research text ought to be the ideas being discussed, not the person producing the text; in cases where the person producing the text is featured somewhat prominently, this should be a means of elaborating the ideas. (p. 315)

Considered in this light, Kate’s text may have been considered problematic not because it discussed her own workplace, professional role and beliefs, but because it failed to explain why these were in fact relevant to the research topic at hand—in this case, the setting up of a maternity unit.

4.2. Referring to oneself

Linguistics studies in EAP have highlighted the challenges for some second language (L2) writers of establishing ‘authorial identity,’ in particular through ‘self-mentions’ (Hyland, 2002; see also Cadman, 2002; Ivanic & Camps, 2001). It has also been suggested that some L1 writers may have similar difficulties (Hyland, 2002), which our findings confirm. Kate’s text mentions ‘the author’ a total of 23 times (in 35 paragraphs) but never once uses ‘I.’ It does eventually become clear that ‘the author,’ ‘the unit manager’ and ‘the midwife’ all refer to Kate herself, but numerous mentions of ‘the author’ seem unnecessary and stilted. For example, see Table 3, which shows excerpts from Kate’s text with Eve’s written feedback.

In her written feedback, Eve explained to Kate that one reason her text is problematic is “because your first person account is written in the third person (not really congruent) and because it is peppered throughout the paper.” In our interview, Eve elaborated on her frustration with what she called Kate’s “forcing the third person”:

[Kate’s text] read as clumsy… It didn’t work at all because… to use the first person well it requires incredible skill… without it sounding trivial… Well she’s not even using the first person, that’s the whole problem. If she was it wouldn’t be so awful.

Ironically, in writing in the third person, Kate was trying to meet what she considered to be the expectations of the academy. As she explained in our interview:
I was under the impression that we had to separate ourselves from what we were doing... I felt that by putting in ‘I’ statements—‘I am,’ ‘I did,’ ‘I saw,’ ‘I perceived’—wasn’t the way to do it. I thought that it was probably, you know, academically more correct to say ‘the author found’ or ‘these were the findings of the author.’

While preparing her literature review, Kate was likely to have been reading numerous research articles that use ‘the author,’ since using ‘I’ still seems to be a somewhat contested practice within nursing literature. A 2002 editorial in the international Journal of Advanced Nursing states that the journal ‘encourage[s] use of the first person... Particularly stilted and irritating are forms such as the author considers that...’ (Webb, 2002, p. 1). This would seem to confirm Eve’s criticism of Kate’s stilted use of ‘the author.’ Yet this editorial makes a point of spelling out the journal’s preference for first-person writing precisely because it is unusual practice compared to other nursing journals (which are, incidentally, three times less likely to use the first person than medical journals) (Webb, 2002; citing Winslow & Guzzetta, 2000). In this light, Kate’s decision to frequently use the third person, however tortured the effects, could be seen as an understandable, even savvy, attempt to legitimate her text by invoking the ‘elevated style’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 152) associated with the discourses of nursing research.

In our interview, Eve also criticised Kate’s text for being “evangelical.” This criticism is not surprising, since the excerpt that Eve drew our attention to reads more like a political diatribe than an academic review or argument, due to a number of features such as emotive language and a lack of documentation (see Prior, 1991). But the specific point we wish to note here is Kate’s repeated use, in this excerpt, of the first person plural form, ‘we’; this represents a pronounced switch from the use of the third person (‘the author’), which dominates the text up until this paragraph (number 24):

The language that was and still is used to educate midwives; that which is used in everyday midwifery practice, reflects the attitudes, influences and beliefs inherent in the context of maternity care provision dominated by a medical model. We fight for the implementation of more woman-centred models of care, but every time we open our mouths to speak, every time we write something down, we perpetuate the
principles of the reductionist model. Where does this language place women in their relationships with us? [our italics]

Kate seems to be using ‘we’ to refer to herself and her midwife colleagues, and possibly positioning her readers as also belonging to that professional group. By writing in a way that creates common ground between the writer and her imagined readers as opposed to a more remote, distancing approach, Kate may have been attempting to engage readers by creating a sense of what Hyland (1999) has called “disciplinary solidarity and shared endeavour” (p. 102)—in this case, a feminist or “sisterly” solidarity (Fuller & Lee, 1997, p. 2). Yet this positioning could be problematic for those readers who may themselves be senior academics in nursing but not necessarily midwives, or who may resist being aligned with ‘woman-centred models of care,’ or who might contest the notion that such models are necessarily in opposition to the dominant ‘medical model.’

In our interview, Eve was also highly critical of the following excerpts from Kate’s text, which she read aloud in a mocking tone:

(from paragraph 6)

The desire to collaborate with other health providers arose from a belief in woman-centred care... The process of networking... was a laborious one... However, the tenacity of the author... resulted in... [our italics].

(from paragraph 7)

Colleagues of the author, who also practice midwifery privately, have voiced frustration and concern over the lack of collegial and obstetric support such as this (Chang, 1993; Bennet, 1994; Vaughn, 1995). [our italics]

The first excerpt above prompted Eve to exclaim with much sarcasm “[Those] marvellous midwives!”—which indicates that the problem is not merely the awkward use of the third person again here but the emotive and somewhat heroic tone that Kate uses here in recounting her efforts. In the second excerpt above, the citations (‘Chang, 1993’ and so on) do not refer to publications or presentations by Kate’s colleagues but to conversations she had with them; this becomes clear in her reference list, where these citations are augmented only by the interlocutor’s first initial, Kate’s first initial and surname, and a city name. However, what bothered Eve was not Kate’s unfamiliarity with the textual convention of referencing such conversations (e.g., ‘personal communication’), but the practice of citing work colleagues who agreed with her views. Eve considered this an inappropriate attempt by Kate to “bolster” her “low self esteem.”

Taken together, Eve’s criticisms clearly indicate that Kate was having difficulty writing in ways that would be deemed sufficiently scholarly about her own experiences and perspectives and those that were, or were presumed to be, shared by her colleagues. Thus, in the case of practice-based research texts, addressing typical writing issues such as first- or third-person choices and citation conventions may require taking into account more complex issues to do with incorporating work-based knowledges and identities.

In contrast, Leanne’s text—which is of similar length to Kate’s—uses neither ‘the author’ nor ‘we,’ and only once uses ‘I.’ While Kate frequently uses the active voice and refers to herself and her colleagues, Leanne frequently uses the passive voice and refers to ‘the nurse’ or ‘nurses’ in a generic sense, without foregrounding herself as a member of that group. For example (paragraph 24):
The nurse is ideally placed to recognize whether a patient is truly suffering. Through knowing the patient the nurse has an understanding of the patient and recognizes the patient's unique individuality. [our italics]

Though Leanne’s text was rated very highly, it is worth asking whether a depersonalised approach that avoids self-mentions is necessarily appropriate for students who are writing about a workplace initiative that they themselves have led. In a recent article on professional doctorates in nursing, Yam (2005, p. 570) argues that students should be encouraged to “bring their own experience and practice problem during the course of study.” The fact that Kate’s attempt at doing this in her first semester assignment was considered unsuccessful raises the question of how students investigating a workplace issue can successfully articulate and incorporate their own professional expertise.

4.3. Using the literature

EAP research has investigated ways of incorporating and using literature in research articles and in Ph.D. theses (Dong, 1996; Swales, 1990, 2004; Thompson, 2005). While this research has provided insights into the overall structure of literature reviews and, more specifically, the links between citational practice, rhetorical purpose and authorial voice (Thompson, 2005), little is known as yet about how these matters are negotiated in theses that investigate work-based issues. In our data, some strong contrasts were evident between the poorly rated and the highly rated texts in terms of their use of literature.

In her poorly rated text, Kate’s use of the literature is limited. She never takes issue with any of the sources she cites, nor does she use these to build context theoretically. Instead, Kate uses the literature only to showcase her own workplace initiative, as indicated in the following brief excerpt from her 26th and 27th paragraphs:

*Literature has shown* that [obstetric] intervention rates are higher for privately insured women (references provided).

*If, as this literature suggests…, [then] it is possible that this group of women may be disadvantaged in terms of information provision. In the workplace of the author, open communication and information sharing between mothers, fathers, obstetricians and midwives is encouraged from the first contact.* [our italics]

In the above example, Kate brings in a point from the literature she cites—namely, that obstetric interventions are more common among a certain group of women—and then uses that point as the rationale for the workplace initiative that is her main focus, which involved ensuring that such women would be informed of their options.

In contrast, Leanne does, in a sense, critique the literature, at least in terms of its value, or lack of value, to her research topic. She uses the literature to set a theoretical context for her research project—for example, by assessing the applicability or otherwise of the literature on suffering to the patient group being researched, as indicated in the following excerpt from her 25th paragraph:

*Cassell* suggests that one way to relieve suffering is to encourage the sufferers to give up their sense of the future and place themselves in the present. *This is not an effective strategy for… patients [with a particular illness] who are struggling to cope with [their treatment] regime and subsequent changes to lifestyle.* [our italics]
In her subsequent paragraph, Leanne uses the literature to build a case for the research that she is undertaking:

_**Cassell further explains** that … For example … [t]he nurse must be able to identify the patient’s method of coping with [type of illness] and support them in his or her personal quest to reduce suffering. _**The ways in which nurses can assist patients warrants further investigation.** ➔ [Eve’s tick of approval; our italics]

These two factors—adopting a somewhat more critical stance toward the literature and using it to set the groundwork for further inquiry—are likely to have contributed to Eve’s much higher rating of Leanne’s text. Though Eve did not comment on these two factors as such, in our interview Eve bemoaned the fact that many of the students’ literature reviews were merely descriptive, saying “they need to go further.” Eve had difficulty articulating exactly what she was after, but thesis supervisors generally expect postgraduate research texts to display “wide and critical reading which serves to justify the [research] project” (Cadman, 2002, p. 91).

Although Kate’s use of literature is clearly problematic for the reasons described above, it is important to note that these problems seem to arise from her attempts to integrate the domains of the workplace, the profession, and the academy—which is what the new professional doctorates are supposed to be doing, according to Lee et al. (2000). However, Kate’s text failed to move beyond a local concern with the actualities of the writer’s own workplace project by exploring, for example, the concepts and theories underpinning the project, or the potentially generalisable issues that may be relevant in other workplaces or regions. Rather than identifying a clear problem for investigation, Kate’s text focuses on the establishment of a new unit in her workplace, which, it becomes clear as the text progresses, Kate considers to have been successful; she intends to retrospectively analyse the ‘important elements’ involved in setting it up, and her own contribution to this process is featured prominently in the text. Indeed, she seems to emphasise that she has already found the solution; she fails to consider any remaining problems that her workplace initiative may not yet have fully solved.

In her written comments on Kate’s text, Eve criticised “the interjection of too many personal comments”; and in our interview, Eve criticised Kate’s practice of “referring [her] own experiences,” which Eve considered to be “egocentric.” Thus, Eve’s negative evaluation of Kate’s text may have to do with not only Kate’s style of writing but also, as mentioned in Section 4.1, the type of knowledge on which her text largely draws, both of which are overtly personalised. Kate’s contested text seems to be underpinned by a view of knowledge that is “rooted in lived experience” and realised through “narrative accounts of activities situated in time and place,” using first-person references to the writer “as a primary participant in these processes” (Ivanic & Camps, 2001, p. 20). This sort of knowledge is likely to feature within practice-based research that investigates programmes or issues in the students’ own workplaces. Yet scholarly readers expect more of postgraduate research texts than just narrated accounts of lived experience, even when these appear to be ‘supported’ by academic literature, as Kate’s case highlights. It seems that a key challenge for practice-based researchers is how to go about adopting or adapting textual conventions so that one’s own, and one’s colleagues’, professional expertise can be reconfigured as legitimate academic knowledge.
Eve’s comments on another excerpt from Kate’s text underscore problems that Kate had in using literature for academic argumentation. The following is from the 24th paragraph of Kate’s text:

Midwives who practice out of a hospital setting—who change practice contexts—have the opportunity to develop new ways of knowing, of being with women. This can include the way in which they speak with women. Because language reflects and shapes our reality, truthful language that puts the mother and woman at the centre tends to be humble language where the midwife or doctor is not the star of the performance (Carboon, 1999; Zeidstein, 1998). How?? Argue these points rather than merely assert them. Discuss. [Eve added the underlining and comments in italics].

Eve’s written comments here challenge the categorical claims that Kate is making with strong certainty. In our interview, Eve mentioned this excerpt as an example of why she was so frustrated by Kate’s text—it needed to provide evidence, she said, and “pull together a… deep argument!” In our interview with Kate she too mentioned this excerpt, but she clearly did not agree with, or did not fully understand, Eve’s written comment about arguing rather than asserting—as Kate put it, “[sigh] I mean I don’t know that they are assertions.” Kate seemed to think that because she had included references she was fulfilling the requirements of an academic literature review, and she was at a loss as to why Eve thought the paragraph did not constitute an argument and required further elaboration. The reasons why Kate may have found it difficult to understand or accept Eve’s criticism are worth further discussion because they illuminate some of the complications of incorporating literature into practice-based research texts.

Kate may have believed that her argument was sufficiently academic because she had incorporated literature from respected journals. For example, the Zeidstein (1998) reference in the above excerpt is from a midwifery journal that is a widely cited resource in its field. However, when we looked up the Zeidstein reference, we found that it is not a research article but a reprinted editorial written in a highly journalistic style, as evident in its opening lines: “‘Delivery!!!’ That shrill pronouncement comes resonating down the hallways of labour and delivery floors everywhere” (Zeidstein, 1998, p. 418). From Kate’s perspective as a practitioner, it may have seemed effective to put forward an argument from a well-reputed journal, but from Eve’s perspective as an academic, it may have seemed ineffective to put forward an argument from a reprinted editorial—which, given its genre, was unlikely to be rigorous empirically or theoretically. Thus, there is the question of which professional literature genres will count as legitimate academic sources, and whether practitioners and academics are likely to have a shared understanding of this.

Also, Kate may have considered her argument sufficiently academic because she had in fact undertaken a number of direct ‘intertextual borrowings’ (Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004). An example of this is clearly evident when the final sentence in Kate’s excerpt above is compared to the following excerpt from Zeidstein (1998): “Truthful language that puts the mother and woman at the centre is a humble language where the midwife is not the star of the performance” (p. 418). While this level of ‘borrowing’ could, in many university contexts, lead to charges of plagiarism, the point we wish to raise here is that problems negotiating intertextuality in practice-based research may indicate difficulties in documenting those ideas or practices that seem to be ‘common knowledge’ within students’ workplace contexts, yet not readily traceable to scholarly research in their field.
Problems with literature use may be further complicated in research projects in which the disciplinary or professional area is itself highly politicised, or the research approach, argument or even just the topic is considered highly contentious. In this case, Kate’s research sought to validate midwifery knowledge—and in so doing, to challenge its historically subjugated position within the more dominant health and nursing discourses (see Mackenzie, 2004). Yet as we have seen, Kate seemed ill-prepared as a writer to challenge these dominant discourses in ways that would be considered persuasive to her academic marker (whose expertise was in nursing, not midwifery). Leanne (also in nursing) seemed able to convey a greater sense of critical authority in her writing, but her task may have been less daunting than Kate’s in large part because her research did not attempt to counter well-established, hegemonic discourses, as Kate’s did. Thus the challenges of writing practice-based research may be intensified for practitioner-researchers whose projects aim to reconfigure powerful hierarchies of knowledge.

In sum, practitioners and academics may have divergent understandings as to what counts as legitimate with regard to types of literature, knowledge, knowers, evidence, intertextual practices, and argumentation. Because these sorts of issues are likely to arise when EAP specialists are called upon to assist research students with their writing difficulties, a greater understanding is needed about how professional and academic knowledges can be successfully interwoven in research texts by students undertaking practice-oriented degrees.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to identify key challenges of writing practice-based research by analysing two professional doctorate assignments (written in the students’ first language), taking into account the disciplinary marker’s evaluative comments. Our analysis critically examined three key aspects of the texts: research framing and text structure, with Kate’s poorly rated text focusing on the writer’s own workplace, professional role and beliefs, but failing to explain their relevance to the specific investigation at hand or to broader issues; self-mentions, which in Kate’s text were frequent and awkward, either obscuring her own agency or narrowly positioning colleagues and readers alike; and the use of literature, which in Kate’s text involved little more than showcasing her own workplace initiative and uncritically incorporating some questionable sources.

While a close examination of just two student texts does not allow for strong claims or generalisations, the sorts of writing issues discussed in this article also feature in our larger corpus of data and in the countless student texts (and marker feedback) that we have analysed over years of teaching research writing. Thus taking a case study approach here has made it possible, we think, to begin to identify and exemplify key writing challenges that may arise when students are researching ‘real-world’ issues arising in their workplaces.

These writing challenges include the following: framing a real-world issue as a research problem that can be investigated; structuring the text so that the literature contextualises and illuminates that problem; referring to one’s own (and one’s colleagues’) work practices and perspectives without confusing or alienating academic readers; and linking action-knowledge with theory-knowledge—in other words, reflexively documenting professional expertise so that this can be ‘counted’ as knowledge in an academic sense and integrated effectively with published literature.
Crucial to these interrelated writing issues are questions of audience, which can be quite complex in the case of research that derives from, and is intended for, industry—yet is assessed by the university. Leanne told us that while she hoped that what she called her “end thesis work” would be read by other nurses, she considered her main audience to be academics; Kate, in contrast, wanted her doctorate to be read primarily by a range of health-related professionals, including midwives, obstetricians and health company managers. Though this sharp contrast in imagined audiences is evident throughout the two students’ texts, questions of audience were never mentioned by the marker in her feedback to the student writers, which raises questions of pedagogy and how EAP-style approaches can be of assistance.

The sort of text analysis presented in this article holds much promise as a learning tool for practitioners writing work-based doctorates, whether in their first language or in an additional language. In teaching writing within doctoral programs, we have found it productive to guide students through the process of analysing research texts, including their own and their peers’ draughts and assignments, together with marker feedback (see Nelson & San Miguel, 2003, for an account of how we used some excerpts from the student texts analysed here for teaching purposes). Students are prompted to consider “the types of choices writers make and the possible effects of these choices on [academic] readers” (Nelson & San Miguel, 2003, p. 132). Problematising textual practices does not mean presenting “‘good models’ to be imitated nor ‘bad models’ to be avoided, but rather [using] the texts to open up ways of talking about important writing issues such as writer identity” (p. 132). This approach has proven especially useful for cohorts of professional practitioners who have to write at a doctoral level, yet who tend to be unfamiliar with academic expectations of research genres generally.

Given the novelty and apparent hybridity of emerging research genres such as professional doctorates, the textual expectations may not be clear even to the experienced academics who are charged with supervising postgraduate researchers, since thesis supervisors like Eve are still developing their own understandings of what the finished products of these degrees might look like. In our study, students often said that they did not know exactly what sort of text they were expected to produce—and, in Eve’s words, “neither do we.” This confusion is perhaps not surprising given the complicated questions that are being asked about what research ought to look like when situated at the uneasy intersections between the academy and industry. In discussing some of the challenges of running the relatively new professional doctorate programmes, Winter et al. (2000) ask:

[H]ow (and how far) can we expand the key concepts of the academic culture to include a new category of work and a new body of potential students, without compromising what is valuable in that culture? Conversely, from the other end of the bridge being constructed between higher education and other workplaces, how far can those concepts be expanded without compromising what is valuable in practice? (p. 36)

It is our hope that, by illuminating mismatches between student writing and academic expectations, empirical studies like ours may provide a useful analytic framework for identifying and discussing key writing problems that thesis supervisors like Eve may note intuitively, but struggle to articulate in ways that will be clear and helpful to their students. Clarifying the parameters of what is expected by academics in the students’ disciplinary areas can in turn inform the teaching efforts of EAP practitioners when called upon to
assist students with research writing. These clarifying discussions are urgently needed in the case of practice-based research degrees, which are proliferating at a rapid rate (Usher, 2002) but whose textual requirements remain under-researched.

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