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Traversing the Doctorate

Reflections and Strategies
from Students, Supervisors
and Administrators

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10

Writing Regularly as a Thesis-Completion Strategy

Brian Martin

Introduction

In 2008, I had been supervising Ph.D. students for 20 years when I happened on a short book by Tara Gray (2005/2015) entitled *Publish & Flourish*. This led me to change my approach considerably. In supervising, I now focus more on the process of doing research, especially writing, and less on the content. The results have been positive.

First a bit of background. I am a social scientist, with a wide range of interests, and have supervised students on topics such as organic agriculture, science journalism, controversies over schizophrenia and public participation in local government. Most of my students have been in their 30s, 40s or 50s, and only a few have been primarily focused on an academic career.

Initially, my approach to supervision was fairly conventional. It involved helping students to choose and refine their topics, suggesting

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directions for investigating theory and collecting data, encouraging writing and giving feedback on drafts. I learned some obvious things, including that each student is different, and that there are some standard problems. A few students are highly organised and disciplined, and produce excellent draft chapters on schedule, but most experience periodic crises. For mature students, there are challenges of making money, rearing children and handling health and relationship problems. For writing their theses, though, the more serious obstacles were usually psychological, including low confidence and excessive perfectionism. Seldom did intellectual skills pose a serious limitation to progress.

After supervising for a number of years, I came to the conclusion that my role as supporter and encourager was usually more important than my role as intellectual guide. Most of my students were quite capable of doing the research, as long as they had the time and opportunities to apply themselves to doing it, so I tried to give plenty of encouragement for what they were doing well. Research shows that most people respond much more strongly to negatives than positives (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001); to counteract this tendency, it is important to accentuate positives. In teaching a class, hostile feedback from a couple of students will preoccupy a teacher more than positive comments from the majority. Similarly, annotating a draft thesis chapter with lots of criticisms and red ink may not be the best way to encourage better work, if it undermines confidence.

Another lesson was that there are exceptions to any rule. One or two students loved rigorous critical comment, and a few needed pressure more than encouragement.

The Writing Programme

In this context, I was inspired by Gray's book *Publish & Flourish*, which offers a 12-step plan to becoming a prolific scholar with the core being writing nearly every day. She built her plan on research carried out by a number of scholars, especially Robert Boice, a psychologist and educational researcher, and has carried out her own research (e.g., Gray, Madson, & Jackson, 2018). I obtained Boice's publications, including

several books (Boice, 1990, 2000) and articles (e.g., Boice, 1984), and contemplated their implications.

Boice, in the 1980s, observed new academics in the US, just starting out in their careers after their first appointments. He noticed that most struggled with the challenges of full-time teaching plus expectations to conduct a research programme and contribute to service, and research usually suffered the most. However, a few new academics seemed to find things much easier: it seemed they could be quite productive without as much stress as their colleagues.

What did these productive junior academics do differently than their colleagues? Boice extracted from his observations a key characteristic: they carried out their work bit by bit, over a period of time.

The usual approach undertaken by students and academics is to procrastinate and then, when a deadline approaches, put in long hours until the task is done. Lectures are prepared in lengthy sessions, often not long before they are delivered. Productive junior academics, in contrast, would start planning a lecture weeks or months in advance, maybe spending just five minutes jotting down some ideas one day, coming back to it another day and adding some more thoughts.

My interest was more in research than teaching. The usual approach, as spelled out by Boice, is to find big blocks of time, at least several hours, preferably an entire day or week, before beginning. Often, research is restricted to one day per week, or postponed until teaching is over or until a study-leave period. Procrastination is standard, especially when writing is concerned. A common refrain is that “I need to read more first.” One of my students delved into one theory after another, always reading more, seemingly to avoid writing a basic background chapter.

When deadlines loom, writing begins, in a process called bingeing. One student I met said she would postpone writing but then, when she started, she would write every available moment—in between her family responsibilities—for weeks, until she physically collapsed. Then she couldn't write for months.

Boice recommended a very different approach, involving brief sessions nearly every day. In essence, it is a philosophy of moderation, having affinities with Buddhism. The key obstacle for many writers

is getting started. Once beginning to write, it is easy to keep going. However, binge sessions are damaging, because they feel agonising and not to be repeated soon. Therefore, Boice advised stopping after a relatively short time. One chapter in his book *Advice for New Faculty Members* is titled “Stop.”

The idea in this approach is to turn writing into an ordinary daily routine rather than as a dreaded, onerous task. By making the sessions short, the task of writing is less daunting, making it easier to start.

Boice thought that if academics who had arrived at this approach on their own had prospered, then bingers might be able to adopt the same techniques, creating different habits with similar productivity and stress-reduction advantages. He showed many benefits from adopting a regular-writing habit. Productivity soared, and regular writers produced far more creative ideas.

One factor in explaining this improvement involves the way the mind works. Most mental processing is unconscious, creative thinking in particular (Claxton, 1997). When writing even for a few minutes, attention is directed at the issues addressed, and subsequently mind processes this material unconsciously, coming up with ideas that can be used in the next session.

I drew an analogy with sports such as running and swimming. Today every coach realises that daily training is essential to elite performance. No athlete can succeed without training, and training just once a week is inferior to daily training, even with the same total number of hours. No basketball coach thinks practising free throws for eight hours the night before a big game is sensible compared to 10 minutes per day over a month. The mind responds to training in roughly the same way as muscles, with progressive adaptation to heavier loads, yet many scholars think that one “research day” per week is a valid strategy. This might be similar to the way many amateur athletes trained a century ago, long superseded by modern athletic training principles.

Boice’s work is filled with insights, but is not inspiring prose. Gray took Boice’s ideas, added research findings of her own, and turned the regular-writing approach into an accessible plan. I was a convert, in part because years earlier I had accidentally hit upon a writing practice part of the way towards the Boice–Gray model.

Implementing the Writing Programme

My first step was to adopt the writing programme myself. This included keeping a record of the number of new words I wrote each day and the number of minutes it took me to write them. Boice and Gray say not to edit as you go along, but to write more freely, using the creative part of the mind and saving critical analysis until later. I set up a spreadsheet and started logging my daily word and minute totals, something I continue to do today (even as I write this chapter!).

After trying out the programme myself, I next pitched it to my Ph.D. students, telling them I had discovered a way to improve their productivity. As well as recommending daily writing—but not too much any day—and keeping a log of words and minutes, I invited them to send their logs to me every week. We could then have a discussion of how their writing had been going.

Boice, in one of his experiments, showed the dramatic advantages of regular writing. One group of academics, the controls, wrote in their usual way and produced just 17 pages of polished text per year, about half an article's worth. Members of another group were asked to write in brief regular sessions and produced an average of 64 pages of polished text per year, a tremendous improvement. Then there was a third group, whose members wrote in brief regular sessions and reported their logs to Boice every week. They produced an average of 157 pages per year. Boice's conclusion was that most writers need an external monitor in order to maintain the habit of regular writing. Relying on will-power alone is not reliable except for a small minority, most likely including the ones Boice had originally observed having low-stress high productivity.

Only some of my students were able to adopt the programme. I learned that although this approach is easy to describe, actually doing it can be incredibly challenging. The mind rebels against changing habits acquired over many years, including the pattern of binge-writing high school and undergraduate essays.

In my discussions with students about their writing, I gradually started probing into details of when, where, and how they wrote. This was giving more attention to the mechanics of writing and the writing

environment than I had previously ever considered. For example, we discovered that daily writing was best done in the morning, if possible, and before checking emails or searching the web. Distractions had to be minimised, for example by closing office doors and switching off phones.

Another obstacle is the capacity for critical analysis, which is well developed in social researchers. Critical examination of text is an important skill, one regularly practised, but it can hinder the free flow of ideas necessary to put down new words. To address this obstacle, I recommended having nothing nearby that was finished prose: no open books and no articles. I advised students against reading their own previous text prior to writing, because this too would obstruct fluency in creating new text. Instead, I advised, following Boice and Gray, preparing a dot-point plan for the day's writing, and relying entirely on this, not stopping to look up references or check points of fact, but just keep writing until the session was over.

The usual target was 5–20 minutes per day, typically averaging 10–20 words per minute. One day's output then might be 50–400 words, usually lower for those not writing in their native language. Chai, a Ph.D. student at a Thai university, visited Wollongong for a semester and adopted the writing programme. Writing in English, he could manage five words per minute. After returning to Thailand, and writing in Thai, he could go many times faster.

Writing 200 new words per day may not seem like a lot, but it adds up. Over a year, writing every day, it amounts to nearly 75,000 words, about the length of a Ph.D. thesis.

With my students, a lot of fine-tuning was involved, and I learned a lot sharing ideas with different students. For example, if there was a week when Kerryn reported writing on only two days, I would ask why, and we would explore options for improving the frequency. In doing this, the goal was writing regularly, even just five minutes per day, as the first priority, to develop the habit of writing. We would identify obstacles, for example, teaching or travel, and discuss ways of overcoming them. I would comment to students that this was an experimental process: we would see whether a change led to improvement; if not, we

would try something else. There was no single solution for every person or for every circumstance.

We also probed into thoughts that accompany writing. Most writers experience “self-talk,” which is a part of the mind generating thoughts that surface to consciousness. For writers, much self-talk is negative, for example “What I’m writing is crap” or “I’ll never get this published” or “I’m no good, so I might as well give up.” Negative self-talk can be a serious hindrance, and often leads to procrastination.

These thoughts can be countered by focusing attention on them and articulating arguments against their underlying assumptions, in the manner of cognitive behavioural therapy. Negative self-talk has been likened to a duck sitting on your shoulder talking into your ear, and there are notepads with the recommendation to “Shut the duck up.”

Keeping in Contact

In earlier years, I made contact with my Ph.D. students only occasionally, with a lengthy meeting every two or three weeks being a typical pattern, similar to that of most of my colleagues. In 2007, I agreed to supervise an honours student, Patrick, at one of the university’s remote campuses, in Bega, several hours’ drive south of Wollongong. Neither Patrick nor I had much likelihood of travelling in order to meet face to face, so I arranged to ring him every week at a regular time, to fit in between his casual work and other activities, including supporting his wife and four young children.

A weekly call, even a brief one, turned out to be far more effective than longer but less frequent meetings. We could talk about how he was going, with a prompt turnaround for issues that arose. It was so effective that I soon adopted the same approach with all my Ph.D. students, including Patrick when he started his doctorate the following year.

At the time, my supervision load was heavy, including 10 Ph.D. students for whom I was principal supervisor—and only one of them lived in Wollongong. The others were in cities across Australia. I arranged a weekly phone call with each student outside Wollongong, and a weekly

meeting with the one Wollongong resident. The weekly calls were of no fixed length, and varied from five minutes to an hour, probably averaging 20–30 minutes. This depended mainly on the student and how much they liked to talk, as well as what was happening with their studies and their lives. In my experience, weekly contact probably involved less total time than infrequent longer meetings.

Having more frequent contact is hardly new. In many scientific disciplines, students work with their supervisors nearly every day in the lab; apprenticeship is a hands-on affair. In the social sciences and humanities, though, many students work from home, and this was especially the case for my students who had careers and families and who lived outside Wollongong. For some of them, contact with me was their only regular contact with anyone at the university.

Meanwhile, I organised a writing group using the principles of the Boice–Gray high-output programme and advertised it for academics and research students in my faculty. Initially, there were two separate groups, one for academics and one for students. Later, to save time, I combined the groups, and it has turned out that mixing academics and research students in a writing group can be stimulating and productive. We meet weekly all year long to share experiences in writing and to comment on drafts of each other's writing. Most participants bring along a page of text for comment each week.

From the on-campus writing group, I learned the value of obtaining feedback from non-experts. Gray advises sending drafts of text first to non-experts and then, after making revisions, to experts. Non-experts can ask naive questions about the meaning of words or the flow of ideas, often picking up limitations that experts do not notice because they are so familiar with the field that they skip over omissions that stymie others.

In our writing group, we have had students or staff writing on topics ranging from Mandarin to military history. We can comment on each other's texts in terms of clarity and organisation, but only sometimes in terms of the content. This has proved remarkably stimulating.

My one Wollongong Ph.D. student attended, and also occasionally one of my other students when they visited, but for others in the group I was not in a formal supervisory role. I have always made clear that they should follow the advice of their supervisors and that our group

is meant to help with the process of writing, and only incidentally deal with matters of content. Nevertheless, our general discussions have covered a range of topics, for example, lengths of theses, thesis submission procedures, submitting articles to journals, choice of examiners, presentation of conference papers, and difficulties with university regulations. In this context, I and the other academics in the group act in a support role that contributes to students' greater understanding and skill in achieving their degrees and becoming better scholars.

Outcomes

Only some of my students took up the writing programme systematically and conscientiously. I learned from the faculty-wide group that although many started the programme, only some were able to change their habits and maintain the new habits—changing habits is difficult (Duhigg, 2012). For those who do, the results are just as dramatic as Boice's and Gray's research has shown. For example, Ian did his Ph.D. part-time because he was working, but nevertheless was able to write his whole thesis within a couple of years.

Brendan provides an excellent example of how to proceed. He wrote just 100 words or so each day, yet by the end of his first year he had 30,000 words. After he had finished a rough draft of chapter 3, for example, he would write each day on chapter 4 while putting in follow-up work on chapter 3 such as additional reading, checking of facts and revising the text. He did all this while his family grew from two to three children.

During the first year of his Ph.D., Brendan had a personal crisis that made him feel like taking a break from daily writing and possibly taking leave of absence from his Ph.D. studies. Knowing about research on how writing can help individuals deal with traumatic experiences (DeSalvo, 1999; Pennebaker, 1997, 2004), I suggested that he might write daily about his personal issues. He did and, to his surprise, within two weeks was able to return to writing on his thesis.

Majken was another student who followed the writing programme. I knew her before she began her Ph.D., and she joined a small online

writing group for researchers studying nonviolent action. In a year or so while working full-time in a completely different field, she wrote the major part of a book on nonviolence, which helped her obtain a scholarship at Wollongong.

Testimonials alone do not prove the effectiveness of a method. I have not tried to collect data on the effectiveness of the Boice–Gray programme because, so far as I’m concerned, they have already done sufficient research, and anyway I have too many other research projects. Still, it is comforting that my observations of the power of the programme are compatible with Boice’s and Gray’s conclusions.

Sceptics

The procrastination–bingeing approach to writing seems to be quite common among academics. Not only is it difficult to change to a regular-writing approach, my observation is that academics find making this switch more difficult than do research students. Academics have more entrenched habits and, furthermore, they are less likely to think of themselves as learners. The rhetoric of the Ph.D. is that it is training to be a researcher; hence, once the degree is obtained, the implication is that graduates should be able to fend for themselves without the need for close supervision. This of course is contrary to what Boice observed among new academics: most of them struggled. When students using the conventional procrastination–bingeing approach obtain their Ph.D.s, their habits are both entrenched and certified. Then, when they struggle in their academic careers in their initial post-Ph.D. years, they blame their workloads or themselves, not their writing habits.

When I’ve discussed the writing programme with successful researchers, only a few of them are interested. Indeed, some dismiss it out of hand, or come up with reasons why it won’t work. Only a minority seek out the research to see for themselves how and why it works.

I regularly hear objections based on unarticulated assumptions. The most common objection is that “I know what works for me, and I need big blocks of time.” Or they might say they have to collect data or read theory first. They might say they are too busy to write every day,

even after I point out that 10 minutes out of a day will not subtract much from the many hours they commit to meetings or marking assignments, or using social media for that matter.

Then there are those who learn about the programme, try to start but cannot. Some cannot even initiate a single session of writing, because this is not part of their usual sequence of procrastination and bingeing.

One factor in this resistance to regular writing is the belief, in many circles, in natural talent (Dweck, 2006). If academic success is due to superior intelligence, then those in the winner's circle are less likely to want to recognise that there are habits for doing research that can make a huge difference, habits that can enable seemingly ordinary students to become highly productive scholars. Athletes might once have relied on natural talent, but these days it is not enough, if it makes much difference at all. There is now a body of research on expert performance that suggests that the key is a particular type of practice, which involves concentrating intently on tackling challenges at the edge of one's abilities (Ericsson, Hoffman, Kozbelt, & Williams, 2018; for popular treatments, see Colvin, 2010; Coyle, 2009; Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Shenk, 2010; Syed, 2010). That is exactly what regular writing involves: writing is a form of thinking, aimed at addressing a challenging task.

Co-authoring

In many humanities disciplines, it is uncommon for supervisors to co-author publications with research students. This was certainly the case in my faculty at the University Wollongong. Indeed, for many years I avoided any suggestion of co-authoring, because I had written about exploitation of students, through so-called honorary authorship, or co-authorship that is not deserved, that is especially common in many scientific fields (Martin, 1986, 2013). Normally I agreed to write with students only after they had finished their degrees.

Then, some years ago, I had a conversation with Rob Whelan, a biologist whom I had known for many years, and who had become Dean of Science. He said that he and the other scientists he collaborated with preferred students to be sole authors of papers, but would co-author if

it increased the odds of students actually publishing their work. This seemed sensible to me, so when appropriate I made this possibility known to my students, with the proviso that I had to do my share of the work and they would be first author. This has worked out well.

After maintaining weekly contact with students over several years, our contact usually became sporadic after they submitted their theses, seemingly based on my assumption that the main job was done. I've now come to realise the value in maintaining a regular connection post-submission and sometimes after graduation, especially with students who have no other institutional form of support for their research. If developing a habit is key to improved productivity, and regular support and reinforcement are needed to maintain the habit, as Boice has stated, then it is unwise to cut off supervisory connections in a sudden way. How to proceed depends a lot on the student. Those going into non-research careers are in a different situation than those wanting to publish for career purposes or to communicate their findings to relevant audiences.

Obviously there is a limit to any policy of keeping regular connections with former students, otherwise I would be making dozens of calls every week. Many students go their own ways or find other sources of support. What I've learned is to try to think through the implications of the writing programme beyond the arbitrary bounds of Ph.D. candidature. Doing a Ph.D. is better thought of as a process of ongoing development rather than achieving a goal and saying, "That's it, I've arrived." Likewise, being a supervisor can be thought of as part of a longer-term process.

One great benefit of learning a new writing-research habit is that it can be used post-Ph.D. Some of my Ph.D. students, especially prior to 2008, faced many challenges in finishing their theses, but eventually succeeded. However, this did not lay a solid basis for subsequent research productivity. In many cases, I was no longer around to push them along, and they did not continue with the same intensity. With the writing programme, there are better odds of continuing with regular writing: a habit, once learned, can be picked up again even after a break.

Although I have learned a lot about how to use the writing programme, there is still much to learn. I've been using the programme myself for over a decade, and periodically obtain new insights in how to refine my approach to generating new research ideas, planning projects, switching between projects, writing while travelling and various other matters. Becoming a better writer, and a better researcher, is a lifelong process, with no end point. Why not start today?

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