

Doing academic writing

Blogs 2013 to 2025

Adrian Holliday

2025

Preface

This collection of blogs, published over ten years, have helped me to get on with my own writing projects. They are about how to do the writing, how to make the point I want to make, to get from one point to another, how to get past writer's block, how to get through that paragraph I have been staring at on the screen for days, how to conclude, and so on. In doing this, I try to take the advice that I have given to my students; but that is easier said than done. Sometimes writing the blog, in a different place with a different format, really helps me to rationalise - and also to work out new bits of advice to myself, which I think can then be useful to others. I am not therefore just writing the blog to myself. I am writing to an audience - of people, like me, who are struggling to write.

Audience is a key word here. There is and must always be an audience. Writing is communication. Reading is also communicating with the writer. How do we therefore write to enable this two-way communication? How do we elicit what we want readers to be thinking about what we are saying as we write to them? Who are our readers; and what do we want them to think as they read what we write? We also know what it is like to read. We read for different purposes; and the various parts of what we write have to be conscious of and achieve their particular purpose.

In the blogs I therefore deal with a number of things, some unexpected. This is not organised thematically but according to what emerged at the time of writing. This mirrors the way in which issues arise from the process. The connections I make, from decisions, boundaries, presentation, discipline, to planning, voice, submitting, where to write, and what can be learnt from conference presentations, are therefore wide and sometimes unexpected, and also connect with the community within which writing takes place. This resonates with my wider theme of small culture formation on the go - where writing is also an intercultural act of communicating and finding threads across boundaries.

As acknowledgement, I would like to give special thanks to all my research students, with whom I have shared the difficult but immensely exhilarating act of writing.

Adrian Holliday is Professor Emeritus at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, specialised in intercultural communication and ideology, discourses of culture, the politics of international English language education, English in the world, cultural imperialism, qualitative research methods, academic writing. More details can be found on his website, adrianholliday.com, and his current blogs at adrianholliday.com/blog.

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[1] Major decisions

At some point in writing one comes to the decision about whether to continue or just scrap the whole thing. I am writing a short article for a highly competitive journal. The editor has been helpful with the reviewers' comments and made his own suggestions about the changes I should make. This seems positive; and so I begin. But then the whole thing begins to change, and I begin to wonder if I really want to get into all this.

[2] Blogging and refining

The process of writing this blog in itself helps me to clear my head about my writing. I go back to the text, mindful of how struggling to meet the comments of reviewers leads to re-framing, cutting out even more of the dead wood and refining connections between ideas. But I still wonder why reviewers keep saying that readers cannot cope with difficult concepts, especially as I find some of the concepts difficult in articles which are published.

[3] Risking pushing boundaries

I am interested in a recent comment that it may be 'a little more difficult to re-sculpt a paper after review once you have done many'. I think this is very true if you are trying to push the boundaries. I am personally very confident that it is entirely possible for writers to bring change to established norms about what is publishable, especially with regard to research methodology and what counts as empirical evidence.

However, on the other side, reviewers, like the majority of academics who support the norm, can require a huge amount of conformity. This may seem like a conflict; but I think it is in effect the checks and balances that ensure the highest quality. I also believe that we can never just let anything go.

The risks for the adventurous writer are nevertheless considerable. There is the definite possibility of failure, and the loss of personal face which comes with that. And also having to bear the reviews which imply you are a novice in an establishment which you are trying to leave behind. Also, just not getting published at all.

Which reminds me - I have two reviews to write, which I am a couple of days late for! And I'm afraid to say that I will be quite harsh with writers who adhere to methodologies and ideas which I no longer approve of - not because I simply don't like them, but because I think they are no longer valid.

[4] Writing to learn

After recommending reject for an article I have reviewed for another journal, I consider again whether I should continue with the one I am writing. I see even more clearly why it might just be too far from what the journal in question can accept. But my reasons for continuing are elsewhere. There is still much for me to learn from the process, not just about writing, but also about the subject matter itself. In trying to push and squeeze my thoughts into another format, I have already developed my thinking. It is amazing that I am still working out exactly what it is that I am trying to say - struggling with the logic and with what actually can be said.

[5] How to present your material

As I continue to draft and re-draft my changes to suit the reviewers I eventually find alternative ways to present my material. The core is my grammar of culture. It is purposefully complex because the reality is not simple; so to find a way to present it simply - having being warned that the readers 'will not understand' - I have to find some ingenious way. I have to think of oral presentations when I seem to have been fairly successful in talking about the diagram display in a few words. But in the writing there can be no body language to indicate the essence of the grammar.

Then there is the temptation to fundamentally change the diagram. But this is not possible because I want to maintain the link to the original, which I want to keep as the core reference for anyone who wishes to look. But anyway in this process I am still learning about how the grammar works - or about how the relationships which the diagram tries to represent works.

[6] Perhaps getting nowhere

The more I reduce the text, the closer I get to seeing the bare bones of the argument; and I begin also to see its flaws. Well, they are not actually flaws; but the space isn't there to explain the connections as much as I feel necessary. The danger there would be that I would be criticised for superficiality. There is already a full discussion along the same lines on the internet.

Should I therefore let this go and resign myself to the fact that what I have to say here simply cannot be squeezed into the requirements of this journal? I have cut 500 words since the last posting, out of a total of 3500. And until recently I felt that by cutting and cutting I was getting to the core of the discussion and bringing greater clarity.

I am nevertheless going to put this aside at least for the moment, move onto the next project, and look back at it freshly later.

[7] Submitting to discipline

I don't want to give the impression that I'm giving up on a piece of writing because I'm not allowed by the journal to write in a way that represents my ideas. Finding it difficult to meet a particular editorial requirement does not mean believing that anything should go. The disciplines that publishers and the academic community impose on us help us to refine our ability to write. This does not mean that we shouldn't resist tradition; but we must master it before we can move against it.

A while ago I had a chapter published in an edited book which did not have a strong reviewing process. I was pleased to get it published quickly; but now I find it embar-

rassing to read. The style is repetitive and inarticulate. With another case I resubmitted it twice before it was published. I feel I was eventually 'successful' through a process of attrition; and I ended up publishing something which didn't fit what they wanted and had also moved away from what I wanted.

[8] Another block

Getting on well now with another article. This time I have actually been invited to write something which is at the centre of what I am interested in. I feel free to do this in my own way with the voice I like - personal and exploring. I started on my iPad, writing freely and developing ideas; but to get the bigger sense of how it looked I had to go to my laptop - and it began to look different. I began with listing points and sub-points to get down the basic ideas and structure of the argument, and then inserting paragraphs in different places. This has enabled me to build sometimes from the inside, and progress has been good. Yesterday, some of the main points became headings and the final shape sprang quickly into being. I even wrote an introduction in fifteen minutes. I only have three weeks. I use the Freedom software to keep me off the internet when I do my early morning stint.

But now, suddenly, a week from the deadline, I hit a block. The very core of what I want to say suddenly seems too difficult to put into words; and the whole fabric seems in danger of perishing. And once again I am stuck in the middle of a paragraph, and might be there for days. Perhaps what I am trying to say, and what I have been maintaining for years, is actually unnecessary, not right at all.

[9] And then ... in simple terms

And then, as a result of writing this blog, I am sure, suddenly, clarity of thinking springs into place and the paragraph moves on. What makes it work is finding simple things to say it. First it was all about ideology and discourse and how researchers and subjects are all implicated - when talking about language and culture. Saying that was just too difficult. So instead I say that people are just people and have all sorts of views and will say different things at different times ...

And so on. The whole thing is about drawing attention to complexity, but managing somehow to do this in simple language.

[10] Planning ahead

I have found it increasingly hard to get writing done recently. This is probably because I'm writing shorter pieces. The same goes for a proliferation of conference and seminar presentations. I spend many anxious hours trying to get ideas in the

right order and to communicate something clear to the audience in question. What I want to say is not an easy matter, and so often departs significantly from the dominant discourse.

What I am therefore doing is taking more time planning. Oral presentations without PowerPoint are much easier - just a series of points that I can talk to. So I am using this device - bullet-pointed short statements, with indents to two or three levels, which I can move around. And before bothering with slides and images.

[11] Planning a presentation

Following my last blog about using bullet pointed notes to plan presentations and papers, it's helpful to think of this as writing a storyboard - saying what sorts of images and text should go into the PowerPoint slides, making you think about the best images and text images to convey ideas in a very brief time.

Well at the end of this advice to self, I still ended up making changes this morning between having breakfast and going out to actually do the presentation - after having sent the final version last night - so all the palaver again of putting a copy on two memory sticks, and making sure that each one worked, and that it was the new version.

I now find that once I have the PowerPoint finalised, the best thing is to print it out, six slides to a page, and then make notes on the printout to remind me what to say. It was the process of doing this at breakfast that made me realise that something was missing. So for this reason I had to change the PowerPoint again. This required taking an image from a previous PowerPoint but then editing it, removing an arrow and moving another arrow into another position, shortening it and putting new text in. Because I now had certainty it took about 15 minutes. Then ... I wasn't going to print it out again, so I wrote onto the original printout where the changes had been made.

[12] Finding a new voice

Feeling good. Yesterday morning I wrote an email to the editor regarding a book chapter I'm writing, to say I had to withdraw. I'd been struggling through three different formats for the chapter for over a month and got nowhere. I'd already asked for a two week extension. All my bullets and planning had come to nothing.

I didn't send the email. I thought at the last moment that a chapter on researching culture was really an opportunity not to be given up. Then a new idea emerged. I'd been spending too much time on critiquing how it should not be done, getting literally bogged down in all sorts of old arguments that were taking me nowhere new. Now I realise that this has been completely the wrong starting place. I have a work-

able picture of culture through my grammar which provides a ready framework for suggesting research ideas and methodology - starting from the beginning to say what can be done and how.

So I have started all over again from the beginning. I've discarded all the clutter of the old notes. My new ploy is to build my ideas gradually through plain sentences, and doing something that always works for me - writing about an object, a piece of data, a diagram, an image, and, in this case, the grammar itself. My mind has cleared; and I've recovered the practice of writing at least something every morning immediately after getting up or just before going out. There is now a flow of writing that I haven't experienced for a long time. This is now something that I really want to write, and which can be used in different ways in the future even if the editor doesn't feel that it's quite what they want.

[\[13\] Submitting](#)

Following my last post, perhaps two weeks later, and the shortest time I in which I think I have ever completed an article, I submitted a draft to the book editor. It certainly helped that they had asked for a draft. With it I explained that I had almost emailed to say that I was going to resign. I also explained my rationale for having gone through about three different formats and had now done something that was quite different to the original abstract. I found it good to be able to do this. I wanted to lay bare my thinking a bit, so at least there would be some principle to fall back on in case it was rejected.

I had continued to write the piece in fits and starts; but always managed to get on with it - and quite suddenly - when I remembered the quiet sentence by sentence voice I had acquired. A bit like writing a letter or even a blog like this one. And I finished it quite suddenly, about a day before I had finally imagined. In the process all sorts of distraction activities had taken place. I make it sound as though these happened to me rather than me doing them because that's a bit how it has been.

I downloaded perhaps for the third time the Documents to Go app on my iPad, worked out how to sync it with Dropbox, after trying Google Drive not very successfully - it's so slow. This did mean that I could actually edit the text on my iPad occasionally, and was actually able to move ahead in this way. Though in the middle of all this I was trying other writing apps, yet again, to get better margins and a better interface with all my beloved shortcuts. I also downloaded the Endnote app and worked out how to sync it and can now get all my references there. I guess all of this was more productive than just vacuuming, tidying my office, and so on.

Well I got a response from the editor last night, just about 24 hours after submitting; and after a quick read they said they liked it! The feeling of calm was immense.

[14] Stuck in reflection

I had just finished an article which is based on several presentations I have given recently. This is to go on my website. It is actually taking one of the narratives from my recent book and developing it further - relating it more precisely to discourses of culture and then to the different worlds of reality and unreality at the end of my 2011 book¹. As always this activity has taken my thinking further. This is a reason for not just writing for publication. Writing in itself helps tremendously to move things on.

So what is the reason for getting stuck in the final section for over a week? I decided to write a postscript on the nature of the narratives themselves. I read in a recent book a critique on the way that I have been writing them. This comes from someone who engages with my work in some detail - and has actually read it in some detail.

So I am very prepared to address very seriously the accusation that almost all the narratives are polarised to a degree between Western and non-Western characters - and that the former are far less developed and suffer greatly from being painted as lacking in understanding - whereas the latter always do well and come out on top. Well, this is true. So what am I doing? Well I know what I'm doing; but can I explain it? So this is what I'm finding so difficult to write. Am I really West bashing? I don't think I really am; but can I explain it? I have to explain it.

Also, why am I getting into such a tiz about something that I'm not even publishing? It's going to be on my website; so the quality has to be very high; and I don't have reviewers to check on that. I can though choose to make the postscript into a separate article.

Perhaps more importantly, this has set me thinking more about this West-rest relationship and my place in it. This is all to do with the intricacies of the 'West as steward' discourse. I need to give three presentations in Helsinki in two weeks' time; and I can see a new idea coming along about the very complex Othering issues that arise out of this.

[15] Blogging does help ... and cafés and music

It certainly does help to clear the air and move on in writing by writing a blog about it. Other things too. Sitting in a café - that hour or so, or even half an hour of stolen time - alone but with lots of people - especially if one is writing about people - and not being able to get up and do something else too easily, without packing things up. And also listening to music - Fayrooz, Um Kalthoum, Marzieh, The Cream ... and so on.. I have the music on my phone set to random tracks ... so lots of other things ... but I smile most when those come up.

¹ *Intercultural communication and ideology*, Sage.

[16] Small steps, abstracts and positioning

Very small things can help in getting on with writing. I was equally stuck on writing a new chapter for a book, on appropriate methodology, which I should know all about, and writing a small abstract for our upcoming Cutting Edges conference. Then I suddenly realised they should both be the same. I did the abstract then very quickly; and now I know how to proceed in the chapter.

Then, during our research student conference last Friday, when I had to focus on the excellent papers in a particular way because I had to sum up at the end of the conference - I realised it was all about positioning. In three short papers, researchers were making small decisions about where to stand, how to look at their slides, how to look at the audience, how to talk about one to the other. There was a huge physicality here which mirrored how researchers must position themselves in their writing. And the abstract for the conference paper is a major part of this.

So, I have puzzled at how conference presentations can really be preparation for publication - that is, in disciplines like mine where you don't write the paper first, and there often is hardly any discussion afterwards. It is the notes, the title, the slides and so on, and thinking how to manipulate these for the audience, which practice the positions which will be played out in the written piece. It is like a field enactment of the eventual article, chapter or thesis.

This is why the conference presentation is better not to be a report of research, but instead a positioning of the research.

[17] Every minute counts

I have long realised that putting aside longer periods of time doesn't necessarily mean writing more. On the other hand not letting opportunities pass is crucial. This morning, fifteen minutes before going out I opened my laptop and wrote a paragraph. This was after two hours yesterday seeking out a chapter in a book and then taking notes, and then an evening of having the time but not getting anything done. So I read the student work I needed to for today last night; and that gave me extra time this morning. But it wasn't until just before going out that I made the paragraph. Somehow it was the urgency that made it work.

[18] What I must always do and not do

I need to learn the lesson that I expect of my students - and that they expect of their students. I should never start a paragraph without a key sentence that states how ... And even now I'm finding it hard to say. Ok, there has to be a statement at the beginning of each paragraph, or very near the beginning, like in the second

sentence, which says what the paragraph is saying and how this links to the last one. And if it's the beginning of a section. It has to say what the section is saying and how it links to the last one - and this will be closer to the message of the whole piece. This is not gratuitous signposting. It's communicating with an audience.

Another useful thing is always to write the paragraph or section in response to an imagined question from a reader who is likely to disagree with you but who is willing to be convinced.

And what I must not do - ever again.

Open a document in Pages on my iPad, which I've neatly saved to Dropbox, which has Endnote fields in it, and then save it back into Word when I've finished editing, and then cut and paste the changed paragraph into the document on my laptop with the Endnote fields still in it. I did this yesterday. At first it looked good. All the fields were still there. But when when I updated the citations almost every one in the document was hit by something like a stroke or seizure. They not only moved to other places in the document; but the page references attached themselves to different authors. It took me a good hour or two to cut and paste the reference fields from an earlier version. Yes, always important to have an earlier version. And I could only do this when the document had been completely cleaned of fields.

Of course I could just use Documents to Go, which keeps all the Endnote fields and formatting intact. But I hate it because it doesn't have margins and also doesn't really work with my keyboard shortcuts, of which I have about 117. They work a bit, for perhaps one or two times. Then the app just seems to get tired; and they stop working completely.

[\[19\] Themes, technology, bits of text, and multiple sites](#)

It's getting boring to say that I almost gave up completely yet again, on a piece I have been writing for an edited book. I got to the point where I thought dementia might be setting in as I struggled with a couple of paragraphs and two or three organisational structures and seemed to spend an awful long time getting nowhere. I even thought of giving up my entire academic career!

Then it suddenly began to fall into place and move on quickly. It's odd that when you are stuck you wonder how you ever managed to write anything in the past. And now even completely new ideas are emerging. With my newly positive mind I can say that writing is always a good way to develop ideas.

So what did it? A technological breakthrough of huge dimension. (I am being ironic here.) In my last blog I described making an appalling mess of moving text from my laptop to my iPad while using Endnote. I consulted the Endnote email help and got an immediate response. Convert the citation fields into unformatted mode. Then

they can go anywhere without being corrupted, and be brought back again and be formatted perfectly. Well, it works. Moreover, you can edit the fields directly in the text once you understand the fairly simple grammar. You can also bring references in from the Endnote app on your iPad. This means I can use Pages on my iPad and really get to like it. I can curl up on the sofa while watching television, sit in easy chairs in the café, with my iPad mini - and it has to be mini - on my knee and write.

This brings the text down to a small size on a small screen - almost like scribbling on bits of paper - and is just another place to write.

But this is just the technology. I had ended up with a text full of bits and pieces, some of course pulled from previous writing, quite jumbled, with a very unconvincing argument to bind it together. I knew it was all relevant; but much of it was quite old, some of it far too theoretical without examples. An idea came at the usual time, about five or six in the morning, which was the key to the whole lot - and also a strategy - to treat it all like qualitative data and arrange it thematically, and develop the main idea all the way through. As with writing qualitative data, juxtaposing the various bits, mixing ideas and examples, began to generate something completely new.

So now I feel rejuvenated, with a new idea, and dementia put off for at least a while.

[\[20\] Conference presentations that never really get there](#)

So many conference presentations that spend ages on theory and methodology that we've all heard before, and don't get to the really interesting data and findings until right at the end. Well perhaps I did this myself. Should always take the courage to begin with the data, the narratives, images, or whatever. Begin with the points.

[\[21\] Moving on](#)

As I get into writing a new paper I am determined to continue to move forward in developing a more personal and less cluttered writing style. The initial problem is the huge backstory and the traditional expectation for literature review and arrangement of empirical evidence. What I have to do is to take everything I know about using evidence, making claims, showing that I have read, acknowledging scholarship, allowing my data to have its own space, and giving full weight to the massive paradigm change that marks my discipline - and make it work in a different way to work in a more personal and less cluttered style.

In essence, then, I need to take the deeper principles of scholarly writing and then re-apply them to a more personal style. I then find myself following a train of thought that leads more naturally from one step to the next - why did I ask the questions I am asking, where do they come from, what the implications are for how

I think about my participants, and so on. And then, as I cite someone, I have to think about that too, and how it relates to my whole project.

This then leads me to see something I hadn't seen before; and I begin to use some of the detail of what this person says to help me to move to the next stage. Then, the next day, I listen to an inspiring presentation from a research student, which also has huge impact on this process. I move therefore slowly, from one thought to another; but there is a more refreshing sense-making.

[22] The pleasure of writing - shortening and refining

As I get to the last part of writing the third edition of my Qualitative Research book I can reflect on what a pleasurable experience it has been. Initially there were difficult thickets of old writing that had to be cut through and rooted out, once the roots could be found. But then there was the easier task of just finding better ways to say things.

Also I have been collecting some new material through interviews with researchers. When the mind is fresh there is also some appreciation of the skill of being able to get to the core of what they are saying - again, cutting and cutting, carving and polishing, until it is found. Reading and making sense, and then finding the best way to present what they have to say and to put into words what I want to say about it - and the courage that that takes.

I am reminded of the sculptor who gets to an imagined shape in the middle of a block of marble. I work completely on the screen, never printing out anything. But I find occasionally using the quick Notes app on my Mac and iPad, helpful. The image on the screen is like my canvas or block of marble. But I can also look at it in different forms and materials by sometimes working on the same text that has been synced to my iPad - where it really is like an archetypal tablet that I can place on my knee wherever I'm sitting and work on the text as if on a piece of stone.

All of this though sometimes just doesn't really work for days and days. Then when it does everything is ok again.

[23] Final submission

This evening I sent of the manuscript for the third edition of my qualitative research book to the publisher. Right on time - well after getting a month's extension about six weeks ago. The whole thing took me from the beginning of August. The final steps were doing short conclusions and some activities for each chapter to help readers find their way around. This made me look again at the content of each chapter; and I was surprised to find some places that still needed some serious editing. These were mainly remains of old literature review sections that were still

cluttered with awful thickets of quotations, that needed clearing, rebuilding and serious shortening. For the last week I've been hovering around within 1,000 words over the required limit. Finally I got it down to 124 words over. I also had to add in about 1000 words of material from two crucial last-minute email interviews.

I sent off three files - a pdf so that they can see the layout in case the word documents wandered a bit. (I had included all the figures in the text.) Then the original word document with all the Endnote fields, in case they might be of some use; and a document with all the Endnote fields converted into plain text.

Writing this helps me to get closure - and on to the next writing task.

[\[24\] Returning to recent writing](#)

I'm returning to a piece of writing I started in April and then had to leave because of other commitments. Since then my ideas have moved on as a result of more recent research - mainly the stuff about blocks and threads. Now I have a new deadline to finish this by the end of the month, after having negotiated more time some time ago.

The original text is not bad at all, based on the paper I gave in Malaysia, and trying to use a more personal voice; and I can see now how to complete the paper as it stood at that time - better than I could then. But how can I go ahead and not get my new ideas in. They don't change things. They add a new layer that gives much more sense.

I have to work at this. Something better must come out of it.

It helps me to write this. Perhaps being able to put the actual problem itself into writing is the thing to do.

[\[25\] Getting a new storyline](#)

Still struggling with this text. It should be obvious; but every time I still have to remind myself all over again. The answer is to create a storyline. And every time there is a new idea or concept there needs to be a revised, new storyline. I think I have worked out what the new storyline will be. Now I have to work out how to re-organise, to re-arrange, to re-design the order of the material that I already have, to fit the storyline. Then I need to work out new transitions. It's more difficult than it sounds.

[26] Positioning and characterisation

Now getting to the end of the piece I am writing. There is no way I can miss the deadline of the end of this weekend. It's good that I have the PowerPoint notes of what was I think quite a good conference presentation that the paper is based upon. However, building in my new ideas about blocks and threads has continued to be problematic. The good thing is that I am learning more about the concept in trying to do this. To make it work though, in the last part of the paper, I have to make a lot of decisions about how to arrange the material. There are people and their thoughts that need to be positioned alongside things that I have recently read. I have to create new characters that can best represent the thinking that continues to develop as I write. And all the way through I have to do this in a way that also forces me into seeing things in a different and better way. There are two protagonists and an event. The event is becoming clear in my mind; but I have to look for names for the characters that will lead both the reader and myself to think differently about it.

This is the sort of creative process that all writers of qualitative research need to get into. It is also so important to be able to talk about it. As supervisors too we are supposed to demonstrate the process of doing our research to our students - to try and lay bare our craft for them. It helped me so much to explain what I was doing to my student in our tutorial yesterday - and also trying to make it relevant, I hope, to what she was doing. Arranging complicated material, finding the best way to represent it in text, and keeping the right balance between our own and other voices.

[27] Stepping outside the literal

Writing with another person is a wonderful thing to do when thoughts match across space, time, personal background and experience. It takes care of a lot of the 'How is it possible to write?' need to reflect out loud - which has been a purpose of this blog. But one can't speak to one's co-writer whenever one wants because we all have the rest of our lives to get on with. And sometimes both of you need to go elsewhere to sort things out.

Writing this blog therefore now has an extra audience - everyone out there who might be interested plus my co-writer. It's like showing to her what I am writing to others. All these different levels and types of sense making.

So here I am - and I get this phrase from my co-writer. Here I am, still stuck in a paragraph, having moved something from one place to another, and having worked out that there are very different alternative interpretations of a particular piece of data, and that part of the important thing to write is that there *are* two interpretations, at least, and why these are important to write about.

What makes writing particularly difficult is leaving behind the literal meaning of things. Nothing is accepted at face value. In this case there is an interview, and it's no longer even clear that we the interviewers can just look at them the people we are interviewing and summarise what they say. This is not just 'political correctness gone mad' but a genuine desire to get to the bottom of what's going on between people.

[\[28\] Writing out of sense-making](#)

We co-writers spend weeks trying to work out between us what is going on in an interview that we are both taking part in. We talk and look and read and listen again and again and again. We unravel our own thinking and learn more about what might be going on with the people we are researching. We discover how we have been cautious to raise issues that the other might disagree with. And then we discover how much we agree and think alike when we didn't think we did. We cross large spaces to find each other's thinking. And then suddenly there is almost a text that we both almost like. We both write into it. The laying bare of making sense takes us to new understandings. It is then worth the time that we spend. And we hope that the text will sustain.

[\[29\] The final forming](#)

Then, when you have a text that you almost like, it needs the final forming - shaving, cutting, sharpening, bringing down to the size that fits. The bringing together of the total form into a whole single body. Designing it for the reader. And in doing this you may find more meaning and understanding. You may need to go back again before you can go forward.

So many images and memories continue to come into this process. The last time other readers saw and judged your text. What they seemed to miss and what you found you had not said. The times you spoke to audiences and joined discussions, and what they took and what they didn't. Even small comments in coffee queues. The turns of phrase that worked, the odd scribbles. Even the advice of long since teachers and elders - telling you where to leave in and take out commas, where you said too much and left too little. Philosophers talking about scripts. Ancient texts with notes in margins. Exercise books with lines and squares. Inkwells and blots. And, today, screens, fonts and windows join the fascination. And then, sometimes, the huge emptiness when you cannot even look at the text for days.

So back to the co-writer for reassurance. Back to the blog to find clarity. Back to the café to watch people. Back to old Khayyam and the moving finger.

[30] Writing new thinking

One of my colleagues noted my reference to Omar Khayyam at the end of my last blog - 'The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on', and about not being able to 'cancel half a line'. The past cannot be changed. But in the process of writing about it, one's thinking certainly can change.

There are so many layers in the brief interview events we are writing about; and taking the time necessary to edit continues to reveal more - not only about what is going on with the people we are talking to, but also what we learn about ourselves as researchers, what *we* are doing in the conversation, and what we therefore need to do in the future.

The transcript of the interview is only the beginning. In writing about it so much more comes into view. Seeing all of us in the interview as small culture formation on the go is liberating and disciplining. The close editing of what we can say about the interview comes down to the deep nuances of the nature of evidence, and prejudice, and what can be claimed. But it also takes in what we are able to know about a wider world.

Sorting out 'grand narratives' from 'personal narratives' from discourses may seem inconsequential theorising. Sorting the winks from the twitches in Geertz's terms. But this is getting to the bottom of things; and it does help us unravel the deep architecture of cultural prejudice.

And then, one of the people we interviewed walks by at the very moment that I'm struggling with the text. We talk about it, as much as I can say, just for a moment. It was a year and a half ago. She may have long forgotten what she said. But I am reminded about her being a person among other people. And the text of the interview becomes even more related to all the other things that are happening; and that becomes part of the unravelling.

[31] The value of painful review

Following the theme that something can be made of everything. My co-author and I have just finished revising another article. As is often the case when trying to break new ground, one of the reviews is negative. 'What is the point of this paper? It doesn't seem to make any worthwhile contribution.'

However, once we have got over the initial anger, good things can come out of it. I hope that this can also apply to difficult vivas and research review meetings.

The important question to ask is: 'Why didn't this particular audience understand what we were trying to say?' It is then that the interesting stuff can begin. When we look in detail through the text that we submitted, we discover a number of things we

didn't see before. We are looking with new eyes now - the imagined eyes of that audience that didn't understand us. It is indeed true that we didn't actually explicitly make the points that we thought that we had. Sometimes the points aren't there at all. Sometimes they're in places where they don't make sense, or not in the places where they would make sense.

Then, when we put in the points that we had forgotten to make, other things begin to emerge - new relationships and connections that had not been clear before. Moving things around, thinking laterally about the text, brings new thinking and takes us forward to new places. We end up with a new title and a new core idea. It's not easy. It might not come right until the fourth, fifth or sixth edit. But immensely worth all the work.

So thank you to that negative reviewer. Without you we wouldn't have a better article with improved and even new ideas!

[32] 'In my mind's eye'

'In my mind's eye' is a common expression that I heard my parents' generation use, which means, I think, imagining visual images or 'seeing' ideas and arguments. I experienced an excellent example of this recently at a seminar for doctoral research supervisors. Most of the event was quite remarkably paperless and apparently they keep all their documents safely stored online so that they don't have to be printed. In the workshops and the plenary sessions I attended PowerPoint or flip charts weren't used at all.

There was one particular session which I found quite remarkable. Two colleagues presented ideas about the structure of the thesis. They sat side by side and spoke quite freely, though at the same time with huge precision. The first one spoke about his experience of an experimental design, and said that this was well represented by one of several models that his colleague, sitting next to him, had found on the internet. The colleague had it on the screen of his iPad which was facing him on the table. The first speaker was able to look over and also see it. The conversation between them went something like this, as they both looked at the screen that the audience couldn't see:

C1: Yes, there it is. It has an introduction, a context chapter, three experiments and a conclusion.

C2: And there's also a second model here, which I suppose is for the humanities, in which there is an introduction and then three themes.

Of course they could have just talked about the two models without looking at the screen. But somehow, certainly for me, them looking at the screen that I couldn't see pushed them into a way of talking that enabled the conjuring of rich visual images.

Earlier in my career I was entirely dependent on overhead transparencies. Before it was possible to laser print transparencies they were hand written and drawn. But I also remember going to an international conference in the early 80s at which there was an outcry from many of the delegates against the use of transparencies in presentations. The conference organised had to make a plenary statement about the need to be tolerant. In the mid 90s I was invited to do a lecture tour in Pakistan. At one location there weren't the facilities for projecting transparencies; and for the first time I had to just speak from notes. It was a liberating experience; and a colleague who was travelling with me said that it was good to see me talking to the audience instead of to the display screen.

I now try to be strategic about whether I use PowerPoint, a handout or just speak from notes. It depends on the audience, it's size, the nature of the event and so on. But perhaps it shouldn't be when not to use PowerPoint, as though it's the default. Perhaps it should be when to use PowerPoint - working up from the fewest possible slides and which one's really need to be seen.

However, the most comfortable position when using PowerPoint - after a lot of trying different things - is to have the notes I would talk to if I didn't use PowerPoint on the PowerPoint screen. This simplifies the focus of my attention in what I want to say. So, basically, for me, it's as minimal as possible notes that work - sometimes just to speak from, sometimes also on a handout, sometimes on PowerPoint slides.

[\[33\] The location of argument and the connecting of sentences](#)

I have been lucky enough to get a contract for a second edition of my last book², with a remit to completely re-frame the text to make it more readable. It will be a more traditional, prose-based, academic text. *However*, I am also intent on a reference-free text that is more accessible.

In the previous version I put all the 'literature review' in a final 'epilogue' chapter. In this version I'm creating footnotes in which I say where concepts come from and who is discussing them. So, for example, when I am talking about interculturality, I can put in the footnote that this has been discussed by so and so who suggest this and that about it. Something similar for essentialism, Othering, hybridity, and so on, where I cannot claim to have sole ownership of the concepts.

² Now published as *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture*, 2nd edition, Routledge 2019

I'm just trying this out at the moment to see how it works. However, I am finding it a liberating experience because I can focus on what I'm trying to say. This means that I don't quote anyone else in the main part of the text. I only use my own sentences; and they have to work all by themselves.

Making my sentences work is all about getting the ideas and the connections between them organised in the right sequences. This can sometimes require pulling whole paragraphs and even sections from other chapters. It's sometimes tough going; but eventually getting there is a wonderful thing - at least for a time. How, for example, does that discourse relate to this paradigm and that ideology and what these people that I have interviewed have to say. It's all data driven because I relate everything to reconstructed ethnographic narratives, which are themselves based on interviews and observed behaviour.

At the core, therefore, is observed social life. In the footnotes are references to broader debates. These might be the equivalent to data chapters and literature review in traditional research writing. But the *substance* of the whole thing is, on the basis of this evidence, what I have to say - my argument. And I can now see far more clearly exactly where my argument is located and what it needs to look like.

One of the reasons for writing this particular blog is to address what I see in so many student dissertations, and the awful struggles that students have to put them together. I wonder if, because there is so much focus on the main content being the literature and the data, plus I suppose the methodology, the students' own argument is left to survive in bits and pieces in between these blocks. Very often this argument is hardly visible at all.

What I am feeling good about, just at this particular moment, is that I've found a significant place, and mode, for my own argument. Then comes the struggle with the actual sentences and how they connect - but at least they are all my own sentences.

[\[34\] Reference to native-non-native speaker labels in research](#)

I have said publicly that I'm not prepared to review any journal submissions that use the native-non-native speaker labels without critical discussion of them. This set me thinking when and when not it would be appropriate to use the labels in research - and to come up with the following. It is also to do with how to write about contested issues.

Whenever the core concept that you are writing about is contested you cannot treat it as though it isn't. Also, you can't say that it's contested and how and why it's contested and then proceed to use it in the rest of your paper as though it isn't. I've seen so many pieces of writing that do this. It's as though the initial critique is only

there because the writer is going through the motions of literature review without really understanding it.

You can critique the constructed, imagined concepts of native-non-native speaker labelling. You can research the nature of the construction of the native-non-native speaker labels.

What you cannot do is research the characteristics of 'native' and 'non-native speakers' because these groups don't actually exist except as ideological constructions. You can't research what students think about 'native' and 'non-native speakers' teachers because these teachers don't actually exist except as ideological constructions.

You can however research what students think about what they imagine are 'native' and 'non-native speaker' teachers. If you do that, however, you should continue to remind yourself and your readers that you are dealing with imagined constructions and not actual groups. You are employing a constructivist approach; and you need to show that you understand what that is.

You can't research anything do to with a sample of 'native' or 'non-native speakers' because there's no way you can determine who is and who isn't. You can't even talk about a sample of people who are labelled 'native' or 'non-native speaker' without spending a lot of time getting into who is doing the labelling and on what basis. This would quite likely get into problematic struggles with equally subjective categories such as 'white'. You can however research people who say that they're labelled as 'native speakers' or 'non-native speakers'.

You can't research your own experience of being a 'native' or 'non-native speaker' because you can't be a member of a group that doesn't actually exist except as an ideological construct. You can however research your experience of being labelled 'native' or 'non-native speaker'. You are then discussing what it's like to be victim of the labelling.

[35] Being focused

The space in the morning is such an important thing to have. It used to be the case that I could just get up and write for half an hour, and that set me up for the day. These days it seems more complex. And for a while I've understood those people who say that they need at least a week of free time get into their writing. I've been finishing other things off and allowing bits and pieces of 'admin work' to get in the way.

However, a few days ago I managed to get something back. There has to be one main project - a book, a dissertation, an article, or whatever. You have to keep it in your mind the whole time, so that you are thinking about it and working on it in be-

tween and even at the same time as all the other things you are doing. This doesn't necessarily mean sitting and staring at the screen with it. In fact, the whole point is not to do that.

It was actually going to be a busy Monday morning. I had a PhD review meeting at 9.00, and then an appraisal meeting with my line manager. The second meeting was going to be stressful; so it wasn't an easy prospect. Nevertheless, between perhaps six thirty and seven fifteen I got a lot done. I searched for something in my emails which at first seemed like distraction, but found it. Then I went to the chapter of the book I am writing, which I had been staring at in the screen in previous days and not getting anywhere. Then the idea came and I was able to think of something I hadn't before and then move a heading, change a few sentences, cut and paste something - suddenly there was amazing clarity. I even realised that searching for the email had helped with that.

I haven't yet been back to it on the screen; and it's Thursday. But it's been in my head ever since. It was certainly between the lines of what I said to the PhD student in the review meeting. It was there in the review of a journal article I had to write. It was there in some of the questions I asked and the sense that I made of the replies in the two gruelling days of interviewing PhD candidates. It was even there in getting through the appraisal meeting, and also in internal dialogues with TV dramas that I've watched. It was certainly there in what I said to my PhD student in a supervision meeting just now. That's why it's so important to meet with my students regularly. They give me so many ideas.

Well, now I'm writing this instead of getting back to the text; but writing this is definitely on the way to getting back to it. And, of course, sitting in the café and watching what's going on is crucial material.

The whole point is that when I get back to it on the screen just a little time will make a lot of difference. But of course, it will take some determination to do that.

[\[36\] New storyline, more ideas and new findings](#)

I met with my co-author a few weeks ago to take a good look at the draft text of our book. We had already 45,000 words of the 50,000 target; but a pile of interviews, analyses, discussions of theory, reconstructed ethnographic accounts, interesting though all of them were, was really just a mishmash of stuff.

It conformed to our original proposal, but was topic-based rather than argument-based. There had been massive breakthroughs and new thinking, which had led us to collect data and make huge points that we hadn't thought of before. This creative exploration had taken us into new areas. We had ambitious hunches that what we were writing was really important and breaking boundaries.

However, this was not enough. We needed to think about our readers and what they would make of it. We felt that, because they could not be inside our minds, they would make little sense of what we were trying to say.

Writing a book, like a thesis, or like other creative acts, is a major opportunity. A publisher, a university, perhaps project funders, or other types of sponsors, have given us a space within which we can say something important. This might seem a negative thing to say; but there are so many books, theses, project reports and so on that cover ground and somehow do the job, but miss the opportunity to say something impactful. This is because they don't really manage to go the extra mile and really speak to readers.

I recently received a new book in the post because I wrote an endorsement for it. The author might read this and recognise the reference. Just looking at the title already speaks to me in a way that transports me to another exciting place. Just the title!

Well, life is short; and my co-author and I decided that we had to take radical action to turn our draft into something that speaks. (Is this a good distinction between speaking and just talking?) Speaking out - saying something important and transporting. We just couldn't waste the opportunity by letting all that work go without whipping it into something to be really read.

We had to work out exactly who our audience is. I'm thinking also about all the PhD students I have encountered who don't really get this, unfortunately. We had both attended seminars and conferences, read widely, and reviewed other people's work. This meant that we had met lots of people, either in face-to-face or on paper. We had to pull out of that experience a sense of real audience.

So we found, over a couple of days, some vacant classrooms with table space. We also went to cafés and walked around and talked. What was really useful was scribbling on pieces of paper and then moving them around. The table space was crucial for that. This was during a few days after a conference we had both attended. So we had the people we had just met and what they had said and what we had thought about them as a very fresh set of memories to help focus our thoughts. This really helped us to position ourselves - to position what we wanted to say - what we wanted to say to those people we had just met, with whom we had had conversations either in our minds while listening to their presentations, or in actually talking to them.

Well I'm really lucky to have a great co-author with whom I can do this sort of thing. We complement each other really well. Again, thinking of lone PhD students, I have also gone through this process by myself with books that I have written in the past. I also need to say that the degree of success has been variable. I have written books that have involved huge amounts of work that have not been resounding successes. However, knowing that one might not actually reach the intended standards

does not mean that one shouldn't try. Not to do the final work of re-framing a text so that it can speak to an audience is a massive, massive waste.

So that's what we did. However, that's not the end of the story - just moving things around to create a better storyline that will speak to an audience.

In doing that, we came up with a whole new set of ideas about what the book is actually about. Just by looking at existing material and moving it around automatically brings the need to make new connections. New connections bring new ideas.

Late at night at the end of the first day we continued to text each other possible new titles for the book. We needed a new title to match the new ideas we had found. The next day we met again and worked on those, and looked back at the bits of paper, and moved them around again, and scribbled more, and thought more about the people we had met and the conversations we had had with them.

Thinking again about going through this process alone. With a particular book I have written which has been successful, I was really lucky enough to have a colleague browse the draft. He actually suggested a title that I hadn't thought of. It was just that title that made me, just a month before submission, completely reorganise the whole text and write in new connections. Speaking again to PhD students, it is so important to get someone else to read - not a proofreader, but someone who is going through a similar process to you. Also, for them, reading your work will help them to sort out their own ideas and writing.

A week later we had a Skype meeting with our publisher and rehearsed the title with her. Amazingly, she liked it.

Now there is the major task of the actual writing that is needed to reorganise the text and put in the new connections that make the new points and communicate the new ideas. Most of this is with the first, introductory chapter. This writing talk in itself continues to bring new ideas. Simply having to write a new paragraph that connects two apparently discordant ideas will generate something very new.

Again, thinking of PhD students. Many writers don't really get down to the detail of making sure that a single paragraph speaks their thoughts in such a way that readers get them. There seems to be a fallacy around that the choice is just between citing references, either to literature or data, and 'putting more of myself into the text' which often results in empty anecdote. This is why so many PhD examiners say 'if only you had explained this is the thesis' and then proceed to ask for changes that might not actually be what the candidate wanted to say - too late.

Every single paragraph in the new connections that we are now having to write comprises our personal authorial voices that speak out to the author about what we think and what we have to say - but always in close reference to evidence.

These are however difficult connections to make because they are between ideas that might not immediately look as though they connect. This therefore requires difficult writing. But the outcome, of new ideas, is well worth the effort.

[\[37\] An on the go methodology for getting to the final text](#)

Finalising the text in your book or your thesis in a global manner, making sure everything is clear and fits together, is a very important task.

My co-author and I have just spent three days working on the final draft of our book. Our aim was to make every part of it speak with a clear message.

We had already written enough words for the book; but now our task was to bring out the main message. I don't think it was clear to either of us exactly how we were going to do this. We had already worked intensively on a conclusion. I had presented about the book at Southampton University three weeks before, and written an abstract for the next IALIC conference. My co-author had also given presentations. All of this had helped.

So this is what we did.

We began with the conclusion and searched the whole book for the main points we had made there. This was to make sure that we really had talked about the things we thought we had, that the terms we were using were consistent, that the discussion flowed, that things were explained in the most appropriate places, and so on.

This process threw up a range of terms, concepts and bits of information that were not consistent and needed to be brought into synchrony. An example of this was that in some places we used 'focus group' and in some 'workshop' to refer to the same thing. We spent some time reviewing with each other which term we should use and then made sure that all through the text this was consistent. This wasn't just a choice between two terms, but became a very fruitful discussion about methodological approach and what this meant about understanding the people we were writing about.

As we looked around the text to check these things, other issues emerged that we also had to check through the book and put right.

When we thought that we were almost done, we met with a colleague who asked us what the book was about. We decided to read aloud to him the first sentences of the first chapter and discovered that they weren't clear at all! The result was that we went back not just to the beginning of the first chapter but also to the preface to do more re-writing - which again meant looking through the whole text for consistency.

Another important issue is that some of our thinking has actually changed during the process of researching and writing the book. In particular, our view of small cul-

ture formation on the go has changed. It is now quite definitely a site within which things happen - a place where the intercultural can be observed - rather than something which is produced. Therefore, every single place where it was mentioned needed to be looked at carefully to make sure that the message was consistent.

The publisher has also requested that we lose about 500 words. This required a careful edit all the way through - simplifying sentences and pruning dense thickets of verbiage. There were obvious places to look for where things could be cut or shortened - footnotes, long quotations, and references which were gratuitous, too long or redundant because of what had been said elsewhere. It's worth remembering that deleting a reference in the text also deletes an item in the bibliography and saves quite a few words. In one case there were three references to the same person; and we decided that the most recent one covered the other two, which could therefore be removed.

We found in the first chapter two whole paragraphs that could be deleted because what they talked about had been dealt with in other chapters.

We are still not finished. It is good to have a little time to continue to look around and to edit through. It's good that we asked for a short extension six months ago to ensure that we would have this time.

A book is a huge opportunity and privilege - a large space within which to put lots of things that will be read for some time to come. It is therefore so important not to waste this opportunity and to get things as right as possible.

[\[38\] Getting the data chapters written](#)

Getting writing done seems often to be a major problem for postgraduate researchers. A common scenario is that half way through the programme excellent progress has been made - large parts of literature review and methodology chapters written, most of the data collected and analysed, and perhaps a third of the thesis already in draft. It is then that researchers can get stuck, with not much more written even a year later.

The block seems to be writing the data chapters. This is serious because the data chapters constitute about a third of the thesis. They are the core around which the whole thesis revolves.

In some respects this should be the easiest part to write. In a classic qualitative study, the chapter titles and sections are already provided by the themes that have emerged from analysis. Half the number of words are the data extracts used to demonstrate the themes. The other half is the researcher talking about the extracts to explain how they do this. If the extracts are bigger, what you say about them is also bigger.

There is a particular writing style that needs to be acquired to do this well. But, once you have acquired it, you should be able to move quickly.

However, some researchers find this daunting and do all sorts of things to postpone writing about the data. I've seen so many theses where data chapters begin with several or more pages of literature before actually getting to the data. As an examiner, I've been reading through the literature and methodology chapters and am actually looking forward to seeing the actual data. What a disappointment when I have to browse through page after page before getting to it!! (Corrections then often require all of this stuff to be moved to the parts of the thesis where it best belongs.)

There is certainly a place for literature in data chapters - but only towards the ends of sections in response to, rather than leading, what has been said about the data.

One of the problems may be a false believe that you cannot write about your data until you have read more and more literature. You have become good at reading; and this can become an easy means of procrastination. Another means of procrastination seems to be endlessly perfecting the methodology chapter. It's a bit like spending ages preparing to do something but never actually doing it. Running around in front of the data chapters, but not having the courage to go in. This might be why, in my opinion, many methodology chapters seem over-written.

There may also be a misunderstanding of what supervisors mean when they say that the data has to speak to the literature and theory. This is of course true; but it doesn't mean that you can't write about the data until all the literature and theory has been sorted out.

So, recently, I have been asking my students to write a good draft of all their data chapters before reading more and more. Where they are full-time PhD students, I am insisting that they do this by the end of their second year!

So far, the results of this advice have been excellent. They have been producing excellent pieces of writing - far from finished, but rich texts into which they can later put in how they relate to literature and theory. They have been taking notes as they go about how literature and theory might relate, but not stopping to read more and more. They have kept going and - so far - are getting the data chapters written.

[\[39\] How to write about data](#)

Following my last blog, how should we write about data? There's a chapter on this in my qualitative research book³, plus another chapter on writer voice. Here though are some thoughts about basic principles. I'm writing about qualitative data; but I have also heard examiners make it clear that they expect something similar in vivas in music experimental sport science, English literature, history, religious studies and

³ *Doing and writing qualitative research*, 3rd edition, Sage, 2016

so on. It's basically to do with going into detail about what you think is going on in the data whatever it is.

The problem is, however, that many researchers don't seem to appreciate this. I've seen so many data chapters that simply present extracts of data with very brief summaries of what they contain without interrogating any of the detail of what they might mean. This is a hugely missed opportunity because it is in the detail and the uncertainty of what it might mean that the new knowledge resides, and this is why companies produce software solutions for automated data combing and preparation, meaning you're able to view the data in simple terms and find this new knowledge that the data can produce.

When beginning a data chapter, it is really, really important to get into the data as quickly as possible. At this point in the thesis, we should already know, from the methodology chapter, that the theme of the chapter emerges from the analysis of the data, and how it emerges. It is therefore not necessary to explain this in detail all over again. Half a page describing the theme and the sub-themes that make up each section is probably enough, then going straight into the first section. I would say that the first extract of data could even appear at the end of the first page.

A useful parallel to writing about each data extract is giving a PowerPoint presentation. On the screen you have the extract. The presenter then stands between it and the audience, points at the relevant bits of the extract and explains to the audience what she thinks might be going on.

I have often been surprised when researchers speak really interestingly about their data in a seminar presentation, but, then, somehow forget all of this when they write. It is therefore good to record the presentation and use the transcript as a basis for writing.

I am not of course talking about presentations that simply summarise and describe, which are not at all satisfactory. Also, the audience should definitely not be left by themselves to make sense of and interpret the data. Researchers need to show the audience the *detail* of what it is that they are noticing in the data that enables them to arrive at their interpretation.

The authorial voice of the researcher therefore stands between the data extract and the audience and explains to the audience what might be going on in the data by 'pointing' to the key parts of it that support this interpretation. It is also good to show that meaning does not emerge too easily and to display reflexivity.

The extracts therefore need to be sufficiently long and rich to show the full complexity that supports the *necessary ambivalences* of the interpretation. The longer the extract, the more needs to be written about it. Also, it must not be forgotten that the data extracts may not only be what participants have said or written. They can be from research diaries, photographs, drawings, plus bits of quantitative data, all of

which contain complex textual material. Even what you yourself have noted at the time of collecting the data is itself data - hence the possibility of auto-ethnography and creative non-fiction.

What is particular about qualitative data is that it needs to be interconnected in a thick description - showing how what you think might be going on is helped by what you've seen in other parts and types of the data you've collected. Therefore, running on from the classic thematic analysis, where themes are found across all of the types of data in a holistic manner, the data chapters should also be organised to allow the different types of data to speak with each other within each theme. Of course, when I say 'speak', it is the researcher who does the speaking by explaining to the audience where the connections lie.

Finally, writing the data chapters is itself a continuation of the analysis of the data. Writing is itself a form of analysis. As you write, you will continue to move things around, even to change the names of themes, revisit what is going on in the data and even see things that you hadn't seen before. Keeping going to get it all laid down in text is good. Getting this done quickly will allow time to go back and look again. If there are black holes that you really cannot get around, jump to the next theme. What comes later might enable you to navigate them better from another perspective. You can even say in your thesis that there are black holes than cannot be navigated. This could be part of the new knowledge.

[40] Explaining things

This blog is partly from the common memory of what happens so often in doctoral vivas, when examiners say 'why didn't you explain that in your thesis?' But it also comes from lots of situations when people just don't tell you what you need to know.

I was talking to an examiner recently about a student I know who they'd recently examined:

Me: What I found quite interesting about the thesis was ...

Examiner: Oh, she didn't mention that. Yes, that would have been interesting. What a shame it didn't come out in the viva.

Me: Didn't you see it in the thesis?

Examiner: No. I must have missed it. There was so much unexplained detail that it was quite easy to miss things.

Me: What a missed opportunity!

I used to think that this was a cultural thing, of course, in the most non-essentialist way - if that's possible. But perhaps it's more to do with people being used to com-

municating with other people in relatively familiar social settings. The above conversation certainly had nothing at all to do with where the student 'came from'.

This is why I often use the example of having guests visiting you in a place that you are familiar with but they are not. You are showing them around the town where you live. But it might be hard to break out of what is in your head about what is going on and to imagine what might be in their heads. So this example probably doesn't work.

A long time ago, an Iranian friend of mine went on a car journey into the Iranian countryside with some British people. Afterwards, she told me that she was amazed at what they chose to talk about - what they noticed along the way and what they had to say about it. This was a countryside that she was familiar with; but she thought that they said such strange things about it.

At the time, she explained this as having something to do with British people thinking in a different way to Iranian people. Of course, now, this explanation seems to be ridiculously over-generalised. Indeed, it comes dangerously close to neo-racism! There was certainly an 'us'-'them' implication lurking in what she said about it.

Nevertheless, there will always be discourses, narratives, and the traditions and histories associated with them, that will make any social group talk about things, and appear to notice things, in different ways to other social groups. At a national level, grand narratives, common histories, media preoccupations, and all sorts of 'us'-'them' perceptions of the world that come from how we are brought up, will always bring about differences in what people notice and talk about. This certainly applies to different generations - with different experiences of say social media.

This does not however imply different types of thinking - different degrees of criticality for example. What is common across all cases is the underlying universal cultural processes that enable small culture formation on the go. It is the content that will differ. We are, after all, the same people brought up in different circumstances.

So, what the Iranian encountered in the 'British' car journey was not some sort of alien thought process - it was people coming at what they were experiencing with different narratives - different personal cultural trajectories.

What therefore we need to do when we write our thesis, is to try really hard to anticipate what our readers need to know.

This is where the notion of third space becomes useful. Not the old essentialist notion of third space as in-between essentialist culture blocks - but a space that we can somehow construct which might be somehow independent of the narratives and histories that preoccupy us differently. Finding threads that enable us to really communicate with others is by no means an easy matter. It really has to be worked at.

[41] Putting theory in its place

Especially when we are starting out as researchers, we are confronted with a number of theories about the world and about research. Often these are produced by well-known people. They can be intimidating, difficult to understand, and seemingly way above us.

However, the people who make them are in many ways just like us. They are trying to make sense of the world.

They have become famous and influential through hard work, brilliant thinking, good writing, good networking, being read and disseminated by the right people, and sometimes by being in the right place at the right time.

Some of us can be like them if we have the ability, the desire or the opportunity, and with the right circumstances.

However, there is nothing sacred about these theories. They are fluid collections of ideas which are by their nature interpretable and negotiable. If they appear bounded, fixed and untouchable it is because of the institutional, academic and sometimes wider politics that make use of them - packaging and monopolising them to build careers, establish status and define disciplines. This does not reduce the value of the theories themselves, but might make them look more fixed than they need to be. The desire to reify theory in the service of disciplinary division of labour can also lead to the artificial segmentation into tightly defined methods in the service of the neoliberal university.

We all therefore need to be reassured that it is not the theories themselves but academic politics that require us to follow them as though they are fixed in their nature and boundaries. Some researchers have no choice but to submit to this politics because of the circumstances in which they find themselves; but they should be aware that it is the politics that requires this and not the theory.

However, in my experience, we sometimes think that there is a politics when there isn't. We think that we need to follow theories as though they are fixed when in fact they are not. We don't believe that we will actually get higher grades and more approval if we are able to interpret, adapt and even develop theories to suit our needs.

But we can interpret, adapt and even develop theories to suit our needs. We don't need to be famous to have our own theories; and our own theories don't have to be famous. They need to be useful to us - to help us to make sense of the world. We are all free to take from, add to, and make use of other people's theories - as long as we give full acknowledgement where appropriate. We are all free to theorise.

[42] Getting the beginning right: saying complicated things in simple terms

I'm now getting back into writing my new book. I have been stuck for some time. I appreciate how this happens to doctoral students. I have written some substantial parts but feel that I can't go any further until I revisit what the whole book is about. I have a proposal; but it isn't enough. I am now therefore going back to the beginning to get the early statements on the first few pages right. This will set up the rest of the book and help me to know how to frame what comes in all the other chapters. I can now do this with knowledge of some of the things that come later.

Immediately though, I begin to learn more about why people find literature review so difficult - and why, in a recent thesis I examined it was impossible to work out what the whole thing was about when the person who wrote it thought it was fine. The result wasn't good!

The problem is that there's so much stuff!! So much clutter!! For me, I've got this cumbersome 'grammar of culture' that I've developed - a complicated theoretical framework that's very hard to describe in a small space. The book is supposed to be applying it; so it has to be there. I could try and simplify it; but then I'd be committing the sin of creating a simplistic explanation that will promote easy answers for ever more. This does not though mean not in simple terms.

So what I'm trying to do is to get the basics of the storyline down first. This means simple sentences that follow logically on from each other. I can put in brackets in the middle of sentences '[insert reference]'. This means that I don't let the references and the theoretical terminology drive the story, but the other way round. The simple sentences come first. Regarding my theory, I try and stand back from it and try and work out what I want to do with it. It's a tool that I want to use. I need to work out how I'm going to use it - what it's useful for - and try and write that down, again in very simple terms.

The book does already have an inherent storyline. Like many doctoral theses, this develops from personal experience of something that you need to get to the bottom of. Therefore, the whole reason why I need to get the basic concepts sorted out in simple terms right at the beginning is because it's the beginning of what I need to do to get to the bottom of things.

When I say 'simple terms', it doesn't mean that it should be simplistic. Indeed, the reason why there should be a whole book on this topic is that there is something too complicated to deal with in a shorter piece of writing. But because the topic is complicated doesn't mean that the mode of writing has to be complicated.

The trick therefore is to write about complicated things in simple terms - and to say, in simple terms, that they are complicated. I guess sentences like:

This is not a straightforward matter. Trying to sort out what this means is what I shall be doing throughout the book

So, if I can't quite work out how I'm going to use the theory, I can actually come out and say that. So, with my grammar of culture, I need to say something like:

It is a conceptual device that shows [insert]. Here I therefore intend to use it to [insert]. Its purpose is to try to make sense of [insert]. But how exactly this will work out will become clear as the book develops.

Well - at least something like that.

And writing this blog certainly helps. At least I've got something out.