DARING TO BE DIFFERENT: A POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON ORIGINALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Research is key to postgraduate study and constitutes the main difference between an undergraduate and a postgraduate degree programme. Given the limited emphasis placed on research in undergraduate studies (Miller, Rycek, Balcetis, Barney, Beins, Burns, Smith, & Ware 2008) and a surface approach to learning adopted by some universities in developing countries (Hunma & Sibomana 2013; Sibomana 2010; Sibomana 2014), the journey to becoming a researcher may be a daunting experience for many postgraduate students. Postgraduate students may face uncertainties due to a lack of a research background because they are from an education system where research was not emphasised. They may therefore not be familiar with different aspects of research, including those related to the nature of the research process and discourses around requirements such as originality or contributions to knowledge. Such students may thus be uncertain of what awaits them and how to deal with the challenges of meeting these requirements, which may cause them to doubt their academic abilities. This chapter focusses specifically on what the requirement of originality may mean to a postgraduate research student (specifically at the doctoral level) and how to identify and explain what is original or amounts to “new knowledge” in research.

RESEARCH NEEDS TO BE ORIGINAL, BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Studying towards a postgraduate degree in South Africa requires research literacy that many prospective postgraduate students may lack. On the one hand, students come into postgraduate study with different attitudes, expectations, hopes and fears, while on the other hand, the university environment has its own requirements for such students. There is not always a match between the individual and the institution,

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which may create tension (Hunma & Sibomana 2013). This tension is likely to increase when student researchers do not understand certain aspects or conditions that are key to the acceptance of their research projects. One such aspect that challenges postgraduate students is the originality of research. Especially doctoral research projects are expected to achieve a higher level of criticality, as well as originality. Originality – or the so-called contribution to knowledge – is a prerequisite for a PhD thesis to be accepted within the research community (Gelling & Rodriguez-Borrego 2014; Gill & Dolan 2015).

The contribution to knowledge can be a confusing concept and, according to Gill and Dolan (2015), a source of uncertainty and anxiety for PhD candidates. Some of the reasons for this situation include the lack of an agreed definition of knowledge (Snowden 2014), the complex and multifaceted nature of originality and its openness to interpretation (Gill & Dolan 2015; Phillips & Pugh 2010), and the uncertainty of how it could be developed and assessed within doctoral education (Brodin & Frick 2011), to mention but a few. These reasons lead to confusion about what can and cannot constitute originality in PhD research and how it can be demonstrated (Gill & Dolan 2015), which makes it difficult for students to understand what is expected of them in this regard (Frick 2011). Indeed, originality in doctoral research can be demonstrated in up to nine different ways (Phillips & Pugh 2010), which may put the student in a precarious position when he or she and the examiner(s) approach it from different perspectives. The matter is made worse by the lack of institutional guidelines on what constitutes originality in a PhD (Phillips & Pugh 2010).

These challenges, paired with students' previous academic experiences, make PhD candidates' interpretations of originality vary from what may be truly original and ground-breaking (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman 2007), to that which is way beyond the scope of a postgraduate study (such as Nobel Prize winning projects, according to Petre and Rugg 2004), to a whole new way of looking at the discipline or the topic (Phillips & Pugh 2010), to almost meaningless contributions (Gill & Burnard 2012) with various points on a continuum in-between. Some students misunderstand originality or do not understand it at all; others underestimate it, while others overestimate it.

When I started working on my PhD I was not sure what originality meant. I thought that I was expected to invent something totally new or come up with a new theory, which I did not have the necessary knowledge or skills to do. I wondered whether there could be anything "new under the sun" (to quote Ecclesiastes 1:9) and if there is not, whether the requirement for originality is realistic. Reading other PhD theses did not make a difference: I read them, but I could not identify the "contribution"

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they were making to knowledge (at least the way I understood it), because there was no explicit “contribution to knowledge” headings in any of these theses. And to me, there was nothing new in these theses because everything therein had been researched in some way. This made me realise that as much as it is difficult for a novice PhD student to explicate what is unique about one’s research (Gill & Dolan 2015), it is also difficult to identify it in other people’s work.

Despite these difficulties, the candidate’s understanding of what originality means is the starting point for identifying what constitutes originality or new knowledge in one’s own research and for being able to articulate it. When I approached my fellow PhD students I realised that they were also struggling with this issue. Some of them understood originality as the percentage of the PhD thesis that belongs to the candidate as opposed to what is obtained from available literature and other research findings. This notion of originality confuses the contribution to knowledge and the student’s own voice or, in other words, the student’s own ideas or points. These points and ideas may not necessarily be original or address an original subject. This understanding implies confusion between the concept of originality and that of plagiarism. Others understood new knowledge only in terms of the subject matter of the research or, in other words, “the what”. This type of understanding confines originality to only one aspect of research: what is being studied. This can be seen in the quick and superficial answer which I gave to a friend of mine who asked me whether for his PhD he could work more extensively on the topic which he had worked on for his Master’s research. I told him that he could not because the topic had already been researched. In giving this answer I did not think of what “more extensively” could mean for him; it could mean the same topic but differently, in a different context and/or with different participants, which could be avenues for originality. Other fellow PhD students thought that all research is original in that no one has ever come up with the same findings in the same context and with the same participants.

The various understandings of originality explained in the above paragraph have implications (which are generally negative) for students’ ability to identify and/or determine what is unique about their research projects. In addition to making it more daunting for students to identify and explain how original their research is, a lack of clear understanding of this concept may result in some PhD research projects lacking originality, making it impossible for them to be accepted and the degrees to be awarded (Gelling & Rodriguez-Borrego 2014). For instance, understanding originality as something that has never happened before may bring the students to search for something that may never be found. Alternatively, pursuing a highly

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original theme may be risky and jeopardise the student's intellectual abilities because he or she may not be able to articulate it effectively (Gill & Dolan 2015). Thus, as a PhD student you need to understand that while a PhD is expected to contribute to knowledge, there is no obligation for it to "redefine a subject area or discipline" (Gill & Dolan 2015:14). Indeed, knowledge claims can be small and still have a role in the discourse (Petre & Rugg 2004). Thus, it may be better to have a small and focussed original contribution than a big but extravagant one that you cannot defend.

The understanding that originality is only about subject matter narrows the possibility of identifying originality in one's research. In fact, originality can be related to all the aspects of research: the subject matter, the research methods and techniques and the research context (Brodin & Frick 2011; Gill & Dolan 2015; Petre & Rugg 2004). Indeed, there may be nothing new about what you want to research but the way you want to approach it may be original. For instance,

... some students follow the prescriptions of other researchers to the letter and simply apply a previously published method to a new body of data. Other research students will devise a method for investigating a particular topic, and this method may not have been previously used, or may have been described but not applied in detail. Their contribution is to the knowledge about that methodology (The research supervisor's friend, 2011, para. 12).

In short, you can make a contribution to knowledge by proposing a framework for reviewing the considerable knowledge and literature that is available about a specific topic (The Research Supervisor's Friend 2011). But if you are not aware of this possibility, you may abandon the project all together because, in your eyes, it is not original. Therefore, a student who understands and approaches originality in terms of subject matter is disadvantaged: while there are three perspectives from which originality can be thought about, the student has only one perspective. Thus, in the process of determining what is new about a given research project, you need to think about it in all its facets.

Another challenge that some PhD students may face as a result of their limited academic literacy practices, is to know what is new and what is not in their areas of interest (Gill & Dolan 2015). As a result, what appears new for them may already be old or known for others, which calls for a full awareness of the state of existing knowledge in their area (Holloway & Walker 2000) in order to be able to share with their supervisors and examiners an understanding of what constitutes originality (Gelling & Rodriguez-Borrego 2014). Understanding what constitutes originality requires the extensive, careful and critical reading of texts (books, articles,

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essays, research reports and theses, amongst others). This may provide a better understanding of the research area and the aspects of the research that may be challenging, including its uniqueness or originality. This is how, after reading several academic texts in the areas of distance education, language education and language teacher education, I came to understand that originality in research is not necessarily a creation of a new theory or a totally new discovery; it can also be researching these concepts from a new and/or different perspective, with the aim of shedding more light on it by answering *original* research questions or answering ordinary questions in an *original* way. In my case, the contribution to knowledge was to undertake the first critical pedagogic analysis of Rwandan distance education materials for language teacher education, to undertake a redesign of a section of these materials and finally to investigate the responses of teachers to the original and the redesigned materials.

ORIGINAL BUT BASED ON OTHER PEOPLE'S WORK

Every area has been researched in one way or another and to different extents. Therefore, chances of finding something totally new are limited. Thus, as much as research needs to be original, it has to be based on what other researchers have done. As Petre and Rugg (2004:14) argue, research is “a discourse among many researchers, each providing evidence and argument that contributes to knowledge and understanding, each critiquing the available evidence”. One way of building on other researchers’ work is to use their theories and concepts to frame your research or, in other words, to develop a theoretical or conceptual framework, which will help you to analyse your data. Understanding the meaning of a theoretical framework and its role in the research, and to identify one that suits your own research does not come easily. For me, this challenge was amplified by my limited academic literacy practices coupled with a surface approach (Biggs 1987) and a banking approach (Freire 2007) that had characterised my previous academic experiences. Postgraduate study was my first encounter with the concepts of theory and theoretical/conceptual framework. It goes without saying that I was not aware of the various theories/theorists in my area and how these theories and theorists could inform my research, let alone understanding how original my research was (supposed to be). This limited understanding increased my anxiety and my doubt about my readiness and ability to undertake a PhD study programme.

Using other people’s ideas to inform your own research requires a thorough understanding of these ideas. Integration and synthesis are not easy to achieve, especially for novice PhD students. I read about some theories and concepts and

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they did not make much sense. I ended up wondering why the scholars wrote these texts the way they did. Matters became worse when these particular theories were crucial to my research and what I needed to make my research original. Eventually, I got to understand that if concepts and theories are difficult to grasp, it is not necessarily because you are less intelligent, but it may be because you did not have enough time and/or opportunities to be exposed to them. Even established researchers sometimes find it difficult to understand some other scholars' work, so do not get discouraged. Understand that you are one of those people these concepts and theories were developed for and that, eventually, you will be able to understand them through continued engagement with them. Getting worried about what lies ahead is part of the normal process of carrying out PhD research (Phillips & Pugh 2010) and, I suggest, it makes you work harder. Reading about and reflecting on these concepts and theories extensively and critically may be necessary. This process may take a long time and the necessary insight and understanding may be slow. Alternative approaches to understanding the concepts and theories, and/or varying the kind of materials you are reading may be called for. Some scholars' writing styles are more accessible than others and knowing which ones are more accessible may be helpful. Changing the approach that you are using to read texts and reading different scholars who wrote about the topic of interest may also be helpful.

Apart from helping you to find appropriate theories for your research, reading extensively and critically can help you to identify the gap(s) in your research area. This could pave the way to identifying originality for your research. But the problem is that you may not be able to access and/or read everything that is available on the topic or in the area. This may increase your anxiety about whether what you claim to be original, really is original. In this case, your supervisors' assistance can make a difference; they are (or should be) more familiar with the key theorists/theories and scholars in your area than you are, and their guidance could help you to focus your reading and save you from reading "unnecessary" or less relevant texts. They can also help you to identify the gap, or point out one for you. In this case, you may need to carefully consider taking their suggested gap because dealing with something that does not originate from your own thinking may be challenging. I had to take the risk of revising and refocussing the suggested gap and, eventually, defining a gap in the current knowledge area to which I could make a feasible and original contribution.

CONCLUSION

Originality or new knowledge is a *sine qua non* for a PhD thesis to be accepted. In spite of the importance of this element, many PhD students start their research

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without a clear understanding of what originality means and how it can be identified and explained in one's own research. This situation is due to several reasons including the complex nature of the concept of originality, lack of agreement on what constitutes knowledge, lack of institutional guidance on what originality is, and the lack of a single formula on how to identify and explain originality. This situation brings PhD students to interpret originality in a variety of ways and these interpretations may have implications for their ability to carry out original projects. Reading critically and extensively in the research area, thinking about all the aspects of one's own research in a critical way, and setting realistic research goals are some of the strategies which PhD students can use to address originality in research. Also, institutions and research supervisors should not just set requirements for originality; they should help, support and accompany postgraduate students in the process of achieving originality in their research.

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