Writes of passage: writing up qualitative data as a threshold concept in doctoral research

Robin Humphrey[a]* and Bob Simpson[b]

[a]*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Newcastle University, Daysh Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;* [b]*Department of Anthropology, Durham University, Dawson Building, South Road, Durham, UK*

Effective writing is an essential skill for all doctoral students, yet it is one that receives relatively little attention in training and supervision. This article explores extensive feedback from participants in a series of workshops for doctoral candidates engaged with writing up qualitative data. The themes arising from the data analysis are discussed in terms of the affective domain of writing, and the main claim is that writing up qualitative data has been identified as what Meyer and Land would call a threshold concept for doctoral candidates employing qualitative analysis. Drawing on Turner's notion of liminality, the article concludes that interdisciplinary workshops can be instrumental in helping doctoral candidates understand the role of writing, and of writing up qualitative data in particular, in their development into independent, autonomous researchers.

Keywords: doctoral education; writing groups; qualitative research methods; threshold concepts; interdisciplinary study programme

Introduction

The impetus for the Writing Across Boundaries (WAB) project, about which we write in this article, was the observation that writing poses particular challenges for doctoral students in general and for those using qualitative data in particular. The problem is most acute at the point where data collection has ended, writing begins in earnest and the deadline for completion begins to loom. Both authors had this experience when writing their own theses, have dealt with it as supervisors and recognise it in the experience of others. When devising the WAB project, we were both immersed in doctoral matters through our formal Faculty-level duties in our respective universities, which allowed us to take a broad look at writing support across the social sciences. We realised that the difficulties were being experienced not just by doctoral candidates from our own disciplines of Anthropology and Sociology, but by researchers from every social science discipline, and indeed from disciplines in the natural and medical sciences and the humanities.

Whilst much research training goes into preparing doctoral students in the early stages of their Ph.D. careers, relatively little attention has been paid to writing post-fieldwork, which, for reasons we will outline later, we continue to call the 'writing-up' stage despite much recent criticism of the term (Badley 2009;

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*Corresponding author. Email: robin.humphrey@ncl.ac.uk

Thomson and Kamler 2010), and to how doctoral researchers might be helped in this endeavour. The WAB project was an attempt to address this issue in practical ways by offering doctoral students help in negotiating what can often appear a very 'scary gap' in their doctoral training and one which has hitherto been self-negotiated (Simpson and Humphrey 2008, 2010).

Our interest in writing and analysis contributes to the development of the post-Roberts agenda for UK doctoral training, and in particular to the newly launched Researcher Development Framework (RDF) which seeks to articulate 'the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of effective and highly skilled researchers' (Vitae 2011). The RDF is structured in four domains, within each of which are three sub-domains and associated descriptors. Domain A encompasses the knowledge, intellectual abilities and techniques required to produce work of a professional academic standard, and the three sub-domains are Knowledge Base (A1), Cognitive Abilities (A2) and Creativity (A3). We were keen to understand writing up qualitative data as a distinctive synthesis of these three sub-domains, and to situate our analysis within the broad context of doctoral training. In short, we were not so much interested in the 'how to' approach to writing, but were concerned rather to cultivate a reflexive awareness of what happens for a doctoral student when they begin to write up qualitative data and why this happens.

In the account that follows we provide an analysis of a body of data that was collected at three of the annual WAB workshops. This data provides insight into the kinds of impediments that doctoral students encounter when writing up qualitative data for incorporation into a thesis. Furthermore, the very positive response that the workshops received gave us some important clues as to the place of writing in the doctoral process and how the impediments might be more effectively addressed.

Analysis of the data revealed very significant cross cutting themes which are pertinent when it comes to understanding the process of doctoral study. The two themes which we discuss here relate to debates about the affective domain in the writing process and the identification of writing up qualitative data as a threshold concept in doctoral research. This last theme highlights what we see as an important point in academic pedagogy and one which is critical for the development of autonomous, professional researchers.

Situating our analysis in the literature

The themes outlined above were generated from our data, rather than derived prior to the data analysis from the substantial body of literature that is now available on the writing of doctoral theses. However, once the themes were identified, we then sought to link them to concepts and discourses prevalent in the contemporary literature.

As our workshop participants came from so many different disciplines, we turned first to the work of Bernstein (1990, 2000), and in particular his typology of knowledge structures in which the vertical knowledge structures of the natural sciences are distinguished from the radically different horizontal knowledge structures found in the social sciences. Social science disciplines, Bernstein concluded, share a common conceptual core although the boundaries between them are far less rigid than are the boundaries between disciplines in the natural

sciences. As we will show, this differentiation between the natural and the social sciences helped us to appreciate the workings of our interdisciplinary workshops in a new light.

We then searched the burgeoning literature which addresses academic writing at doctoral level. Some of these texts concentrate on publishing pedagogy (Aitchison, Kamler, and Lee 2010; Belcher 2009), while others focus on particular aspects of the doctoral writing process, such as dissertation proposals (Kratwohl and Smith 2005) and literature reviews (Kamler and Thomson 2006a; Machi and McEvoy 2008). There is also an established research tradition which explores the ways in which graduate students learn writing conventions in disciplinary settings (McAlpine, Paré, and Starke-Meyerring 2008; Prior 1998). There were two bodies of work, however, that had direct relevance to our themes: work addressing the relationship between text work and identity construction in doctoral research (Kamler and Thomson 2006a, 2006b); and work addressing the incorporation of the notion of threshold concepts into the realm of doctoral pedagogy (Kiley 2009; Meyer and Land 2006).

Through their treatment of doctoral writing as a complex, institutionally constrained social practice, rather than simply a set of skills and competences, Kamler and Thomson (2006b, 2) employ the notion of 'research as writing', and seek to remedy the situation where the development of scholarly writing has become a major site of anxiety for doctoral candidates, and their supervisors. Their call for universities to address more seriously the question of research writing and to establish 'institutional writing cultures' (144) will be addressed elsewhere. The aspects of their work that we draw on here are the connections they make between academic writing practices and the formation of the 'doctoral researcher'.

Recognising the relationship explored by Kamler and Thomson between successful doctoral writing and the development of the doctoral candidate's identity as an academic researcher allowed us to make the link between our findings and the emerging literature on threshold concepts in doctoral research. Kiley (2009) argues that doctoral candidates undertake a series of rites of passage during their candidature, and that there are times during their research education when they demonstrate that they have undergone a change in the way they see themselves and their research work. These changes, she argues, are the result of the candidate first encountering, and then successfully crossing, a threshold which is critical for the furtherance of the doctoral research process. The identification of discipline-specific threshold concepts has been developed as a way of differentiating between core learning outcomes that represent 'seeing things in a transformed way' and those that do not (Kiley and Wisker 2009; Meyer and Land 2006). A threshold concept is seen as distinct from other core learning outcomes because 'once grasped, [it] leads to a qualitatively different view of the subject matter and/or learning experience and of oneself as a learner' (Kiley and Wisker 2009, 432).

We shall explore these concepts further when we discuss our findings, but first we will outline briefly the content of our workshops and our methodological approaches of generating feedback from the participants.

The workshops

The WAB workshops were the centrepiece of a project funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council as a part of its Researcher Development

Initiative.[1] Each two day workshop was residential and comprised five participative sessions:

  i. An introduction by the organisers, including a panel conducted by recently successful doctoral researchers who reflected on their strategies for writing up qualitative data in their theses.
  ii. Ordering text – delivered by a psychologist who is also a creative writer.
  iii. Analysing the relationship between text and representation – delivered variously by a sociologist with an interest in narrative, and an anthropologist who is also a poet.
  iv. Rhetoric and narrative in qualitative writing – delivered by a social anthropologist.
  v. Data and theory – delivered by experienced and widely published qualitative researchers in Sociology and Education.[2]

The structure of the workshops did not change from their inception, largely owing to the positive feedback and reinforcement gained after the first, and each subsequent, workshop. The first two workshops were regional, and open to applicants from the five universities in the North-East of England. The third workshop was opened up to applicants from any university in the UK, and the fourth workshop was advertised throughout Europe.

Information about the workshop and details about applications were disseminated via email distribution lists and via the WAB project website.[3] The criteria used for selection were that the doctoral candidate should have completed their fieldwork and should be writing a thesis based in part or entirely on qualitative data. The application form had to be submitted by the candidate's supervisor, who was asked to make a case explaining why the candidate would benefit from the workshop. Out of a total of 237 applicants for the four workshops, 156 participants were drawn from 26 UK universities and, in the fourth workshop, from universities in the Netherlands, Poland, Belgium, the Irish Republic and the Czech Republic.

The workshop participants were drawn from all but four of the 19 ESRC social science disciplines. Although the majority of the participants were social scientists, the workshops attracted some who had been trained and were located in the natural sciences (particularly environmental science), the medical sciences (including health services research, midwifery, physiotherapy, general medical practice, nursing and pharmacy) and the humanities (including modern languages, history and design). Participants brought with them experience of a wide range of qualitative methodologies, the most common being interviews (70%) and participant-observation (42%). Most researchers (71%) were employing a combination of qualitative methods, and some (12%) were combining qualitative analysis with that of quantitative data.

Methodology

The strategy adopted for the formal evaluation of the workshops had three stages, with each stage employing a different methodological approach in order to generate multiple perspectives on the workshops. For stage one, two Ph.D. students attended the workshop as participant observers. They took notes, and discussed what was

going on with participants both during the workshop sessions and in the less formal periods during the residential weekend. Short reports were produced by the participant observers following the workshops, which provided the foundation for debriefing sessions where impressions and reflections were discussed with the project leaders.

For stage two, all the participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire soon after the workshop. This was filled in remotely on Durham University's online learning support platform, Blackboard. The questionnaire was designed to capture immediate impressions of the workshop, and included a series of closed questions asking participants to rank their responses on five-point Likert scales, and some open ended questions asking what they liked best about the workshop and how they thought it could be improved. The overall response rate to the post-workshop online questionnaire across the three years was 82%, and the responses generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Significantly, the qualitative data was unusually detailed and thoughtful by the standards of online feedback, and went beyond the initial expectations of the project organisers.

For stage three, semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out six months after the workshop. These were conducted not only with participants but also with their supervisors to assess whether there had been any longer term impacts arising from the workshop, rather than just a short-term 'glow'. The response rates for stage three were 53% for students and 50% for their supervisors.

These three exercises were repeated for each of the first three workshops, and produced a longitudinal data set comprising a rich mix of quantitative and qualitative data, the latter produced via ethnographic, self-completion and interview-based approaches. All the data were processed and stored electronically on the software package NVivo, in preparation for analysis. The breadth and depth of the data set allowed emergent themes to be traced across the three cohorts of participants, and for conclusions to be drawn with stronger claims to rigour and generalisability than is often the case with qualitative studies based on single context or cohort studies.

From feedback to analysis

In terms of feedback on the success of the workshops, the data collected was overwhelmingly positive. In the online quantitative feedback collected immediately after the workshops, after the results for the first three years were combined participants indicated, through their rating on the five-point Likert scales, not only that they had found the workshops very enjoyable (90%) but also that they had greatly increased their confidence in their ability to write up their Ph.D. (90%) and felt that they had been very useful in helping them to develop strategies for writing up qualitative data (91%). These results reassured the organisers that the workshops were, at least in the short term, effective and that the project was largely meeting its original aims. These results were further reinforced by a great many comments from workshop participants pointing to how their attitude to writing had been changed positively:

> The impact [of the workshop] has been phenomenal. I was losing sleep before but when I came back I got straight on to it and wrote reams and reams, so it was like opening a floodgate – it gave me the opportunity to move on as a writer. (Doctoral Candidate in Education, Workshop 2)

Such responses were enormously gratifying, but made us curious as to why the workshops were so successful. We would like to think that they were well organised and presented, but there was a sense that we had touched on something that was much more fundamental and dynamic among the groups that we had convened. Beyond specific organisational factors, we first turned to Bernstein's typology of knowledge structures to help us deepen our understanding of what had transpired in the workshops. Bernstein (1990, 2000) contrasts the vertical knowledge structures of the natural sciences with the horizontal knowledge structures found in the social sciences. In the latter, disciplines share a common conceptual core and the boundaries between them are weak and porous. Thus, bringing together 30–40 doctoral students created a significant opportunity for lateral communication to take place and, as we go on to illustrate, for participants to use these encounters to generate positive momentum for themselves; in many respects we were merely providing the crucible in which certain kinds of reactions could take place.

A key catalyst in these reactions was the sharing of broad methodological approaches. These overlaps facilitated moves out of the vertical, disciplinary knowledge domains which some participants brought to the workshop. What we inferred from these moves was that focusing on a common processual problem for doctoral students, in this case the writing up of qualitative data, can be profitably undertaken where a mix of disciplines and methodologies are brought together.

An important feature of the workshop in this respect was the academic level of the doctoral participants, all of whom had already acquired threshold concepts at undergraduate level of a wide range of academic disciplines (Cousin 2006). The workshops were therefore characterised by a high level of cross disciplinary exploration and boundary crossing (Engeström, Engeström, and Kärkkäinen 1995) which, as we shall see below, constituted a rich resource from which participants could draw in deepening their learning experience.

The participants who were crossing the most difficult boundaries were those who had been educated in the natural sciences, for whom cross-disciplinary moves of the kind we discuss here were unfamiliar. For them, the intellectual task of writing up qualitative data was particularly challenging:

> As someone with a natural science background, qualitative data is still new to me and analysing and writing up 'words' rather than numbers is a daunting process. (Doctoral candidate in Environmental Science, Workshop 3)

Observing interactions at the workshop, gathering post-workshop impressions and subsequently interviewing students and their supervisors gave us important insights into the experience of writing at this critical phase in the doctoral process and enabled us to illuminate some of the still largely uncharted areas of doctoral research training.

Acquiring confidence and self belief: the affective domain in the writing process

Issues of confidence are evidently key when it comes to writing up qualitative data. This message was the clearest to emerge from the analysis of the feedback data. There were 196 explicit references to acquiring confidence in writing from the workshops in the anonymous online feedback and in the transcripts of the 63 phone interviews subsequently conducted with participants, and many more comments

where it was strongly implied. The context in which this message was expressed, however, took many forms.

As we have seen earlier, research using qualitative methods is now carried out by doctoral candidates in disciplines outside of the social sciences. Many participants from such disciplines referred to changes in their confidence levels in writing about approaches which may well be deemed marginal in their academic environments:

> Interestingly, one of the organisers said my approach was similar to an anthropologist's approach. It was useful to find this out – finding out that it was acceptable to do what I was doing. That was really good. And good to speak to people with diverse backgrounds and find out that there's lots of ways of doing it and you do what you need to, to fit the purpose. (Doctoral candidate in Design, Workshop 1)

Confidence through increased knowledge and understanding of the qualitative research process was keenly felt by participants from disciplines where quantitative research is dominant and follows scientific models for enquiry and data presentation:

> I can't explain very well but I knew the way I was writing in this rigid scientific structure wasn't right for my data. Obviously I'm still doing active experimental research as well as writing up. Although I have one supervisor pushing it a lot more experimentally, I have the confidence now to say 'no I have this [qualitative] data' and it is an important part of the research too …. I think the difficulty I've had is with my setting, I'm in the medical setting. I feel more constrained, more reined in I think because you have this idea that it has to be rigorous and that means to write like this, only in this certain 'scientific' way. But seeing how other people were doing this, I thought 'no, this works, this could work for me'. (Doctoral candidate in Physiotherapy, Workshop 3)

This greater appreciation of the nature of qualitative research was expressed well by the General Medical Practitioner quoted below, who prior to the workshop had clearly struggled with the differences between qualitative and quantitative data and, more specifically, with what this meant in a context increasingly dominated by evidence-based paradigms:

> I am committed to qualitative research, but come from a discipline very closely allied with biomedicine, and this workshop … has given me the confidence to trust my data. There are many decisions which researchers have to make at all stages of the process. The writing stage is no different. I have the confidence to know that I don't have to include everything in the thesis, I have to make judgments. It was helpful to consider the words 'illustration' and 'explanation', rather than 'evidence'. As a health care professional, this word comes back to haunt us on a daily basis. (Doctoral candidate in General Medical Practice, Workshop 3)

This anxiety about writing up qualitative data was not dependent on the innovative adoption of qualitative research methods by participants in disciplines dominated by other methodological approaches, since there were comments from doctoral candidates in Sociology, Anthropology and Human Geography showing that familiarity with and acceptance of qualitative research within a discipline can produce its own pressures:

> As you know Anthropology has been talking representation for the last 20 years, so I worry more about how to write, how do I do this? But that was a good thing about the

workshop; it was very good at bringing confidence to me. I was anxious about writing. (Doctoral candidate in Anthropology, Workshop 2)

The emergence of confidence as a strong theme in our data analysis provides powerful corroboration for claims that writing about qualitative data and analysis is more than simply a matter of technical ability, but is a process in which the writer's attitudes and feelings about writing also play a significant part. In our view, paying attention to this relationship is key to the development of skills in analysis and communication for the aspiring social scientist.

Following Bloom's taxonomy of goals within education systems (Bloom 1956), Wellington (2010) argues that the cognitive domain of skill and knowledge development has dominated thinking on developing writing ability to the detriment of understanding the role of affect in the writing process. Considering the affective domain causes us to reflect on the role of feelings and emotions in learning and teaching, yet it is a domain that has tended to be neglected in postgraduate education, where academics have, perhaps, underestimated the extent to which doctoral candidates need help with confidence, motivation and inspiration (Lillis and Turner 2001; Wellington 2010).

Our evidence suggests strongly that academic writing is not a skill that we can assume is inbuilt and simply develops autonomously and individually (Nightingale 1988; Wellington 2010). Difficulties with writing are magnified when coupled with the analysis of qualitative data. This distinctive post-fieldwork activity for researchers working with qualitative data has its own complexities and difficulties (Silverman 2010; Wolcott 2009), as the interplay of writing and analysis requires the bringing together of rigorous data analysis and the nuanced and rhetorical use of language.

The anxieties provoked when trying to engage with this aspect of the research process in a doctoral thesis are likely to be exacerbated by current thinking that writing should start on 'day one' of a thesis, and that the notion of 'writing up' is outmoded and potentially dangerous as it implies that writing only happens at the end of the doctoral cycle (Badley 2009; Kamler and Thomson 2006b). While we agree with Badley that the term 'writing up' is problematic since it can fail to convey the nature of good academic writing ('a problematical and tentative exercise in critical reflective thinking', Badley 2009), our evidence suggests that this conflation of 'writing' with 'writing up' can mask some important distinctions between the mechanics of writing (literature reviews, accounts of methodology, contextualisation, etc.), reflexive and reflective writing (in the form of diaries and fieldwork logs) and 'writing up' (the final synthesis of information and experience in the form of a thesis). All of these stages of writing are important, and particularly so for qualitative researchers, who typically produce words that describe words, rather than words that describe numbers. Enabling students to be clearer about how the varieties of writing relate to each other was an important outcome of the workshop and one which led us to think more analytically about writing as a threshold concept.

Writing up qualitative data as a threshold concept in doctoral research

Just as we were able to identify some of the affective problems associated with writing, we were also interested to note some of the affective solutions that the

workshop generated. There were many comments that referred to a new feeling of being able to overcome the intellectual and emotional challenges of post-fieldwork/data-collection writing, and especially of having glimpsed new perspectives that might impart the confidence to try new approaches and pursue more creative directions:

> I was scared before I got there, I felt challenged about things I didn't know about, that I wouldn't know enough. But when I got there I wasn't intimidated at all, everyone was very willing to share. It gave me permission to let my creative intuition take me forward. To stop being worried that it's not scientific or academic enough. But it just comes. They say that in the text books, you know, just write, but the workshop let me do that. I feel like I'm on a race course and all these hurdles keep popping up in front of me and I jump this one, and then that one, but the last one's in sight and I'm heading for the finish line. (Doctoral candidate in Gerontology, Workshop 3)

The reference above to being given 'permission' is echoed in many comments, and there were also references to 'feeling liberated' and 'freed up' after the workshop:

> Definitely [had positive benefits from the workshop], because now I'm writing up – my thinking has changed – I feel freed up to write up differently than perhaps I might have before. I felt liberated after the workshops as I could write up more like myself. I think the workshop liberated me to write up as me. (Doctoral candidate in Health Care, Workshop 1)

The idea that participants were somehow deriving a sense of liberation and perhaps even feeling that a kind of 'permission' was being given was as puzzling as it was gratifying. We were curious as to where the authority for this licence to 'write up as me' issued from as it was certainly not what we had in any way planned or intended and a deeper reflection on what is happening here is instructive. In particular, repeated reference to the idea of 'voice' gives some clue as to where impediments may lie:

> I am much more concerned about using my own voice, much more confident that I can write in my own voice, that it is distinctive. I'm more confident about doing that. My colleagues are always talking about making an original contribution. A big part of your original contribution is the way you communicate ... I have more sense that I can put my own stamp on this now, put in my own voice. (Doctoral candidate in Nursing, Workshop 3)

The interviewer of this participant noted that he had used the phrase 'finding my own voice' several times, and commented that for many doctoral candidates she had spoken to 'there seems to be a sense of coming to the final year of the Ph.D. having spent so much time with other people's words that they are unsure of how to find their own words, or what standing or role they take in the final script'.

All of this is strong evidence that the workshops have been working around what Kiley refers to as a threshold concept in doctoral research, in this case research that employs qualitative methodology. Following Meyer and Land (2006), Kiley (2009) adapts Turner's notion of liminality (1979) and suggests that prior to crossing a threshold of understanding doctoral candidates can enter a liminal space, in which some can experience being 'stuck' for some time. Whether there is a single moment in

which one discovers one's own voice and in a single epiphany acquires belief in one's own potential, thereby becoming 'unstuck', is questionable. However, it did seem that through the medium of the workshops we had been able to create the space for this kind of liminality. Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner (1967, 1969, 1974), we understand liminality as a place and a time which is outside of the conventional structures of process and in which there is the opportunity to engage in play and experimentation in relation to values and assumptions that might otherwise be constrained by the structure and conventions that prevail in other contexts. As Turner famously put it, the liminal is culture in the subjunctive mood, that is 'the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire – depending on which of the trinity of cognition, affect, and conation is situationally dominant' (Turner 1986, 42).

In the face of the challenges of writing up data collected using qualitative methodologies, the workshop appeared to provide a crack or interstice within which a deeper reflection on self, writing and the doctoral process became possible. Crucially, what doctoral students were able to create within this space was a boost to confidence and self belief which would enable them to successfully cross a significant threshold in writing up their qualitative data and take an important step towards becoming academic researchers in their own right.

Conclusion

Analysis of participant feedback has not been presented simply to impress with the evident success of the WAB workshops – the scale of the success of which came as a surprise to the organisers and, hopefully, offered reassurance to the projects' funders, the ESRC. Rather, the feedback analysis has provided insights into a crucial stage of the doctoral cycle.

We believe that our data have provided evidence for the claim that the writing up of qualitative data is a threshold concept in this form of doctoral research, and that achieving this is challenging for most doctoral researchers. We would contend that, in enabling this to happen, training of the kind reported on here can play a crucial role. As we have seen, confidence is key to taking control of the thesis as a textual synthesis of data, theory and experience and requires the bringing together of the skills and expertise underpinning all of the three sub-domains of Domain A of the RDF, Knowledge and Intellectual Abilities: sound academic knowledge, cognitive abilities and creativity (Vitae 2011). Acquiring the confidence to achieve this appears to be significantly helped by removing the doctoral candidate for a short, but intense time from their established environments of supervisors, immediate peers and disciplinary arrangements. Our evidence confirms the pedagogical benefits for doctoral candidates of breaking out of their disciplinary and institutional homes in order to spend focused time with their peers and fellow travellers.

The fact that the workshops were purposefully multi-disciplinary, focusing more on the nature of writing up qualitative data than on disciplinary perspectives or processes, was undoubtedly important for the experience of the workshop participants. However, it was also important for the potential generalisability of the analytic conclusions presented here. In those disciplines that employ qualitative methodologies, at least, the moment when the doctoral candidate begins to analyse

and write up their data is often a defining one in the move from novice to independent social researcher.

Notes

1. The Writing across Boundaries project was funded by the ESRC Research Development Initiative, grant number RES 035 25 0013. Further details of the RDI can be found at: http://www.rdi.ac.uk/
2. Further elaboration and reflections on the content of the workshops can be found in earlier publications (Simpson and Humphrey 2008, 2010).
3. The project website can be found at http://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/. Since its inception in June 2008, according to Google Analytics the 211 pages have been viewed 70,941 times, and its home page has recorded 13,026 unique page views, of which 7,049 have originated from outside the UK.

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