

An exploration into workshops on research paradigms as part of postgraduate EAP provision.

(A case study of collaborative work with subject lecturers)

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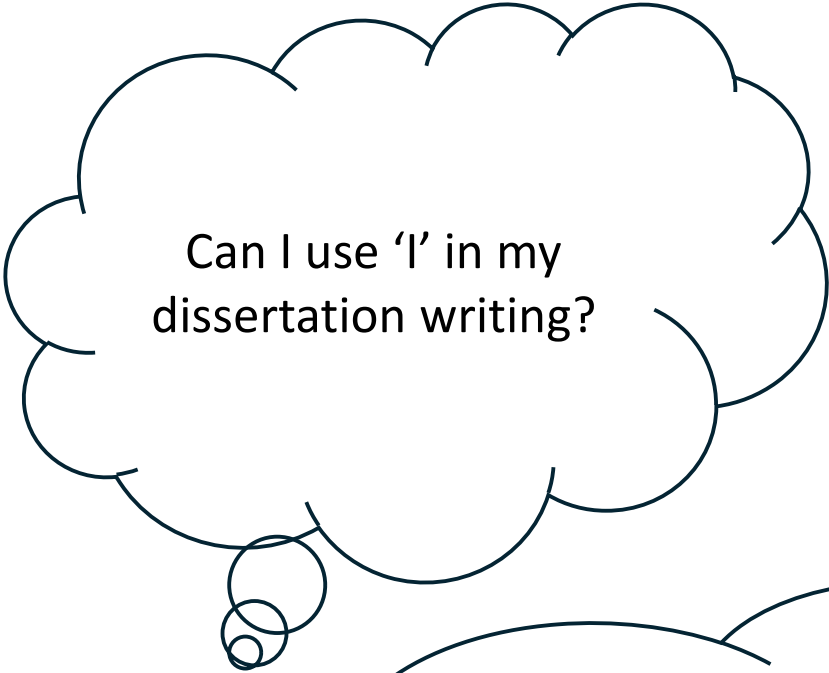
Academic Communication Centre (ACC)

Institute of Education (IoE)

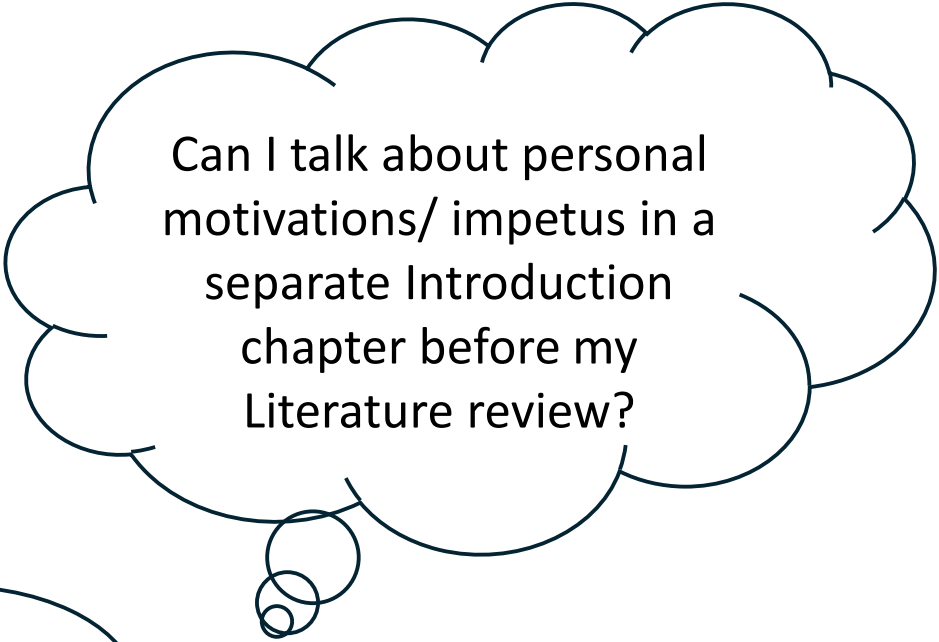
University College London (UCL)



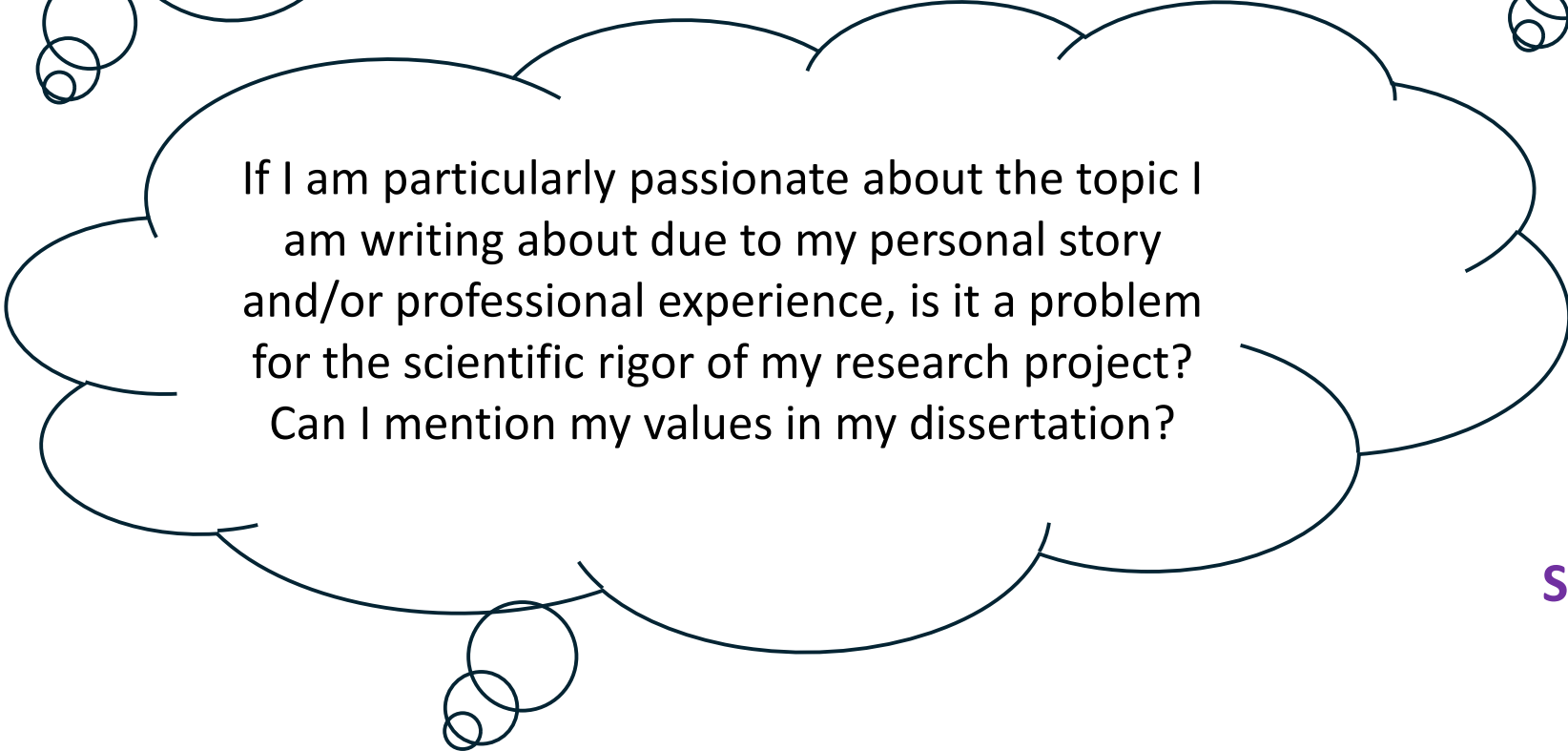
Rationale for collaboration
(or how did it all start...?)



Can I use 'I' in my dissertation writing?

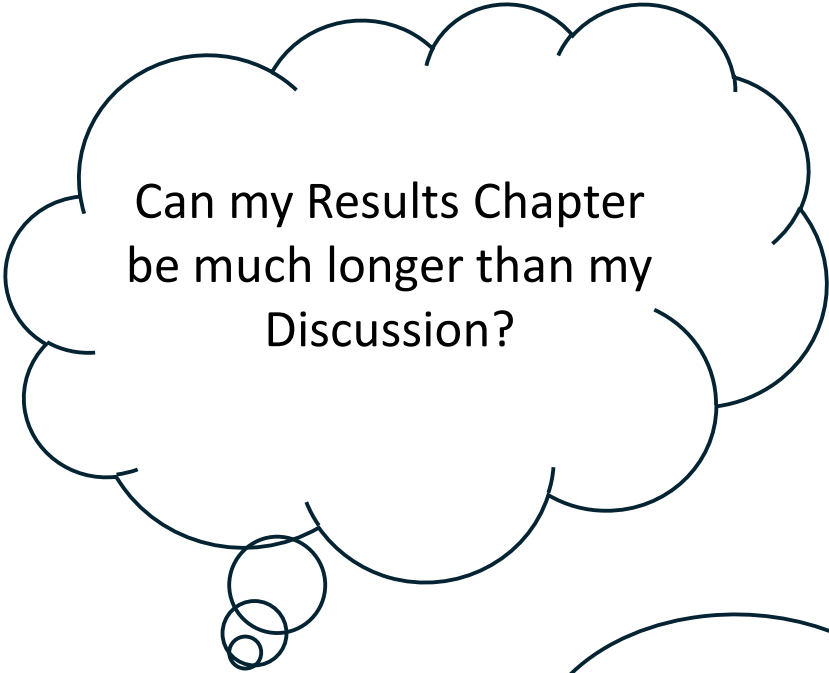


Can I talk about personal motivations/ impetus in a separate Introduction chapter before my Literature review?

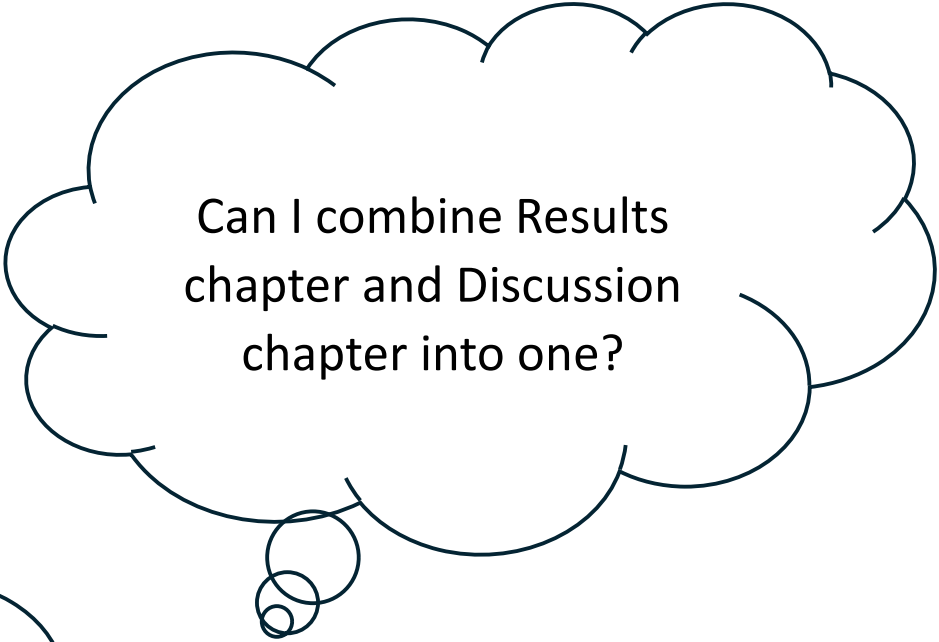


If I am particularly passionate about the topic I am writing about due to my personal story and/or professional experience, is it a problem for the scientific rigor of my research project?
Can I mention my values in my dissertation?

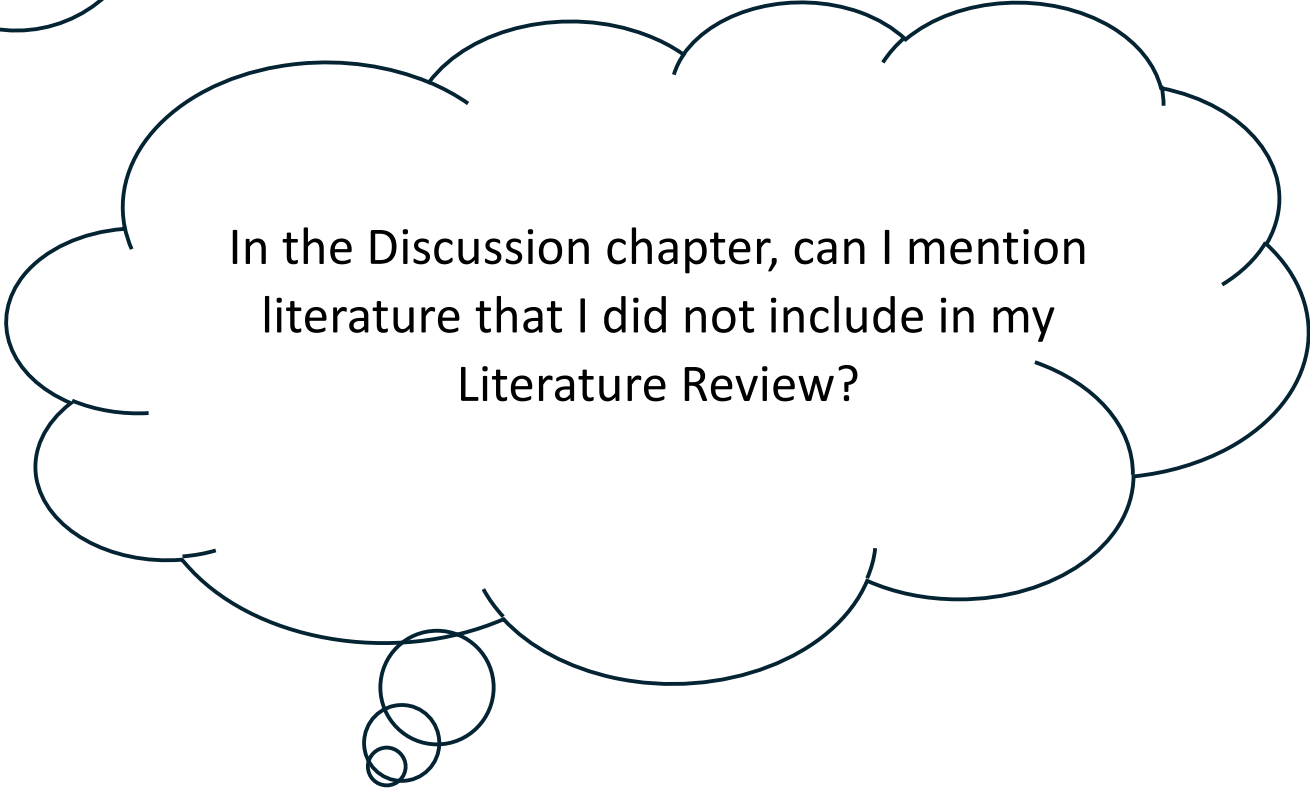
Students' questions

A thought bubble with a scalloped border and a tail of three small circles at the bottom left.

Can my Results Chapter
be much longer than my
Discussion?

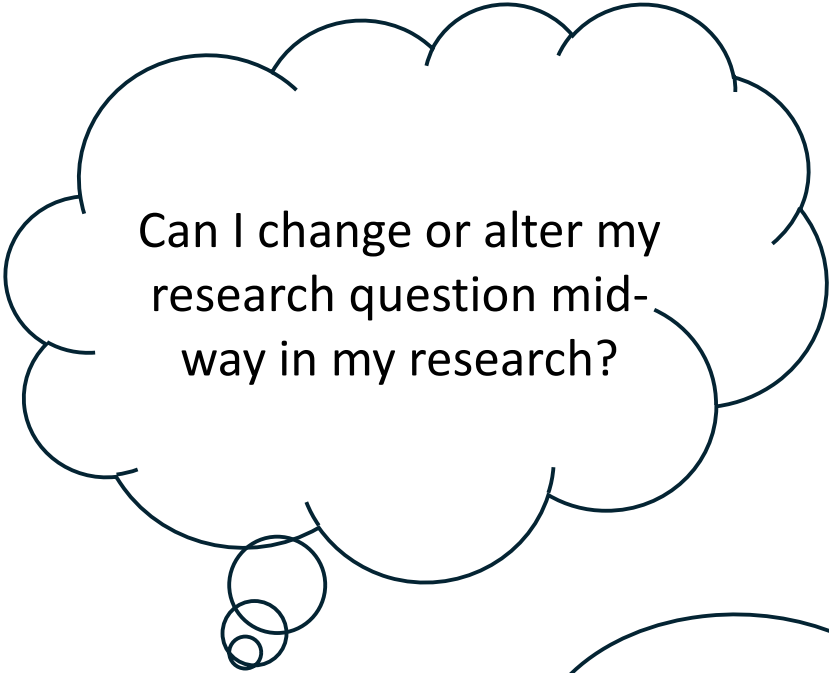
A thought bubble with a scalloped border and a tail of three small circles at the bottom left.

Can I combine Results
chapter and Discussion
chapter into one?


A large thought bubble with a scalloped border and a tail of three small circles at the bottom left.

In the Discussion chapter, can I mention
literature that I did not include in my
Literature Review?

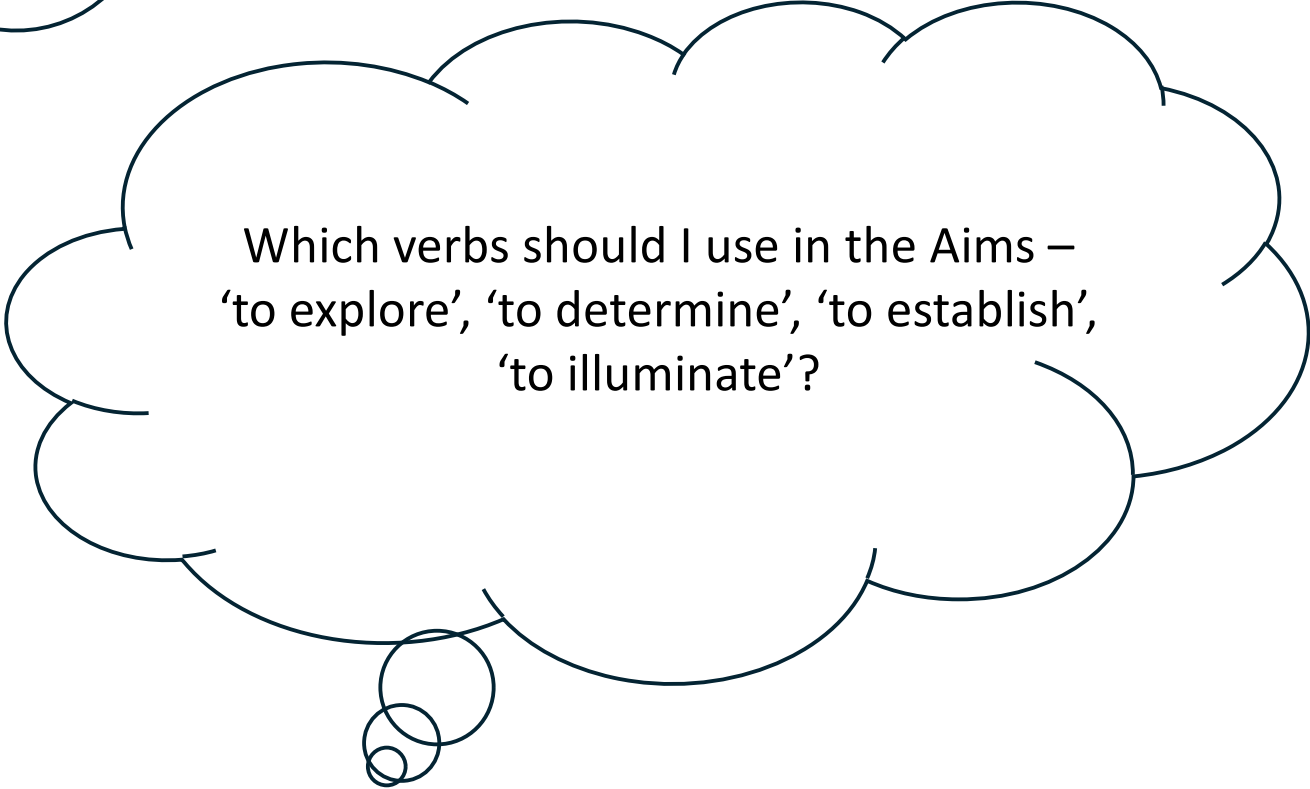
Students' questions



Can I change or alter my research question mid-way in my research?



Can I radically change the conventional IMRaD structure in my project?

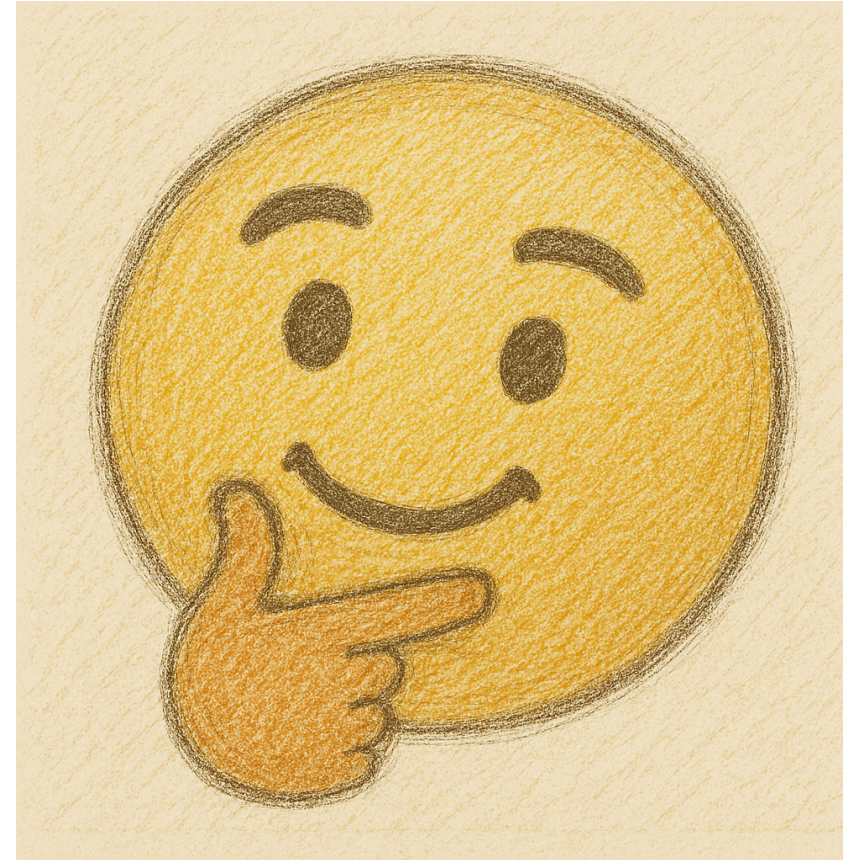


Which verbs should I use in the Aims – ‘to explore’, ‘to determine’, ‘to establish’, ‘to illuminate’?

Students' questions

What would your answers to those questions be?

- It depends, doesn't it?
- And not just on the chosen topic or on what students' supervisors say/recommend...
- It depends on the type of scientific tradition (paradigm) student's project is positioned in.
- It is deeply rooted in paradigmatic assumptions (which are often implicit and not always clearly articulated to postgraduate students).



I started wondering:

Are our postgraduate students already aware of some of these paradigms and their implications for dissertation writing?

Positivism

Post-Positivism

Interpretivism

Social
constructionism

Critical theory

Pragmatism


Possible implications for **methodological approaches** and **language**

Positivism/post-positivism	Interpretivism/constructionism
Deductive reasoning	Inductive reasoning
Often quantitative methods: experiments, standardized tests, closed-ended questionnaires, standardized observation tools	Often qualitative methods: open-ended interviews, focus groups, open-ended questionnaires, open-ended observations, think aloud protocols, role-playing
Often large samples. Probability sampling strategies (e.g. random).	Often small samples. Non-probability sampling strategy (e.g. convenience, purposeful, snowball)
Quality criteria: reliability, validity, generalisability	Dependability, credibility/trustworthiness, transferability
Data needs to be separated from interpretation (Results – often separate from Discussion)	Data cannot be separated from interpretation (Results – often combined with Discussion)
'Determine, establish, reject, prove'	'Explore, illuminate, shed light, highlight'
'Research subjects'	'Research participants'
'Data collection'	'Data construction/data generation'
Passive Voice is common in writing (e.g. It can be argued that...)	Personal pronoun 'I' is common in writing (e.g. I argue that...) Positionality and personal motivations/values are often discussed.

Why is it important for postgraduate students to understand research paradigms?

- ‘Some very general familiarity with terminology and the basic arguments is useful simply because of the **frequency** with which these kinds of issues are brought up in debates about research’ (Gibson, 2017).
- Raises **awareness** - as paradigmatic assumptions are implicit in almost everything we do as researchers. Helps to better understand the purpose, intentions and value of published research and of your own research project.
- Strengthens the study’s **internal logic** and makes the research design more transparent and defensible (Pretorius, 2024). Reduces ambiguity and incoherence in methodological decisions and claims.
- Makes writing **more sophisticated and less naïve**.
- Celebrates diversity and plurality of opinions. Helps to ‘**disagree well**’ (UCL president and provost Michael Spence).

How did I start to communicate this content to students?

- Mainly as part of dissertation writing courses for the faculty of Brain Sciences delivered by Academic Communication Centre (ACC) at UCL –
not embedded, no collaboration with subject lecturers
- As a workshop within a specific postgraduate programme –
embedded, collaboration with subject lecturers  **focus of today's talk**



Case Study

(context, partners, content, procedure,
feedback)

Case study. Context and partners.

Academic Communication Centre (ACC, UCL)

- Works with both home and international students
- Works mainly with PGT students, but also UG and PGR.
- Short courses, one-off workshops (embedded and non-embedded), webinars, tutorials, writing retreats, etc.
- Works with different faculties
- **Katia Dowdle** – EAP Lecturer, 'responsible' for Brain Sciences faculty



Postgraduate Research Programme in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy (Brain Sciences, UCL + Anna Freud Centre)

- 4-year professional clinical training programme
- Clinical, academic, and research components.
- Service-related project within clinical placement + Individual empirical research project
- **Students receive teaching from the programme lecturers on research methodologies relevant to psychotherapy + research supervision**
- **Michelle Sleed** – Deputy Programme Director, Senior Research Fellow

Case study. Context.

‘Our research teaching staff need to equip students with the basic skills needed to carry out their research, but **often feel frustrated that we do not have enough space to step back with the students and reflect on their epistemological positions and why they are doing what they are doing.**’

(Michelle Sled, Deputy Programme Director, Senior Research Fellow)

Case study. Content and procedure.

- 2-hour workshop: self-reflection + theory + practice
- Co-designed and co-delivered
- Most common research paradigms discussed (positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, social constructionism, pragmatism, critical theory/emancipatory)
- Simplified account of paradigms (historical development and current conventions), 'paradigm wars', 'positivist hangover'
- Practical tasks (e.g. identify research paradigms in published articles on the topic of resilience – abstract analysis; discuss your research in relation to paradigms)
- See some example content on the following 5 slides.....

Example questions for self-reflection. Used as a ‘warmer’ at the beginning and as a ‘wrap-up’ discussion at the end.

What is research for?

Do you believe that there is “one verifiable reality,” or that “multiple socially constructed realities” exist?

Do you believe that knowledge is contextual, ever-changing and emergent? Or that knowledge, when appropriately developed, is truth—that is, it is certain, congruent with reality, and accurate?

Do you believe research should be value-free or value-laden?

Do you believe that absolute separation must exist between the research participant and the researcher?

If someone decided to repeat/replicate your study and their results were different, would you see it as a problem?



Paradigm	Ontology (what is reality?)	Epistemology (what is knowledge?)	Axiology (the role of values in research)	Methodology (research framework)	Methods (tools)
Scientific/ Positivism/ Post-positivism	There is a single reality or truth that exists independent of the knower (more realist)	Knowledge is acquired through objective measurements	No place for values (value-neutral)	Experiments, Survey research, etc.	Mainly quantitative but could be qualitative
Interpretivism/ Constructionism	There is no single reality or truth. Reality is created by individuals and groups. (more relativist)	Knowledge is acquired through subjective interpretations	Researcher attempts to bracket their values and their influence on knowing (but value-free research is not possible)	Ethnography, Phenomenology, Discourse analysis, Grounded theory, etc.	Mainly qualitative
Critical/ emancipatory/ radical/ transformative	Single physical reality, but different social interpretations of that reality framed by power relations.	Knowledge is acquired through subjective interpretations	Researcher attacks the reality and hopes that their values will lead to transformation and empowerment of participants	Participatory action research, Critical ethnography, Critical discourse analysis, etc.	Mainly qualitative but could be quantitative
Pragmatism	Reality is constantly renegotiated in light of its usefulness	Knowledge is acquired through action.	Values of practical change are explicitly stated	Mixed methods, Action research, Design-based research, etc.	Mainly mixed methods

Example changes in methodological approaches and language

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(Post)-positivising ('positivist hangover') – an intentional act or a result of confusion?



Psychology generally, and counselling psychology specifically, has been dominated by positivist and postpositivist research paradigms and associated quantitative methods.

But what about 'qualitative methods'?

You can also draw from post-positivism even if you use qualitative methods, but you do not have to!!!

Signs of intentional or confused postpositivising:

- ✓ Preparing a list of expected themes/categories before data collection (codebook) and attempting to code interview data into these categories; following a deductive reasoning.
- ✓ Calculating the number of participants who are represented in each theme.
- ✓ Including several raters that need to reach consensus in identification of themes in interview data (intercoder reliability).
- ✓ Recruiting large samples for interviews with the purpose of 'strengthening' the generalising potential.
- ✓ Trying to separate researcher and participants in study design and data collection to minimize bias.
- ✓ Fixed and standard interview schedules (multiple-choice/closed questions, following the same protocol, no additional probes)

Example tasks that were given to students

1. 'Together, in groups, look at the 7 abstracts of the academic journal articles or dissertations that focus on the concept of 'resilience' in children. Try to identify the paradigm that the research was influenced by. Remember, the answer is not always clear or straightforward; do not fear confusion – it's part of critical thinking and learning process'.
2. 'In groups, discuss your own current research projects. Which paradigm do you think it can be positioned in? Are you happy with that? Does it align with your general beliefs or is it just chosen for this particular project because of the nature of the question under investigation? Do you think your topic can be researched within other paradigms?'

So, what was the
feedback?

Case study. Feedback from the collaborating lecturer.

‘Katia’s workshop provided that much-needed space for our students to reflect on their research and their position. Most of them do qualitative studies for their doctoral theses, and the concept of a “positivist hangover” was a refreshing idea for them. This realisation enabled them to shed some of the shackles of research that have felt so at-odds with their therapeutic training and to more confidently assert their position as researchers doing something that is clinically meaningful to them. The opportunity to learn from Katia has been incredibly helpful, and I have taken on some of these ideas in my own teaching and supervision.

It is a collaboration that we hope will continue’.

(Michelle Sled, Deputy Programme Director, Senior Research Fellow)

Case study. Feedback from students.

- ✓ Feeling **more informed opposed to tumbling along**. Thinking about philosophical underpinnings of the approach I am taking to the research and the meaning of this. A flexible unfolding rather than rigid approach.
- ✓ This will **facilitate thinking and direction** when I meet with my supervisor.

Thoughts

- Did I step into someone else's territory?
- What has EAP got to do with this? Is it within our remit? Does it align with our values and expertise? Are we the ones who can provide this 'space' Michelle was talking about?
- Am I qualified to talk about research paradigms? Are all EAP lecturers qualified? Who is qualified within HE to deliver this content?
- Who has time, space, resources, capacity in UK HE to discuss this content with postgraduate students?
- Do students really need this content? Is it possibly 'a bit too much'? (academic socialisation approach VS academic literacies approach)
- Would you do that in your universities? Can it become part of 'our' provision in the future?

Can our professional 'names' (job titles) define, liberate or restrict us?

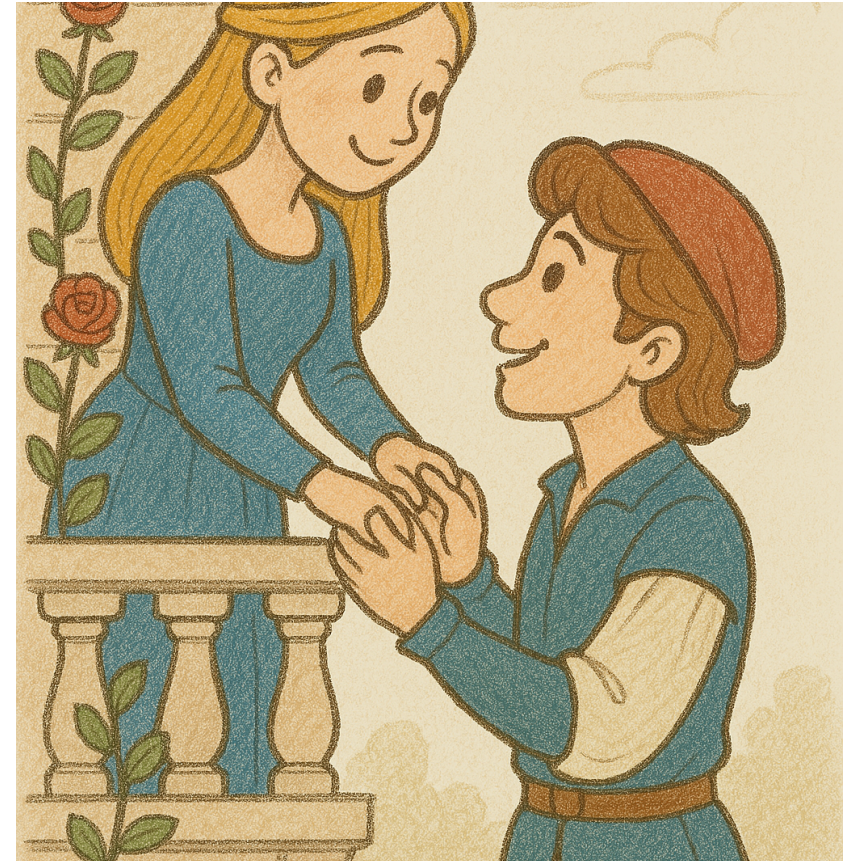
*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."
(*'Romeo and Juliet'*, Shakespeare) – **is that true for us?***

- **Does it matter what we are called as professionals within HE?**

EAP lecturer/tutor? Study Skills lecturer/tutor? Learning Development lecturer/tutor? Academic Writing lecturer/tutor? Academic Communication Lecturer?

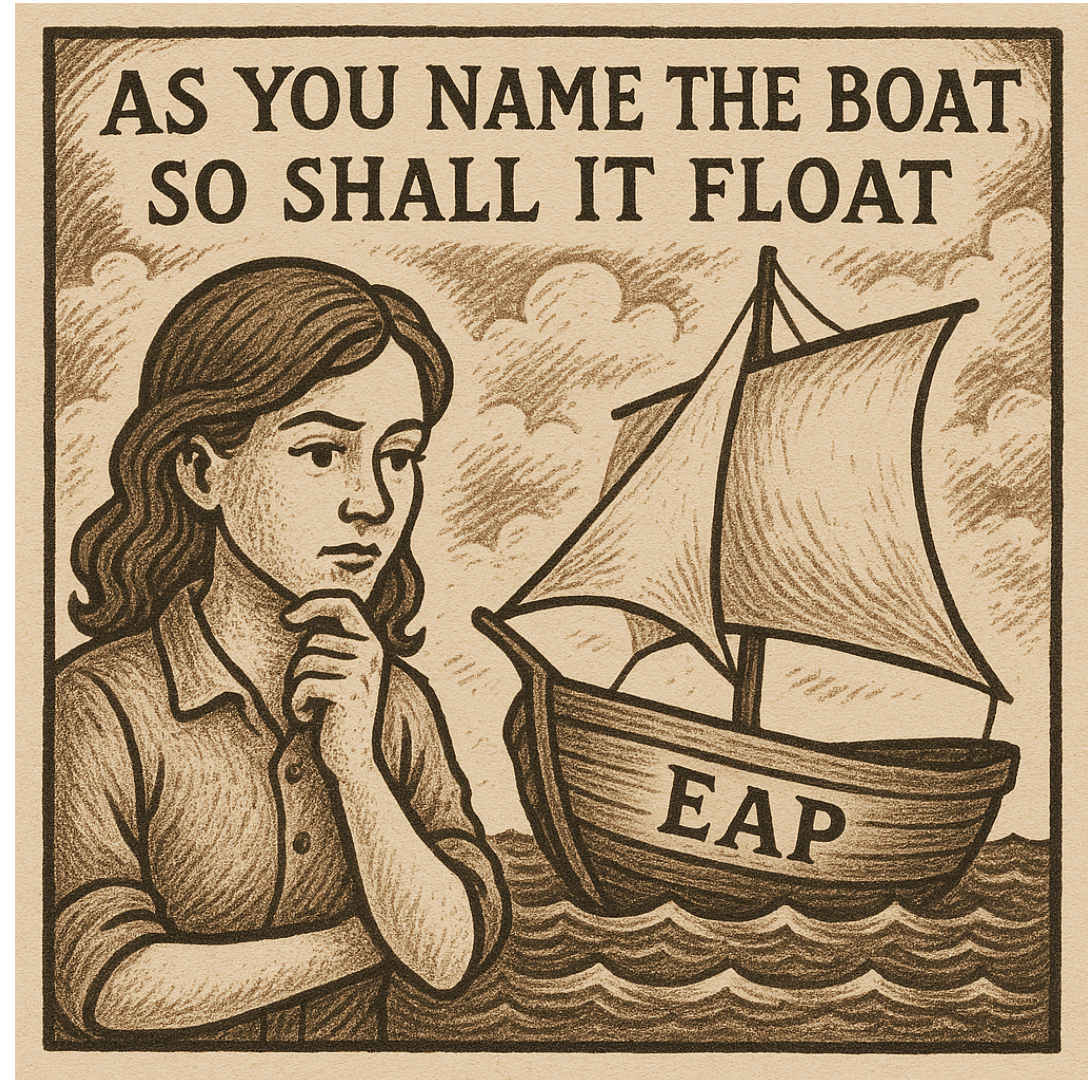
- **Does it matter what our centres/departments are called?**

Language Centre? Centre for Academic English? Academic Writing Centre? EAP Centre? Centre for Academic Development? Academic Communication Centre?



Does the change of name change nothing in our role/position?

Or can the 'right' name 'reposition' us within HE and help create collaborative opportunities with subject lecturers?



References

Gibson, W. (2017). Constructing knowledge through social research : debates in epistemology and ontology. In *Designing Research in Education: Concepts and Methodologies* (Vol. 0, pp. 54-73). SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529622775>

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