Transcript: Michelle Bolduc on signposting

Edward Mills
But I was wondering if if you could start just by explaining what you as an examiner do when you get a thesis ahead of the viva. Presumably the first thing you do is read it, but I mean, how do you how do you go about doing that?

Michelle Bolduc
Well, you know, it's a really interesting question, given now that all of the Covid regulations require that we don't have paper copies. I really need a paper copy in order to be able to read, so - I don't know whether you know this, Edward - but I requested paper copies of your dissertation. And I did so because the way that - I'm going to be just very practical about it - the way that I read is both by taking notes with a pen (really old-fashioned) on the thesis itself, on the pages, and also on a notepad that I keep next to me. So I go through, I read, I take notes on the thesis. I read it a second time. I take notes on the notepad. I read it a third time. I take further notes on my notepad. And then, usually my fourth reading is where I start to try to pull things onto some kind of a Word document so I can organise the comments thematically, whether it's based on argument or language use or some of the kinds of ideas that are linked across the the thesis and the questions that I might have.

Edward Mills
So could I ask when you're reading a thesis for whether it's the first time or the fourth time, what do you like to see? And is there anything that sort of really frustrates you? Is there anything you look at and are good or anything you look at and go, oh, hang on a minute, this is going to irritate me me?

Michelle Bolduc
Well, I would say that I really like signposting. I really like when I see what the argument is, I see clearly how the argument is progressing, the way in which the student has chosen to (or the candidate) has chosen to mark out, 'This is what I'm doing and this is why I'm doing it.' I pay really close attention actually to those features of argument that I don't think we teach quite enough, frankly. But but I think that having a sense of what your argument is, why it's important, how you're going to improve it makes for a much easier reading experience for the for the evaluator, for the examiner. But I think it's also important for you as a candidate to know: can you identify what it is that you're arguing and why you're arguing it, what's important about it? It sounds really simplistic, but oftentimes that's lacking. And so oftentimes, by the time you get to the the the viva, hopefully all of that is is quite clear.

Edward Mills
Is this sort of lack of structure, or lack of signposting, something you you would you would hope to sort of signal the upgrade stage if it's not if it's not immediately clear?

Michelle Bolduc
We do always signal it at the upgrade, but especially now what we're reading in terms of the upgrade tends to be a very small number of pages compared to what the the thesis ends up being, There can sometimes be a little bit of an issue of if students go through the upgrade, but they're still not able to mark out their argument and in a very clear way. It's it's really easy to get lost when you're writing your thesis. And Edward, I have your thesis sitting in front of me. And without the appendix, I seem to recall it was like three hundred and twenty nine pages, something like that.

Edward Mills
I think that's right. Yes.

Michelle Bolduc
You know, it's it's it's really hard over many, many pages like that to remember: well, how does how does page two hundred and twenty nine fit with what I said back on page seven? You've got to be able to to focus in on specific places in your argument, specific ideas, and yet still have an overarching idea of what it is that you're doing and how each specific idea responds to that overarching idea.

Edward Mills
And could I ask just for anyone who's not familiar with the term 'signposting', obviously how ideas relate to each other is one thing. But how would you describe signposting? Is that to do with how you signal all of that?

Michelle Bolduc
Well, it's about how you signal the way that a very specific idea is important to your argument on a local level and important to your argument on a on a general universal overarching level. And signposting doesn't mean anything really complicated. It can just mean explaining. I am looking at this particular idea because it relates to my argument in this way. In relation to signposting is the idea of connective tissue. Signposting gives the reader the idea that you know what this particular idea is doing for your argument and in your argument, and you're telling that to the reader. Connective tissue is making the connections between the idea: why is it that one idea follows another idea that you do just simply with transitions. Why is it that one idea follows another idea? That you do just simply with transitions. And it can be that it's important in terms of the paragraph structure, but typically speaking, by the time you're getting to writing your thesis, you don't have a problem with how you link paragraphs. It's more how you move from one idea to another.