Part 4: "Stop reading. Start writing. The best dissertation is a done dissertation." OR Examining Discourse Communities and Genres

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I could feel her eyes anxiously search my face as I looked through the thesis proposals my graduate advisee had brought in—three different proposals, on three different topics. The problem she was wrestling with didn't, in any way, stem from incompetence. This graduate student was not only exceptionally bright and dedicated, but also creative, critical, and passionate. The challenge she was facing was identifying and committing to a research project that she felt was equal measures interesting and meaningful.

As a graduate student, I had also spent many an afternoon at my local coffee shop during the summer I wrote my dissertation proposal, avidly reading all the scholarship I could find that was even tangentially related to my area of interest. Although reading and writing in that sun-drenched coffee shop was definitely one of the most blissful moments in my graduate school career, it wasn't one without its own frustrations. As a graduate student, I often felt lost in the vast sea of literature, and struggled to learn how to make space for myself among the authoritative voices of renowned scholars I came across in print. I grappled with ways to effectively situate my research questions in the interdisciplinary field of Second Language Writing by connecting ideas in the various disciplines of Applied Linguistics, Composition, and Education.

Now, sitting face to face with a graduate student advisee who was in the depths of navigating her own sea of literature, the challenge that I faced as her advisor was to enthusiastically support her mission to explore a question she was passionate about, and at the same time, help rein it into the scope and format of a master's thesis—a thesis that would meet the requirements of our graduate program and also make a sound contribution to the field of Second Language Writing. Faced with this role reversal, I found myself repeating some of the sage—albeit cliché—comments I had encountered as a graduate student which, at the time, seemed cryptic and out of reach: "I see where you're coming from, but there's no need to reinvent the wheel. You know what they say: A done dissertation is the best dissertation."

As I continue to mentor graduate student writers in our program, I have found that some questions are more or less expected from MA students coming to the

program with little research experience and who are learning new and unfamiliar genres of writing: How do I format a research paper? What methods do I use to collect data? How do I write an IRB application? Answering these types of questions is relatively straightforward, and I can often provide models or point students to resources on MA thesis requirements, research methods, and APA style guidelines. Other questions, however, are more complex: What is the purpose of a literature review? Can I critique this author's research in my literature review even though it is often-cited and well known in the field? Should I use first-person pronouns when writing my thesis? Why or why not? Who is the audience for my thesis? How do I draw from a different discipline while still anchoring my study in the field of Applied Linguistics? Can I explore a research question for my thesis that may have few pedagogical implications but is personally meaningful to me?

As I work through these complex (and necessary) questions with my graduate students, it has become clearer to me that learning how to write in graduate school does not only involve learning the textual features of a new genre. To write effectively, graduate students must also learn the underlying values and disciplinary expectations that are inextricably linked to the textual features of each new genre in which they write. Learning the rhetorical moves performed in literature reviews is only useful to the extent that graduate student writers understand and appreciate that they are engaging in broader conversations in the field through these moves in their writing (see Blazer & DeCapua, this collection; Caplan, this collection). Similarly, the intertextuality in graduate students' research papers has as much to do with the scholarly identities and positionalities of these writers as it has to do with accurate and effective citation practices (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006). To become more purposeful, deliberate, and effective writers, it's imperative that graduate student writers learn *how* to write in new genres as well as *why*. This takes time and perspective.

The challenge that I face, now in my position as a graduate student advisor, is to be able to clearly articulate the often opaque expectations of writing in graduate school. What are some effective ways for graduate students to learn the values and norms in their disciplines? How can advisors and mentors provide clear signposts and expectations for graduate students to move towards, while encouraging them to be creative, explore their scholarly identities, and pursue their interests? The following three chapters in this section of our collection speak to these questions.

References

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