

Chapter 22. When Writing Hurts: Positionality, Recovery, and Distance When Forming and Maintaining a Research Identity

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Whenever there's a need to visualize the writing process, the steps—often drawn with arrows or sometimes circles for zest—are tidy. You think about things. You write about things. You revisit things. Then, you publish things. And, always, writing is what moves it all forward.

While most of us acknowledge a neat, linear process is about as grounded in reality as dragons or unicorns, we often aren't transparent about what real writing processes look like, especially when one's positionality is integral to the work, such as when researching difficult, sensitive, traumatic, or personally meaningful topics. Rather than tidy lines, this chapter tells our stories about messy research and writing after our dissertations, about processes that don't follow neat lines but instead require decompression and distance. Positionality influences not only how we collect and interpret findings but also the important time we need to make sense of our research and communicate our understanding.

As an example of how positionality affects research and writing, we draw from our own, 4-year collaboration to highlight how we have had to bargain with the gains of making progress on our research versus the very real physically and mentally exhaustive demands of this time, our individual identities, and our connections to our work. And, to resituate how we teach writing and research for personally meaningful or difficult topics, we also offer recommendations for graduate students and early career researchers on the role of recovery in research projects requiring deep emotional, mental, and/or physical commitment, especially in the writing and sharing of these experiences.

Finding Our Positions: Our Own Messy Lines During a 4-Year Collaboration

We collaborated on a research article, stemming from our dissertations, that took about 4 years to publish. Our dissertations were not on similar topics: Kathleen

explored issues of silencing and violence in youth athletic training, and Leah did an accessible design study for users with affective disorders. Despite the difference in subject matter, our research personally impacted us in parallel ways. Strangers before starting this project, we were brought together by a shared mentor who saw similar questions in our work and encouraged us to explore these tensions further together. Our dissertations, both deeply connected to our positionalities, left us with many questions about the tensions between researcher subjectivity, personal connections to our research communities, the value and risks of emotional commitment, and the corporeal consequences of this commitment. While we were both excited about the project, and anticipated completing it in a single academic term, more than 3 years would pass before we completed a full draft of our article and submitted it for journal consideration.

The Fall of 2020, when we began our collaboration, was a tumultuous time. At the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we had defended our dissertations via Zoom that summer and celebrated completing our degrees as much as social isolation would allow, but the entire process had left us both exhausted and with complicated feelings about our research and our connection to it. We needed time for recovery and decompression from research projects that required deep emotional, mental, and even physical commitment, as well as from the general “overdrive” mode of dissertating. But, at that time, we did not factor rest for the weary into our research agendas.

Our own positionality as researchers, storytellers, collaborators, and survivors of dissertations on difficult and sensitive topics is therefore at the heart of our decision to write this chapter together and support the editors’ call for “positionality-as-practice.” Before discussing pedagogical approaches, we first want to share some of the struggles we’ve encountered with positionality during our own writing process, as we believe the sharing of imperfect stories to be an important pedagogical approach in and of itself. While this story has a “happy” ending (the article has recently been published!), we feel it is important to share our experience to destigmatize slow writing and demonstrate how even no writing is an important and necessary part of the research process. We hope our stories of this research collaboration—both exhausting and delightful—reflect how positionality exists with and through the writing process, both before and after a dissertation defense, and encourage other emergent scholars who feel they do not reach the benchmarks of the “ideal researcher.”

Leah’s Story: Breaking Up with My Research Trajectory

My research, for the most part, centers around disability, mental illness, and/or Madness. Like many disability researchers, I’m drawn to this area because of my lived experience: I am bipolar and identify as mentally ill. I wrote my dissertation on affective disorders and have spent a few dedicated years to thinking, reading, and writing about mental illness or adjacent topics.

Shortly before I defended my dissertation, the pandemic and self-isolating began. Isolating, in addition to moving and starting a new tenure-track position during the height of quarantine, drove me deep into a depressive cycle. When it is hard to just brush your teeth, it is even harder to reflect and process research on mental illness—research that requires regular self-examination on your own relationship to your bodymind. Trying to revisit my dissertation on depression, while depressed, actively enabled a negative feedback loop that was not sustainable.

Nevertheless, for my first few years as an assistant professor, I still tried to write when my mind and my body were actively telling me that doing so would be cutting a few corners on my hierarchy of needs. As a result, trying to prepare my research felt like having a tire stuck in the mud that was spinning over and over with nowhere to go. The act of writing did not move anything forward for me; it often felt like trying to do so only entrenched me further. I started to feel apprehensive toward my own work, and as a result, very little felt feasible or possible through my research. I began hating writing in general and would go months without opening a document because doing so only made me feel worse. At a certain point, I made the decision to temporarily give up writing in my main area of research, and instead started other projects in less personally demanding areas. This move has allowed me to slowly repair my relationship to writing. For my own well-being, I had to break-up with my work to make any difference with it.

Kathleen's Story: Perfect Imperfect Timing

In hindsight, I see now that I was not emotionally prepared for my dissertation subject and methodology. Prompted by my own daughter's experiences as a young gymnast (and, frankly, by a lot of anger), I interrogated systems and rhetorics of silencing in sports training using the case study of the Larry Nassar abuse scandal at Michigan State University and within USA Gymnastics. Before my dissertation, I had not studied issues of sexual violence and certainly not cases involving primarily child victims.

I watched, transcribed, and analyzed hours of testimony from Nassar's trials—often by myself and isolated from my loved ones. This included 181 victims' voices and more than 600 pages of text. In the end, the mental toll of countless hours spent alone listening to and reading horrific stories of child sexual abuse is hard to describe. This process carried an enormous emotional burden, just as I was emotionally invested in the research.

Looking back, I see many of my "positions" in life contributing to our article's elongated timeline, such being a mother, daughter, spouse, teacher, writer, friend, and colleague. And, not long into our collaboration, my job position literally changed, as I transitioned from my teaching position of 6 years at a small, private, business-focused college to a public, STEM-only university. Personally, this was a beneficial move. But as a researcher, my position declined, as I no longer received credit or course release for my research activities. I found myself in the position

of many non-tenure-track and contingent faculty—conducting research because it is critically important to me but also while handling a larger course load than my colleagues and without institutional recognition or support. Even so, in the years that followed, I took my dissertation from book proposal to publication, accepting the extra work I really did not have time for and pushing through emotional exhaustion because the topic just meant that much to me.

Always hanging on in the background of the changes and challenges during that time was the project with Leah—the revivals, the lulls, the near death of the project, and the furious pushes. And through it all was a desire to see this project to publication, in part, because it directly addresses the very same issues that plagued our progress. In the end, I see our long timeline, in all of its glorious messiness, as perfect timing.

Our project “emerged from the pit,” so to speak, after we encountered a very relevant special issue call for proposals (CFP) in March 2023 that seemed to be a perfect fit for our article. This CFP gave us the sense of purpose and direction we needed to move forward with the project. So, while we do interrogate timelines in this chapter, we also acknowledge that structure, purpose, and even certain pressures can be motivational and perhaps necessary to researchers. And in the end, our own messy lines of pause, break, and postponement were actually kairotic in that they led us to the right moment to pursue publication.

Unfortunately, taking our time with our work, including time to process, rest, and heal from difficult projects, often conflicts with an academic culture that encourages researchers to hide their “shortcomings” and shuns “unproductive” behavior. Therefore, we now offer reflections to help graduate students and early career scholars negotiate their own positionalities, timelines, and need for distance from their research.

From Messy Lines to Messy Nets: Teaching for Recovery and Community in Writing

While we both felt well-prepared for the dissertation process, and both of us benefited from positive and supportive mentorship while working on our research, we could not possibly have anticipated the challenges of transitioning from graduate students to post-graduates in a pandemic world, nor the long-term effects of our relationships to our work. In this limbo realm post-defense, we were deeply missing the community of scholars and academic discourse we had enjoyed while in a graduate program. We were struggling to self-motivate, especially to revisit dissertation work that had been emotionally and physically exhausting. We were navigating challenging new work situations, sometimes in isolation. And, inevitably, deadlines loomed and time pressure demanded outputs.

When we were outlining notes for this chapter, one line written in passing kept staring back at us from the page: Why are we killing ourselves for this? We highlighted it in yellow and added a dozen more question marks. Why are we

literally hurting ourselves to meet writing deadlines others set, comply with tenure and promotion cycles (or in other cases write without institutional support), and internalize or ignore the very real consequences of our research? Unfortunately, we still do not have a good answer for this question (and maybe we never will), but we believe part of the solution is being honest about the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of our research and making that pain visible to other scholars. To conclude this chapter, we offer reflections and suggestions for reworking the writing and research process away from models that prioritize production and deliverables over individual identities and needs.

Leah's Reflections and Suggestions: Plateaued Progress and Relearning Yourself through Research

On the academic job market, one of the most common questions you're asked is what's the 5-year plan: what grants are you going to go after, what are your publication plans for your dissertation, and where would you like your career to be by the time you reach the point for tenure review? In the winter of 2019, as I was drafting my job materials, I made very clear roadmaps for myself: I was going to write a book, target journals x-y-z, and apply for one of the numerous acronym soup grants. It turns out I was a liar. This is okay.

Part of building a research trajectory that is integrally linked to your identity is that said research often necessitates a relearning of how you understand yourself and your thinking. Numerous scholars have written more eloquently on the self-transformative effect of research, but I wonder how this strange phenomenon of negotiation might be understood when preparing graduate researchers and early career scholars not just to start projects that are intimately connected to their various positionalities but also to sustain themselves throughout fluctuating demands and limits while doing so.

While a culminating project, article, or conference presentation are deliverables with set parameters and end points, a continuing relationship to one's personally meaningful research lacks such clearly defined boundaries. When doing work connected to your positionality, there is a fundamental difference between research projects, that is, the things you facilitate or make, and research identity, the intrinsic parts that manifest and carry you through the research and writing process in the long-term. The latter is always in flux, and sometimes it is difficult to reconcile institutional expectations and their strict timetables against the need to process, rest, and relearn. In teaching new researchers to embark on significant research projects, it's important to make and prepare for this distinction. It is entirely possible that positionality interferes with productivity, and readings, training, or practices of embodied listening—of knowing your limits, of knowing what exhaustion is telling you—is a critical part for maintaining a trajectory that sometimes requires a plateau to get out of the ditch. What distance from my work did for me is it helped me stop being frustrated at the lack of forward

progress, and made me more intentional about where I allocate my time and energy—so that research becomes an act of sustenance rather than endurance.

Kathleen's Reflections and Suggestions: It's Okay Not to Be Okay

In my dissertation, I critique sports training techniques that force athletes to separate and repress their own mind and self from the expected emotional and physical responses to their training and competition. In the texts I studied, many gymnasts reported that they could not safely express emotions like fear and pain and needed to detach and suppress these natural responses from their physical performances. I found these reports deeply troubling, especially as the mother of a young gymnast. Ironically, through my subsequent interrogation of my own dissertation process, I now see that I often hesitated to express my own natural physical, psychological, and emotional responses to my research. I worried about the vulnerability of this personal disclosure and that I would be judged as too subjective or too sensitive. This research has taught me that it's okay not to be okay, and that we should not shy away from making our stress, pain, and emotion visible in our research.

I see the value of resisting emotionally neutral and productivity-driven models of scholarship and instead promoting teaching practices that destigmatize the need to take time with our writing. Graduate students and early career researchers would benefit from open, non-judgmental spaces where they can discuss their embodied reactions to difficult research, which supports an overall community of academic care. I see creating distance and taking time away from difficult research as one potential solution to protecting a researcher's well-being, and I encourage researchers to re-envision their research timelines in light of their own bodily and mental thresholds. However, I am well aware that timelines and research demands—and the stigma around not meeting imposed deadlines—cannot change unless institutions change. On the individual level, though, I see mentorship, peer-to-peer collaboration, and debriefing opportunities as important tools for building communities of care that respect individual timelines, needs, and positionalities within research. For me, distance from my research, combined with the opportunity to share concerns with friendly and knowledgeable collaborators, helped me reconsider both my role as a researcher and my relationship to that research in extremely helpful and sustaining ways.

So, we conclude this chapter where we began: with a messy, chaotic writing process that was perfectly slow and necessarily long. The collaboration story we share in these pages is in itself an example of the communities of care we seek. We both benefited from positive mentorship experiences that respected our vulnerability and embodied reactions to difficult research—and that ultimately connected us to collaborate and explore these issues together. While we took our time with that project (about 3.5 years longer than expected), we have also learned to respect the value and power of not doing anything when writing.