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Writing a Thesis/ Dissertation: Transitioning from Reporter to Scholar

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In graduate school, students receive validation for showing what they know. Students collect, digest, and report on knowledge generated by others to verify their understanding of the content. They consume and re-present existing scholarly insights for the primary purpose of explaining to a professor the depth of understanding they possess about the ideas of a theorist, school, movement, or text. In other words, students learn skills that enable them to be successful as reporters rather than scholars.

Because they are rewarded for their reportorial skills in graduate school, students often apply the same skills when they tackle their theses and dissertations. The writing of a thesis or dissertation, however, requires the skills of a scholar—which are substantially different skills from those that work effectively in completing coursework or the comprehensive exam. If students continue to apply the reporter model rather than the scholar model to the thesis or dissertation, they are likely to become stuck and to have difficulty finishing their project.

The scholar uses writing in a different way from the reporter. Reporters use writing to list facts that validate their understanding of a concept, while scholars use writing to point to their own original insights about a text or data set. Rather than reporting what is already known, scholars endeavor to create new knowledge. Regardless of the specific methodological tradition in which the student is working—for example, critical, rhetorical, historiographic, or quantita-

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tive (i.e., Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000; Stacks & Hocking, 1999)—adopting a scholar model enables students to approach the tasks of choosing a topic and designing the study, writing the literature review, analyzing data, and writing up the study in ways that facilitate efficient completion of the project.

CHOOSING THE TOPIC AND DESIGNING THE STUDY

Choosing a topic for the thesis or dissertation is one place where students often enact the reporter rather than the scholar role. They seek a topic using a process that relies on what others believe is important. Much like a reporter, they go every which way, trying to sniff out a story that someone else has created instead of generating their own. The typical forms that this process assumes include searching through literature to see if something strikes the student as interesting or chatting for a few minutes with the advisor or other committee members about an idea, hoping for a response that sanctions an idea as an appropriate topic.

A conceptual conversation, in contrast, gives students a means for choosing a topic from the perspective of a scholar; the conversation produces a topic from the student's own interests rather than the interests of others. A conceptual conversation is an extended discussion a student has with someone to create a plan for the thesis or dissertation. The discussion is designed to help students conceive of their projects by funneling their knowledge and preferences efficiently and effectively into an appropriate topic. This conversation gives the student a specific time period—usually no more than a week—to make all of the key decisions about the thesis or dissertation. The interaction occurs before the student writes the proposal because the decisions that are made in this conversation become the key components of the pre-proposal—a plan that includes the key decisions about the project that then becomes the basis for the proposal.

Ideally, the conceptual conversation should involve the student's advisor as the conversational partner. Sometimes, though, advisors are not the best conversational partners for any number of reasons—perhaps an advisor does not have the time required to engage in this kind of conversation, maybe a student does not know their advisor well, or a student might feel intimidated by his or her advisor. If this is the case, another faculty member, a fellow graduate student, a friend, a spouse, or a partner will work just fine. Knowledge of the student's discipline is not required to be an effective partner in the conversation.

To set up the conversation, the partners need to set aside a block of uninterrupted time—ideally, two to three hours. If they do not figure out the student's topic in this amount of time, they will want to schedule another session as soon as possible to maintain the momentum that has been generated. This meeting should be held in a place where the participants will not be interrupted—in someone's home or at a coffee shop, for example, rather than in an office at school. Students should bring to the conversation their interests, their enthusiasm, and perhaps a tape recorder to record the conversation. The partner should bring

a commitment to spend a significant amount of time with the student, excitement about what the conversation will produce, a tablet to write on, and a pen or pencil.

What happens in the conversation is that the student's partner asks questions designed to help the student identify some key pieces or elements that will be a part of the thesis or dissertation. To generate these key pieces, the partner might want to ask the student questions such as these:

- "What are your major interests in your discipline?"
- "What personal experiences have you had that were particularly meaningful for you that are relevant to your discipline?"
- "What coursework did you take that you found most exciting?"
- "What theories and concepts are most interesting to you?"
- "Are there some ideas you have studied that you are curious about and want to explore in more depth?"
- "With what kinds of data do you enjoy working?"
- "Do you have ideas for specific data, texts, or artifacts you would like to study?"
- "Are there resources to which you have access that could provide participants or data for your study? Do your volunteer activities or your job offer any of these resources? Is there someone you know who could give you access to these kinds of resources? Is there an archive, organization, or upcoming event in your community that is ripe for analysis?"
- "What approach or methods do you like to use when you do research?"
- "What are your career goals? How would this project help you achieve those goals?"

As students answer the questions, their partners should encourage them to continue talking by asking exploratory, open-ended, follow-up questions. Partners should listen closely and take detailed notes about what the student says, leaving the student free to focus on thinking and talking. The partner should also note in some way the ideas that seem most important to the student as they are articulated.

When students begin repeating themselves and are no longer adding new information to the conversation, they probably are finished articulating their ideas. This is the time for the student and the partner to identify the key pieces that emerged from the conversation that the student wants to make sure are included in the thesis or dissertation. Ultimately, the student wants to identify seven key pieces for the thesis or dissertation. These constitute the plan or pre-proposal for the dissertation. The key pieces are:

1. A research question to guide the study
2. Some data to analyze
3. An approach to or method of data collection
4. A process or method for analyzing data
5. The areas of literature that will be included in the literature review
6. Reasons why the study is significant
7. Outline of the chapters of the thesis or dissertation

Students should not worry if they know some key pieces they want in their project but not all of them. They might know the data they want to analyze

and the method they want to use to collect those data, for example, but they do not know the research question, the method for analyzing the data, the categories of the literature review, why the study is significant, or how the dissertation will be organized. The goal at this time is simply to identify the key pieces of which the student is certain.

Following identification of the key pieces that the student is sure about, the student and the conversational partner turn their attention to creating the pre-proposal for the thesis or dissertation. The pre-proposal is a one-page summary of the key pieces of the thesis or dissertation. To create the pre-proposal, the student and the conversational partner fill in the pieces that they did not identify earlier in the conceptual conversation. They work to determine what the other pieces of the dissertation design are going to be that will align with the pieces articulated initially. They would figure out, for example, what research question could be asked about the data, the categories of literature derived from the research question, why the project is significant, and so on. (If the conversational partner is not an academician, filling in the pieces to create the pre-proposal might be difficult simply because that individual lacks knowledge about research design. If this is the case, filling in the pieces might best be done with a fellow graduate student or the advisor.)

When the pre-proposal has been developed, with all of the key decisions summarized on a single sheet of paper, the pre-proposal should be assessed for internal consistency among all of the elements. A good pre-proposal is one to which positive answers can be given to these questions:

- Does everything align with the research question?
- Are the data a good example of the phenomenon you want to study?
- Can your question be answered with the approach or method you propose?
- Are the categories of the literature review derived from the key terms of the research question?
- Do the reasons for doing the study relate to the research question and the categories of literature covered in the literature review?
- Do the chapters you are planning make sense given your data and your method?
- Can the study be done with the resources and time that you have available?

The conceptual conversation, then, creates a topic for the thesis or dissertation that is of interest to the student because it is developed from the student's preferences and resources. The topic emerges organically from the student's articulation of ideas and not from any agendas of others. When the scholar model rather than the reporter model is applied at this crucial first step of the project, the student is off to a good start in efficiently completing a high-quality project.

WRITING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

When students write literature reviews for papers in classes or for comprehensive exams, they report information to validate their knowledge of a topic. They present the ideas that come from others to show how much research they have done and how much they know about a topic. In a thesis or dissertation, in

contrast, learning the literature is not an end in itself. Instead, literature is used to make an argument concerning how the proposed study engages the various perspectives and extant knowledge on that topic.

The first step in the literature review, of course, is to gather the literature in the categories identified in the pre-proposal. When students have gathered all of their books and articles and see all of them stacked in front of them, they are likely to feel utterly overwhelmed. Just reading all of the works seems like an insurmountable task, much less keeping track of everything and putting it together in a meaningful way. A five-step method is available to make processing and writing the literature efficient and manageable and to produce a literature review from the perspective of a scholar instead of a reporter: (1) rapid reviewing of sources, (2) systematic analysis, (3) sorting and categorizing excerpts from the sources, (4) creating a conceptual schema, and (5) using the schema to organize and write the literature review.

Reviewing literature for the literature review involves skimming rather than deep and comprehensive reading. The student begins by selecting a book from the stack of literature and opening it to the table of contents. The student looks through the table of contents to see what chapters appear to be relevant to the literature review. If a chapter seems relevant to the project, the student turns to that chapter and reviews the section headings. If a section seems relevant to the study, the student skims it, looking for these things:

- Claims and findings about the constructs being investigated
- Definitions of terms
- Calls for follow-up studies relevant to the project
- Gaps in the literature
- Disagreements about the constructs being investigated

The student reads each page in the section, looking for any sentences, paragraphs, or excerpts that include one or more of the above items. This reading is not done to extract deep meaning or to remember. Instead, the student is skimming, looking for ideas relevant to the categories of the literature review. When a relevant idea or passage is identified, it should be marked with a line in the margin (in pencil if the book is borrowed from a library).

After coding and marking all of the books and articles in this way, the student goes to a copy machine, pages through each book or article, and copies all of the pages that have lines in the margins (erasing pencil marks before returning books borrowed from a library). After making a photocopy of a page, the student should write an abbreviation for the source and the page number in the margin of each marked passage on the photocopied page. The student then cuts out the passages marked from the photocopied pages. At the end of this process, all of the sources combined make a huge pile of slips of paper containing excerpts from the literature.

The next step is to sort the pieces of paper according to like topic. Everything that is about the same idea goes in the same pile. When the sorting is done, the piles should be put into envelopes and the envelopes labeled. What these envelopes represent are the major ideas relevant to the project and thus the major areas of the literature review. The ideas represented by the envelopes then get

transformed into a conceptual schema or creative synthesis for the literature review.

A conceptual schema is a way of organizing the literature review to show how the relevant pieces of the literature relate to one another. The schema allows students to tell a story about the content of the literature review. This creative synthesis is not a chronological description of literature in which the student takes each study in turn and discusses it in chronological order. Such reviews are tedious because they do not make an argument or connect the studies to one another. A literature review organized around a conceptual schema, in contrast, is organized by major topics and not by individual studies so that the new study is positioned within the theoretical conversation of the field.

Students have the mechanism for creating the conceptual schema for the literature right in front of them—the envelopes containing the passages from the literature. The next step is to type a list of the labels that are on the envelopes, using a large font size and leaving a couple of spaces between each of the labels in the list. The student then cuts the labels apart, lays them out in any order on a table or desk, and begins to play around with the possible relationships among the topics represented by the labels. Perhaps the literature can be organized by different influences on a phenomenon, components of a phenomenon, functions, outcomes, models, ways of doing something, elements of a process, or multiple perspectives on a phenomenon.

By moving the labels into different patterns, the student can try out different ways of organizing the literature. The resulting schema should encompass all or most of the labels in a way that makes sense and that connects the major areas of the literature. The schema also should help the student enter the theoretical conversation of the discipline about the topic in a meaningful and insightful way.

The student then selects a section of the literature review to write, starting at any place in the schema because the student understands the various sections of the conceptual schema, how they relate to one another, and an order in which to discuss them. The student finds the envelope with the excerpts related to the topic of the selected section, takes all the excerpts from that envelope, and lays them out on the desk. By playing with different ways of arranging them, the student can create a mini-conceptual schema that presents the argument about literature in that area.

Now comes the magical part because the literature review almost writes itself. The student starts with the first excerpt and types it into the computer. The student literally writes through the pile by typing in the second excerpt, the third excerpt, the fourth excerpt, and all the way through to the last one. Of course, introductions, overviews, arguments about the excerpts, and transitions have to be added between the excerpts, but those are easy because the student is clear about the argument being made.

Because students are using the ideas of others, the substance of the literature review is not theirs, of course. But how they present the literature review and the connections they make among the pieces of the literature are students' own unique inventions. By coding their literature to create an innovative conceptual schema, students have begun to do original scholarship—the work of the scholar instead of the reporter—and have an excellent start on the proposal for the thesis or dissertation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Because there are well-established procedures for analyzing quantitative data and students who are using such data are likely to be familiar with them, the focus in this discussion of coding data will be on qualitative data—whether texts like speeches, newspaper articles, or literature; transcripts of videotapes of focus groups or interactions; printouts of online discussions, or transcripts of interviews. The process of coding these kinds of data tends to constitute a major obstacle for many students. One reason is because, when students are generating insights for a paper, they are likely to engage the reporter model, just as they tend to do with the other tasks in the thesis or dissertation process. In this case, students typically begin with a theory they believe will explain the data. They plop the theory onto the data and then conclude that the data support the theory. A student using the reporter model, for example, might believe that a particular set of interview data can be explained by Baxter and Montgomery's (1988) theory of dialectics in relationships. Analyzing the data then takes the form of looking quickly through the data and marking any clusters of contradictions they see— *integration-separation* and *stability-change*, for example. The student then concludes that the interviews can best be explained as enacting various dialectics.

The scholar model of analyzing qualitative data, in contrast, uses detailed, systematic analysis to generate original insights from data. The insights that emerge often surprise and challenge the student because systematic analysis discourages the use of conventional explanations in the form of existing theories and thus allows the student to see something new in a body of data. Analyzing data within the scholar model involves five steps: (1) using the research question to identify units of analysis, (2) identifying and labeling the units of analysis in the data, (3) organizing the units of analysis into meaningful categories, (4) creating an explanatory schema, and (5) using the explanatory schema to organize and write up the results.

Using data rather than an existing theory to generate the answer to a research question is what allows a scholar to make a unique contribution to a field. The first step in finding that answer involves identifying units of analysis, which are derived from the research question. For example, if the research question asks how parents transmit political beliefs to their children, the unit of analysis would be methods of transmission of political beliefs, whatever form those might assume.

To code for a unit of analysis, students systematically and carefully review the complete set of data, searching for any occurrence of the unit. Whenever they find an example of the unit of analysis, they write a code next to the excerpt in the margin that captures the essence of the excerpt at a literal level. For example, if the student is coding interviews for methods that parents use to transmit political beliefs to children and encounters an example where a parent says the family watches and discusses Fox news together, the code would be "watches and discusses Fox news." Next to the code, the student should provide a shorthand citation to that data source and page—something like "2-9," for example, to reference interview 2, page 9. The student continues moving through the data, identifying and coding units of analysis.

A variety of kinds of software are available for coding qualitative data such as NUDIST and ATLAS.ti, and students often are tempted to use one of these

software programs for coding their data. Use of such software, however, replicates the reporter model because it creates substantial distance between a student and the data, diminishing the student's ability to understand the conceptual connections among the units of analysis or categories of the data. This diminished understanding of these connections often leads students to approach qualitative data as if it were quantitative data and to skip the discovery of insights that produce interesting results (Seidel, 1991).

When students have finished coding the data, they make a copy of the pages of the data that contain the marked excerpts and cut the individual excerpts out of the copied pages. They then sort the codes into similar groups or categories, putting all like topics together. For example, the student who is searching for methods parents use to transmit political beliefs might group the excerpt "watches and discusses Fox news" with another that says "discusses school books" and a third that says "explains President's state of the union speech." Together, these excerpts create a pile of examples that have a shared method of transmission— "explicit discussions." Other piles that might emerge from sorting the excerpts might be "modeling behavior," "corrective rewards," and "punishing silences." The labels for the piles, then, are not determined before the piles of excerpts are created but emerge from the shared similarity of the excerpts within a category. Once all excerpts are sorted into piles, the student assigns labels to each pile, puts the piles of excerpts into separate envelopes, and labels the envelopes.

The next step in the coding process is to create an explanatory schema or theory that answers the research question using the data. To do this, the student types a list of the labels created for the piles in a large font size with several spaces between the labels, just as was done for the literature review. Then the student cuts the labels apart, lays them out on a large bare surface, and works to arrange them into a pattern that explains the unique relationship among the categories that represent the data. Again, the movable labels allow experimentation with many different ways of organizing the categories that emerged from the data.

An explanatory schema is a more insightful way of presenting the results of coding data than what is often produced in qualitative studies—simply listing six or seven methods of transmission, for example, that parents use to convey political beliefs to children. While this simple listing of methods is one possible organizing schema for sharing results in a thesis or dissertation, this finding is unlikely to explore or explain rich connections among those methods of transmission and is also unlikely to generate a new theory about them. When the student arranges the labels into an explanatory schema, significant relationships among the categories are often discovered that were neither obvious nor expected beforehand. The student may discover, for example, that all of the methods that parents use to transmit political beliefs to children reproduce the actions that a traffic cop uses to control the flow of traffic. This discovery would create an explanatory schema that metaphorically presents parents who are transmitting their political beliefs as traffic cops. Such a relationship is able to generate new knowledge by contributing a new theory to the discipline.

WRITING UP THE STUDY

As students sit down to write, they often find themselves staring for hours at an empty computer screen or doing anything but writing. Once again, the

difficulty is often that they are applying a reporter rather than a scholar model to their work. Reporters have formulas to follow in writing up their stories, and they largely insert a story into that formula. In contrast, because it is designed to produce new insights, a thesis or a dissertation requires organizing findings and writing them up in ways that are unique to the particular project. The student must generate the particular means out of the project itself.

The most common way in which students are likely to respond to the requirement to produce original scholarship is by enacting roles that enable them to do things other than write. Four of the most common of these roles are the housekeeper, the model employee, the patient, and the proxy critic. These roles are appealing because they provide rewards to students at a time when they feel the need for some kind of affirmation. After all, they are not getting the rewards that would come if they were actually making progress on the thesis or dissertation.

Housekeeper

A student sits down to work on the thesis or dissertation and decides that the kitchen cupboards need cleaning or the laundry needs to be done or the plants need to be watered or e-mail needs to be answered. What is going on with all of these variations on the housekeeper role is that the student is doing things other than writing in the belief that the completion of these tasks will make writing easier. This student believes that the conditions in the writing environment must be perfect before any writing can get done, so a great deal of time is spent trying to make those conditions perfect.

Model Employee

Students enact the role of the model employee when they have a job to do—paid or otherwise—and let the demands of that job push their writing aside. Because there is never an end to what individuals can do on the job when they are busy being perfect employees, the tasks multiply to fill the time available. Graduate students often adopt the role of the model employee when they spend a great deal of time over-teaching—preparing far too much for each class. Students also can be model employees in their personal lives, choosing to be the perfect spouse, partner, or parent. Although these students know their priority is to finish their thesis or dissertation, they keep busy with less important, short-term tasks. Once they are immersed in the busyness of some other area of their lives, there seems to be no room for any other high-priority task such as working on the thesis or dissertation.

Patient

The patient is the role students adopt if their scholarly work consists largely of trying to cure themselves of whatever is preventing them from making progress on their writing. Students can assume a patient role in various ways—by joining support groups, going into therapy, or focusing on physical ailments. In the role of the patient, students give power to some condition and allow it to stand in the way between them and a completed writing project. Their response is to do the work that reinforces and highlights the disease so that it becomes the

thing on which students focus their attention, and they count this as work on the thesis or dissertation.

Proxy Critic

Some students will write a sentence and immediately begin to wonder about what they have just written. "This isn't good enough," they say to themselves, and they stop writing. These students feel like they need approval before they can proceed, but, of course, there is no one who will approve every sentence at the moment it is written. In this case, students have assumed the role of the proxy critic—an imaginary editor or critic who stops the flow of ideas by assessing them prematurely. In this role, students are forgetting that writing and editing are two separate processes. The first process is getting the ideas on paper, and the second (and separate) step is to scrutinize and revise.

What is common to the roles that students adopt to keep them from having to write is that the roles allow students to do things other than write. Thus, to counter these roles, students must make writing a regular, recurring activity. Key to writing regularly is to work on writing according to a schedule. Even if a student has just an hour or two to devote to writing each day, those hours should be scheduled, and writing during those hours should be a sacred part of the day. Students who believe they have no time during a day for regular writing should chart their daily activities for a week or two in half-hour blocks. They undoubtedly will discover that they are spending time on nonessential activities that could be used to work on the thesis or dissertation.

If writing in a sustained fashion for an extended period of time proves difficult, students might want to try the 40-minute cycle. This is a system in which a student does 40 minutes of sustained work, takes a 20-minute break, and then repeats the cycle. The 40-minute cycle prevents students from becoming physically tired and burned out. When they feel like they cannot face working on the thesis or dissertation, knowing that they just have to complete two or three 40-minutes cycles seems like something that is possible to do.

Some students have trouble keeping themselves on a schedule. They can easily slide into adopting or perpetuating a housekeeper or a patient role, for example, and never quite get around to making or sticking to a schedule in which they really do work on the thesis or dissertation. These students might try keeping a record of how many hours they write each day and sharing that record with someone at the end of every week. Without a commitment to sharing their records with someone else, students easily can convince themselves that they will begin writing "tomorrow."

When students are done with their scheduled writing period for the day, they should stop and put their writing aside. They have met their goals for the day, so there is no reason to feel guilty. Students may be tempted to keep writing if they are making good progress, but learning to stop at regular times for breaks is an important part of learning to write regularly. Stopping at the end of the designated time keeps students from becoming hungry or exhausted, both of which make writing difficult. Plus, stopping at a point when they are eager to write more makes it easy to begin writing at the next session.

Writing a thesis or dissertation involves many processes that students have done before in their graduate study—choosing a topic for a paper and designing research studies, writing literature reviews, coding data, and writing papers. But if students approach these activities in the ways they did for their coursework or comprehensive exams—using a reporter model—they will have a difficult time successfully completing a thesis or a dissertation. The thesis or dissertation requires accomplishing these various processes using a scholar model, one in which students generate original insights and theories instead of relying on the insights and theories of others. The more quickly and completely students adopt and apply the scholar role as they engage the various processes of the dissertation, the more efficiently they will complete their projects and the more original their contributions will be to the communication discipline.[1]

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