

Carpe Diem or Carpe Thesis? How Graduate Students Deal With Their Thesis Writing

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Abstract:

This present study examined the different experiences and challenges graduate students encountered in writing their thesis. Two dissertation writers and 12 thesis writers participated in the study, which was conducted during the Academic Year 2018-2019. Semistructured interviewing, that is, with the aid of a validated and pilot-tested interview protocol was employed in collecting data; interview transcripts constituted the collected qualitative data. The qualitative data were analyzed following three major stages, viz., open-coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The rigorous analysis resulted in four major themes, the findings of the study: 1) academic preparation, 2) community support, 3) writing hindrances, and 4) personal motivation. Good academic preparations, genuine community support, and personal motivation, be it intrinsic or extrinsic, serve as indispensable bludgeon in the thesis writers' challenging journey towards the completion of their degree. These factors make them seize their theses (carpe theses) and finally finish the same with great satisfaction.

An in-depth qualitative study could be done on how thesis advisers or supervisors guide their advisees in the conduct of the latter's theses or dissertations. The former's advising framework and techniques could be examined. Dealing with difficult advisees is, likewise, a worthwhile inquiry that could be carried out qualitatively.

Keywords

CERES in qualitative data analysis, graduate students, semistructured interview, thesis and dissertation writing.

1. Introduction

Writing one's thesis or dissertation is considered an important, yet, almost always a dreadful undertaking for many graduate students. In fact, it is so significant that its completion is a major requirement for a student to graduate the program. However, studies show that many graduate students are not able to finish their thesis or dissertation. Reasons cited vary such as the students' knowledge (Bitchener, Basturkman, & East, 2010; Wang & Yang 2012; Ekpoh, 2016; Manchishi, Ndhlovu, & Mwanza, 2015; Rodriguez, Griffith, & Juarez, 2017); institutional-related factors (Golde & Dore, 2001; Noonan, Ballinger, & Black, 2007; Ismail & Hassan, 2011; Ekpoh, 2016); and students' "socialization experience", the community, or their relationship with their professors or fellow classmates (Ismail & Hassan, 2011; Schramm-Possinger, 2015; Blair, 2016).

Ekpoh (2016) revealed that despite the increasing trend in the enrollment in graduate studies, there is a continuous decline in the number of students who finish the program. This may be attributed to the three challenges encountered by postgraduate students which deal mostly with the students themselves, like their preparation for the program or their ability to write; their professors, especially their research supervisor or adviser; and institutional-related factors. The former relies on the extent of knowledge or training acquired by the students themselves in the graduate program and their motivation to finish or complete the program. The supervisor-related factor refers to the kind of relationship graduate students have with their professors or research adviser, whether such relationship would aid in finishing the said program

or not, is worth looking at (Blair, 2016); while institutional-related factors revolve around the university's graduate program itself, its infrastructures, and the like. This includes challenging institutions to involve students in hands-on research experiences to enhance their learning (Marke, 2003 in Tan 2007).

Bitchener, Basturkman, and East (2010), explaining on the student-related factor, contended that unlike in the undergraduate level where explicit instructions are given to learn new knowledge, this is not always the case in the graduate level especially when writing a thesis since the instruction usually comes in the form of written or oral feedback. Graff (2015 in Rodriguez, Griffith, & Juarez, 2017) also noted this similarity when they contended that writing a thesis or dissertation would necessitate "extensive knowledge of one's area, interdisciplinary problem solving, critical thinking," and a great deal of knowledge of "research procedures," which could have helped the students had they been prepared for it when they had their course works (p. 55). Noonan, Ballinger and Black (2007) posited that "a range of educational experiences that extend beyond course work" is a matter of necessity in order to ensure a high quality and standard of graduate studies (p. 251). However, according to Abdul-Raaf (2016) despite completing their course works, most Sri Lankan graduate students are not able to complete their degrees within the specified time.

Rodriguez, Griffith, and Juarez (2017) further asserted that how a graduate student manages the writing process and how the committee or panelists react to the said process can spell the difference between completing or not completing the dissertation. There exists a logical connection between a "professional songwriter's process and the collaborative creativity process of using tablet technology," and how these could help graduate students and even the committee members to be actively "engaged in the research process" (p. 55).

However, Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza (2015) averred that the commonly committed mistakes when writing the proposal include "broad and unclear topics, failure to state the problem, failure to identify the gap in the literature, using wrong methodology, misunderstanding research terminology, wrong referencing style and plagiarism" (p. 126). This, was supported by Wang and Yang (2012) when they emphasized the importance of graduate students' experience in academic writing, especially those who write their proposals in the second language. Bloom (1982) reasoned though that most graduate students are "anxious writers" who appear to be "chronic procrastinators"; they "dislike writing," and "have difficulty concentrating on it"; and worse, the "fear of evaluation of their work" (p. 103). Moreover, if

forced to write a thesis, they again come across a very challenging situation, that is, the fear of rejection being in their minds (Shinghal, 2018).

Rodriguez, Griffith, and Juarez (2017) concluded in their study that the following could improve the writing of graduate students: 1) inclusion of low-stakes writing activities, 2) trust in the students' ability to write, 3) professor or teacher as co-writer or collaborator with the students, 4) knowledge of genres, and 5) small risks which could be critical to writing. These strategies, the authors added, could help both parties in the writing process and the eventual completion of the course. Wang and Yang (2012), on the other hand, asserted that with constant practice through the process of doing assignments for the academic writing course, graduate students could albeit piecemeal learn from their writing supervisors and peers skills on how to deal with their proposals. Additionally, Merkel (2003) and Tan (2007) highlighted the paramountcy of the role of the mentor in the completion of a student's thesis. Doing research entails a close collaboration between the two stakeholders as shown in "the supportive, encouraging, and intellectual partnership among students and between students and their faculty mentor" (Tan, 2007, p. 205). Whereas, Gardner (2008) underlined the importance of the quality socialization experience students have within a social, cultural, or institutional group. Socialization could be a factor in the successful completion of a graduate program (Golde, 1998; Schramm-Possinger & Powers, 2015; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Other studies on the writing of thesis and dissertation stressed the challenges posed to graduate students (Talebloo & Baki, 2013; Asogwa, Wombo, & Ugwuoke, 2014; Manchishi, Ndhlovu, & Mwanza, 2015; Schramm-Possinger & Powers, 2015; Komba, 2016; and Zaid, 2016). In the study of Asogwa, Wombo, and Ugwuoke (2014) uncovered 28 challenges and 15 coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students in Nigerian universities when writing their thesis. Schramm-Possinger and Powers (2015), on the other hand, documented the varied challenges that confront graduate students such as: 1) time management, 2) handling the bulk of reading materials and comprehending them, and 3) the ability to write on the level of a graduate student. In addition, Golde and Dore (2001) observed that graduate education has been the subject of many criticisms and that institutional-related concerns call for change and reform initiatives. Post graduate education challenges universities to produce more quality students with outstanding research project by striving to improve the development of postgraduates' research and supervision (Ismail, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011). Komba (2016) added that there have been some worldwide concerns

from higher education stakeholders, including external examiners and education quality assurance officers, on the quality of theses and dissertations written and submitted by postgraduate students. Most of the concerns have suggested that the quality of the research reports is low (Bitchener, Basturkmen, & East, 2010).

In addition to the foregoing, other studies not only identified problems but proposed solutions to the challenges encountered by graduate students (Zuber-Skerritt & Knight, 1986; Young, 2014; Singh, 2015; Shaker Al-Shaibani, 2016). Zuber-Skerritt and Knight (1986) focused on two key problem areas: “the definition of the research problem, and the planning and writing of the first draft.” They too argued that workshop is one approach that can assist students best because here the skills “can be developed through the practical guidance, group support, discussion, and reflection which appear in the workshop context” (p. 89). In the case of international graduate students at a university in Malaysia, Singh (2015) suggested “policies and programmes to meet the unique academic writing background needs of these students and ensure their academic success” (p. 12). Moreover, Komba (2016) asserted the undeniable fact that students have been facing challenges in writing their theses and dissertations, yet limited studies have been conducted to investigate the nature and scope of this phenomenon.

Given the plethora of literature on problems and challenges in writing thesis and dissertation, no research of similar focus, except that of Tan (2007) which dealt with undergraduate research, has been done in the Philippine context. Hence, the present study, which considered the different experiences and challenges graduate students encountered in writing their thesis and dissertation. The study examined how graduate students dealt with the writing process itself, and what motivated them to finish what they have started. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) How did graduate students deal with the writing of their thesis and dissertation?
- (2) What challenges did they encounter in writing their thesis and dissertation?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative research design was used for this study following basic interpretive qualitative approach. Following this approach, the study helped provide the “idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002). It helped interpret “how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them,” which in this case were postgraduate students who brought to light

their varied experiences, including coping with different challenges while writing their thesis or dissertation (2).

As such, this study entailed an analysis and understanding of the postgraduate students’ “unique situations as part of a particular context and their interactions” with their adviser, professors, classmates, colleagues, and administrators, in the context of writing their thesis or dissertation. This required the conduct of a series of semi-structured interviews with the graduate students who were currently writing their thesis or dissertation. These graduate students were high school and college faculty members, as well as lay middle level administrators in their respective schools. This study examined the different research experiences of these graduate students in writing their thesis or dissertation. It also identified how these students dealt with their thesis and the challenges that they encountered during the writing process.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The participants of the study were chosen employing purposeful sampling bearing in mind the following criteria: 1) enrolled in post-graduate studies at the time of data collection (Academic Year 2018-2019), 2) currently doing or working on their thesis or dissertation, and 3) Filipino graduate students only. Factors like language and culture are not variables of the current study. Based on the criteria, 75 graduate students were qualified to be the participants of the study, but only 14 of them actually gave their consent for this study. They were assured that anonymity and confidentiality were to be strictly observed from data gathering until the writing and publication of the research output. The participants were given corresponding codes; hence, they were referred to by codes GS01 to GS14.

2.3. Data Collection Technique

Interviewing was the sole data collection technique that was utilized in the study. Although an interview comes in any of the three forms, viz., structured, unstructured, and semistructured, the latter is considered as probably the most common in qualitative research (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, Carl 2016; and Brinkmann, 2015); hence, the employment of a semi-structured interview. An interview protocol, which “enables the researcher to take notes about the responses of the interviewee” (Creswell, 2007, p. 135), served as a guide during the conduct of the interviews. The validated and pilot-tested interview protocol contained interview questions which were contemplative of the specific research questions.

Interviews with each of the 14 participants were sustained until data saturation was reached. The interviews were transcribed following the

denaturalized approach to transcription (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason 2005; and Bucholtz, 2000). Speech fillers, pauses, and extralinguistic and paralinguistic elements were deliberately removed.

2.4. Data Collection Technique

The qualitative data (interview transcripts) were analyzed following three major stages, viz., open-coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). While reading the interview transcripts, open coding was done by literally underlining and highlighting significant statements, and writing notes and comments on the margin. Initial codes were also identified based on the significant statements and marginal notes. Open coding was repeatedly done across all the pages of the transcripts; interview transcripts (per participant) had an average of 11 initial codes. Axial coding ensued by classifying and tabulating the identified initial codes, and similarity or identity of the meanings of the initial codes was the basis for classification and tabulation. The axial coding stage gave rise to 10 classifications, which constituted the initial list of categories or themes. The 10 initial categories were subjected to selective coding, the final stage of qualitative data analysis, whereby overlapping categories were lumped together after a thorough analysis. Selective coding yielded four categories or themes which constituted the findings of the present study.

The number of categories was finalized in light of the criteria set forth by Merriam (2009), which were given acronym by the authors as CERES; hence the CERES criteria for the determinations of categories: (1) Conceptual congruence, (2) Exclusivity, (3) Responsiveness, (4) Exhaustiveness, and (5) Sensitivity. Conceptual congruence of themes was observed when all of them belonged to the same conceptual level; in short parallelism is observed in the phraseology of themes. Second, exclusivity means that one identified theme should mutually exclude the others; thus, overlapping of themes was avoided. Third, responsiveness was maintained when the identified themes were the direct answers to the research problems or objectives of the research. Fourth, exhaustiveness was followed when the identified themes were enough to encompass all the relevant data contained in the transcripts. Fifth and last, sensitivity was observed when the identified themes were reflective of the qualitative data; in short, they had strong and material support from the data. Employing the CERES for the determinations of categories, four themes were established.

2.5. Trustworthiness

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1985) proposed four criteria for establishing the trustworthiness and

soundness of a qualitative study: (1) credibility—truth of the findings, (2) transferability, applicability of the findings in other context, (3) dependability, consistency and replicability of findings, and (4) confirmability, absence of the researcher's bias in the determination of findings. The trustworthiness of the present study involved establishing credibility, dependability, and confirmability by doing prolonged-engagement, member-checking, external audit, audit trail, and reflexivity. Prolonged engagement was undertaken by having sufficient time spent for the interview of the participants of the study. Interviews were not terminated until data saturation was reached. Member-checking was carried out by reporting to the participants the findings derived from their interview responses. When the themes were presented and discussed with each of the participants, none of them gave any disagreement. In fact, they confirmed how the authors explained the theme to them.

External audit was another way by which credibility, dependability and confirmability of the present study were established. Three qualitative researchers served as external auditors by examining the research process (the transcripts included) and the research output. Their comments and suggestions were incorporated in the study. Additionally, audit trail was observed in establishing confirmability by keeping a record of the following: validated interview protocol (with comments and final version), interview schedule, recorded interviews, transcripts of interviews with the open-coding notes and comments, complete list of related studies, and tabulated initial categories that were color-coded with the significant statements under each category. By doing the audit trail, it was easier to do the checking and counterchecking of categories and searching from the transcripts relevant and material support for each theme.

Results and Discussion

The themes or categories that were abstracted from the qualitative data revealed the graduate students' experiences in dealing with thesis or dissertation writing. Four major themes were drawn from the initial categories which emerged from the recurring initial codes after doing the axial and selective coding: 1) academic preparation, 2) community support, 3) writing hindrances, and 4) personal motivation.

3.1 Academic Preparation

Academic preparation came out to be the first theme that captures the experiences which the participants underscored when asked about their thesis and dissertation writing. They claimed that the courses they had taken were indeed very helpful as they started wrestling with their theses. In fact,

they identified courses like academic writing, qualitative research, and quantitative research as being of great help in preparing them for the task of writing their theses. One participant emphatically said,

“Academic writing was my first research-related subject taken. It was such a serendipitous choice because it eased me through with quanti and quali (referring to Quantitative and Qualitative Research subjects of the graduate program). Acad Writing helped me understand [the] research format and more importantly, it helped me by showing the step-by-step process in writing my thesis. Quali refreshed and updated my skills in writing. It also showed me many considerations to further improve my topic. Quanti showed me the importance of understanding my data (GS01).

The participants realized the necessity of reading varied sources for them to be able to survive the process. This point was accentuated on by one participant when she said, “I always find time to study researches, focusing on the recommendation and read literature so that it would help me in deciding the topic I will venture on (GS03). For them to survive the demands of paper works and other requirements in the graduate school, they realized that reading voluminous books, references, related literatures, and professional journals was one experience they inevitably encountered as graduate students.

Finally, the participants were unanimous in their contention that writing skills were the most important skills that form part of their academic preparation. They identified paraphrasing, summarizing, organizing details, and citing materials as among the skills they need to have in dealing with their theses. This point was particularly stressed by GS08 when she said, “I think being skilled with paraphrasing, properly citing sources, and presenting ideas in logical order are few of the things that we need in writing research.”

3.2. Community Support

Advisers, professors and even the research committee or panelists played a great role in the lives of the graduate students. They were the source of community support, which came out to be the second theme. Their comments, remarks, and suggestions, whether positive or negative, were crucial to the completion of the graduate students’ thesis and dissertation. The kind and quality of support they extended to thesis writers impacted greatly on the latter. GS03 claimed that having very approachable, knowledgeable, and accommodating adviser was a great help. Ironically, GS07 considered “the harshest professors [as] the best advisers”. In addition, the support of family, colleagues, and friends was extremely important. They did not only provide

inspiration to the participants, but they were instrumental in their works as graduate students. This point was underscored by GS08.

Finally, the assistance, or none of it, by the administration, local government, immediate heads or bosses at work, or even the graduate school itself contributed in the experiences of the participants as graduate students.

3.3. Writing Hindrances

The third theme is writing hindrances. Interestingly enough, most of the participants agreed that learning how to manage one’s time is the greatest challenge of all when it comes to thesis or dissertation writing. When asked what they thought hindered many graduate students from finishing their theses, most expressed their inability to make time and balance things within their grasps. The following excerpts prove such point:

(1) It is hard to find time for writing. No time to write; I don’t prioritize writing at this point. Work first. In my case I might finish on time if I seriously work on it. (GS02)

(2) It takes time to conceptualize my topic because I need to consider many [other] things (GS03).

(3) Managing my time between work and thesis writing. In public school, work comes unplanned and unannounced, and sometimes I have no choice but to be obligated. Time and work related obligations hinder me from continuing my thesis. GS08.

(4) Maybe time and motivation to not procrastinate because there are a lot of distractions whenever I do work. (GS11).

Most participants conveyed that balancing one’s work and study at the same time can be a very demanding thing to do. Even though studying while working is not something new among teachers, it could still put so much stress on them, yet they almost always choose the former over the latter.

3.4. Personal Motivation

The final theme that resulted from the qualitative data analysis is personal motivation in finishing their theses. One’s interest or background, academic degree as an investment or means for promotion, and service to others constitute the sense of personal motivation according to the participants of the study. Participants were almost unanimous in saying that one’s interest and background actually are good sources of topics. GS01 convincingly said, “I considered my interest and passion . . . in order to succeed in thesis writing, the motivation has to be intrinsic.” Aside from one’s interest, the background of the participants was also a consideration for their choice. Interviewee GS06, when asked how he chose the topic, replied that it was a personal involvement since having been afflicted with psoriasis himself, he

had been part of an NGO who takes care of people with psoriasis and wanted “to break the stigma about the condition and fill in the gap of literature about psoriasis.”

While others might have been inspired by their own interests and backgrounds, some were driven to pursue their thesis or dissertation writing because this was part of their bucket lists, a dream, or a goal and pride for themselves to be just like their mentors or others whom they emulate for having a master’s or doctorate degree. Moreover, finishing a degree was equally a form of investment one has ventured on for himself or herself since it entails quite an amount of money to enrol in and complete the program. A degree is also viewed as an opportunity to find a better job or to be promoted to a better post. One of the participants, GS05 was pursuing her Masters because “It is the only way I see myself to really boom my real happiness. That’ll push me to finish what I have already started since I already invested much in this degree.” Finally, by finishing their theses and successfully earning their degrees, they could be of better help as teachers in their institution.

3.5. Discussion

Academic preparation, community support, writing hindrances, and personal motivation constitute the four major themes, which were drawn from a rigorous qualitative data analysis and served as the findings of the present study. A good academic preparation is an indispensable condition precedent in writing thesis or dissertation. Graff (2015) and Rodriguez, Griffith, and Juarez (2017) contended that the breadth of the graduate students’ knowledge in their discipline and other disciplines, and their familiarity with research procedures form part of their academic preparation prior to the writing of their theses. It is precisely the same point that most of the participants of the present study echoed. Notably, it was academic writing course they considered as one of the best courses that prepared them for the writing of their theses. Li (2007) and Schulze and Lemmer (2017) posited that academic writing is recognized as an essential competence of postgraduate students.

In addition to academic preparation, the present study has established the importance of community support in the completion of graduate students’ theses. Wang and Yang (2012) highlighted the valuable support given by thesis supervisors and peers of thesis writers. Supervisors and peers extend their valuable help when they give their critical comments and suggestions concerning the papers of the writers so that the latter could further improve their works. Community support is visibly felt in what Gardner (2008) called “socialization experience”, which was also studied by Schramm-

Possinger and Powers (2015). Success in the graduate school or the completion of one’s course is dependent on the “socialization experience” of students—the feeling of being part of the group. They feel that their colleagues, professors, thesis examiners, and administrators care about them. Given their academic preparation and genuine community support, graduate students would be able to cope with the writing hindrances that they inevitably encounter as they traverse the path of writing their theses. Obstacles such as difficulty in managing their time, balancing work and studies, and looking for fund tempt graduate students to set aside their theses and, instead, seize the day (*carpe diem*), and not seize the thesis (*carpe thesis*) (Bloom 1982). However, these obstacles could be eased out through genuine community support.

Finally, personal motivation is of paramount ingredient in the successful completion of thesis. Personal motivation as revealed in the study consists of the graduate students’ view of their degree as an investment/ means for promotion, interest or background, service to others, and personal satisfaction. Both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation enable thesis writers to wrestle with whatever challenges that would come their way (Ekpoh 2016; Talebloo & Baki, 2013; Asogwa, Wombo, & Ugwuoke 2014; Manchishi, Ndhlovu, & Mwanza, 2015; Schramm-Possinger, & Powers, 2015; Komba, 2016; and Zaid, 2016). With great conviction, thesis writers could shout, “*carpe thesis!*”

3. Conclusion and Recommendation

Writing thesis or dissertation is truly a formidable, yet manageable task. Graduate students have indeed varied reasons to continue or not with their degrees, yet it is quite a relief to find out that they are not alone in this journey called graduate school. Good academic preparations, genuine community support, and personal motivation, be it intrinsic or extrinsic, serve as indispensable bludgeon in the thesis writers’ challenging journey towards the completion of their degree. These are factors that make them seize their theses (*carpe theses*) and finally finish the same with great satisfaction.

To ensure the successful completion of graduate degrees, graduate schools could consider a mentoring program that would support their students in every stage of their thesis or dissertation writing. Such a program forms part of the community support that is given to graduate students.

One limitation of the present study that is worth noting is the employment of interviewing as the sole data collection technique. Given this limitation, the present study could be replicated using other data collection techniques like survey questionnaires. An in-depth qualitative study could also be done focusing on how thesis advisers or supervisors guide

their advisees in the conduct of the latter's theses or dissertations. The former's advising framework and techniques could be examined. Lastly, dealing with difficult advisees is a worthwhile inquiry to be carried out qualitatively.

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