Thesis Work: An Ethnography of the Writing and Text Production of Professional Graduate Education Students

by

Suzanne Forgang Miller

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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This thesis examined the experiences of mature education and health professionals in graduate education programs at a large Canadian university to discover how they learned to write as academics and produce their theses, and to explore their particular challenges. Most of the participants were women, and most studied part-time while continuing their professional work. The research also examined the social organization of the graduate education programs, and the policies and practices that regulated the students’ writing and text production. The study revealed which policies had positive results, and which were problematic or lacking. The method of inquiry was informed by institutional ethnography and autoethnography, conducted from the standpoint of graduate students.

Participation in and observation of classes, study groups, thesis proposal presentations, conference presentations, mock thesis defenses, interviews and conversations revealed the dynamics between students and supervisors, as well as the value of students presenting their
work at all stages and at different venues for feedback and development of their research, discourse and writing skills.

Problem areas identified by the participants included supervision difficulties, part-time students’ unmet needs, student mothers’ challenges, and writing problems. Suggestions include that supervisors meet with students regularly, provide advice and resources as needed, return thesis drafts promptly, and provide study groups to augment individual supervision. Suggestions to assist part-time students include providing supervision and workshops on Saturdays, and more evening, online and summer courses. Mothers of babies and young children require on-site, flexible, subsidized daycare or subsidies for off-site care, and a support group. Teaching academic rhetoric and the genres required for thesis writing, providing writing assistance groups and groups for students who are “stuck” would alleviate some writing issues. Another suggestion is open monthly meetings on a Saturday with facilitators, a forum where students can discuss any questions or concerns, and develop social connections.
Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Linda Muzzin, who started me on my thesis journey, Roxana Ng, who continued down the road with me, and Glen Jones, who helped me bring my project to fruition. Prof. Muzzin created community with her students, gathering them together so they could share experiences and ideas and foster collegiality; her rich example showed me the value of peer support, and led me to create communities among the students who were the participants. Roxana Ng provided wonderful examples of working with institutional ethnography and critical feminism, as well as caring, warmth and friendship, which became models for my research. Her unfortunately passing in Jan. 2013 left a gap in my life and the many others that she touched; she is dearly missed. A special thanks to Glen Jones, who switched roles from committee member to supervisor after the untimely passing of Prof. Ng, and provided insightful advice and suggestions to bring the thesis to its finished state.

Thank you so much to my committee members, Kari Dehli and Jamie Magnusson, for your most valuable input. Other professors at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education have provided vital support for my developing work, including Sandra Acker, Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg, and Clare Brett.

Thanks too to the participants, who so generously shared their time and their stories with me. Your voices ring through this thesis and your embodied accounts bring to life the lived experiences of graduate students.

Thank you to my wonderful friends at OISE/UT who buoyed me up when I was discouraged, and cheered me on to the finish. Special thanks to Lindsay Kerr; your scholarship and friendship are greatly valued.

I would like to thank Ercument Gundogdu, who introduced me to institutional ethnography and the sociology of Dorothy E. Smith, and encouraged me to undertake this study.

And thank you to my wonderful family: my three daughters, Devorah, Shira and Lyla, their partners, and my dear grandchildren, Isabel, Samantha and Georgia Dewey, Elizabeth and Alexander Sherman, and Benjamin and Rowan Christie. Your support, patience, and love were and are invaluable enrichments to my life and my work.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“It takes a lot of relationships to make a thesis.” Quote from a student.

Introduction to the Study

All knowledge is produced in the form of documents and texts; graduate students’ development as skilled writers is therefore critical to their production of new knowledge in their graduate programs and theses. My research investigated graduate students’ personal experiences related to the advancement of their writing competencies in their programs as they completed their program work and developed their theses, including exchanges with peers, professors and supervisors. As well, the research included the social organization of graduate education students’ writing and text production in programs that included a thesis, important topics in graduate education research. By ‘social organization,’ I mean the purposeful coordination and organization of graduate students in their programs by their schools and universities. Because the field of graduate student writing is under-studied and under-researched, graduate student writing in general is not well-known, and critical perspectives are rare.

The research focused on graduate students who were experienced professionals who returned to graduate school for additional credentials in the form of master’s and doctoral degrees in education requiring a thesis. Little is known about this group of graduate students. This thesis fills this gap in research on graduate education, highlighting professionals’ reasons for entering graduate education programs, and examining their diverse backgrounds and experiences in their programs. The central concern of the thesis is to ask how they learned to write as academics, and to explore their particular challenges as they completed the writing
components of their required program work while meeting the specifications delineated in the handbooks and policy documents of their schools. I also discuss the assistance that the students pursued and received from others in fulfilling these tasks, and shortcomings in the graduate programs in meeting their needs.

Graduate schools attract applicants from professional, public, or community organizations through specialized program offerings, and/or through part-time study programs which are described in this thesis. At the same time, pressure may be put on professionals to obtain advanced degrees in education from their workplaces. As well, there is pressure from universities, governments, and other public institutions for graduate trainees to produce new knowledge for society that is readily communicable through conferences or through publication to the larger academic community and professional circles (COU, 2003; 2009; 2012; World Bank, 2002). Together these trends have resulted in the expansion of doctoral education worldwide (Nerad, 2010). In North America, there has been a surge in scholarly attention to and publication about graduate education, training and research in all its aspects, indicative of its scope and importance.

Together with the scaling-up of economic, financial, environmental, scientific and policy-making practices in the “knowledge economy” (Powell & Snellman, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; cited by Nerad, 2010, p. 70), there has been a shift in the mode of production of knowledge from the traditional academic model, or Mode 1, to a model that values professional skills, or Mode 2 (Gibbons, Limoges & Nowotny, 1994; Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001). This trend to increase the supply of practical knowledge continues and some of the sites where it manifests itself are in the World Bank (WB, 2002) and other international corporate organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), European Union (EU), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific,
and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), that advocate for the expansion of graduate education worldwide (Nerad, 2010, pp. 69-70).

**Increase in Graduate Education in Canada**

The stress on graduate schools to produce socially relevant and robust knowledge because more people with graduate degrees are required for the knowledge economy has put pressure on universities to increase the number of masters and doctoral graduates in North America. One of the results has been an expansion of graduate education in Canada (AUCC, 2011), where changes are being implemented at the federal, provincial and institutional level. At the provincial level, there has been an expansion of graduate education at universities in Ontario, owing to an increase in funding from the Province of Ontario, which has the largest population and largest graduate programs (COU, 2003; 2007; 2009; 2012). According to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, there has been a 54% increase in enrollment in graduate programs in Ontario from 2002-2003 to 2012.¹ There is not only a demand for quantitative enlargement of graduate education, but also qualitative changes in the ways research, scholarship and teaching are carried out.²

This process necessitates the recruitment to graduate schools of already-trained and experienced professionals to make them research-capable and leadership-capable in the scaling-up of professional and governance practices based on the expansion of global knowledge production. Professionals are attracted to graduate programs to engage in research, and to be empowered through accreditation with advanced degrees. This thesis locates professional/graduate students’ thesis work at the intersection of their individual and professional needs and the needs of universities, governments, and other public institutions for new knowledge and new graduate trainees.

² These were addressed in the Rae Report on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario (2005).
Methodology

I conducted my research like a bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001), because I pieced together several different methods in my qualitative research in order to answer my thesis question. My method of inquiry was informed by the critical feminist sociology of Dorothy E. Smith, known as institutional ethnography (IE), which is based on Marx and other influences. Although IE was a major influence on my research methods, I diverge from most IE research because I was not seeking to reveal oppressive practices on the part of the institution (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 101), in this case, the graduate school. Instead, I was looking out for problem areas, or disjunctures, that were impeding the progress of the participants. As well, the students’ experiences became the main focus of the thesis, which is an additional reason I call it an ethnography and not an institutional ethnography. Ethnography, autoethnography, and Laurel Richardson’s Writing as a Method of Inquiry were other methods that informed my work as I compiled my data, analyzed it, and wrote this thesis.

Thesis Question

Graduate departments take for granted that students can manage to acquire the skills they need to make their way through their programs and complete the written components they require, utilizing the resources that are made available to them, seeking help when they need it, and knowing where to find that help. But students’ real-life experiences show that there is a lot of confusion about what is expected, where to find resources, and who to approach for assistance at different stages of their programs (Nelson & Lovitts, 2006; Nerad & Cerny, 1991; Golde & Dore, 2001; Elgar, 2003). “I was in a fog at the beginning” was a common refrain among students interviewed for this study when they talked about their first years of their programs. Observing my own experiences and struggles and those of the students I
encountered, as well as the programs that we were engaged in, and the bigger picture of
graduate education in the larger community, led me to formulate the following question:

**What social organization of graduate education programs supports the reading-
writing activities and text production of professionals/graduate education students in
programs requiring a thesis?**

The question implies that in addition to supports, I would also be watching out for any
problematic areas, omissions, or disjunctures, to use an IE term, which had a negative impact
on students’ writing and text production.

**Research**

The research included ethnographic accounts of my own experiences as a graduate
education student in a doctoral program and the narratives of other students whom I
encountered in both formally organized and informal settings, as well as my observations of
them. We were all professionals with different backgrounds; most were previously or
currently engaged in education or in health care professions, but other professions were also
represented. We were all students in graduate studies in education at the masters and doctoral
levels in programs requiring a thesis in several different departments of a graduate school of
education in a large city in Canada.

In order to understand these graduate students’ development as academic writers, I
followed the social relations of the group during five years of research. With the aim of better
understanding their experiences, I also recorded my own experiences and observations, since I
was a member of this group myself, as a professional (secondary school teacher) and as a
graduate education student. Hence my research originated directly from within the
environments of graduate programs, and from the perspective, or standpoint, of graduate
students, rather than inferring the nature of students’ experiences indirectly from another perspective or from texts about them.

The students were at different stages of their programs, engaged in taking courses, writing their thesis proposals, conducting their research, writing their theses, or preparing for their oral defenses; a few had already completed their programs and graduated. I followed them ethnographically in their program processes as I encountered them in courses, in study groups, at thesis proposal and mock thesis defense presentations, at workshops and at conferences, as well as informal settings, such as cafés. I observed them in action for varying lengths of time, from several encounters, to several years of encounters in the same or different settings, and interacted with them around their program-related activities.

I took an activist role with some of the participants, encouraging them to apply for grants/scholarships and to submit papers and present at conferences. I also organized several conference sessions and recruited students to present papers in them; in preparation, we exchanged abstracts and papers with each other for comments and presentation ideas. I also facilitated a study group for students writing their theses.

I interviewed and had conversations with students, professors, and thesis supervisors in order to learn about the environments in which the graduate students produced their written work. I also sought to uncover some of the dynamics that influenced those processes, including local practices, handbooks, and policy documents representing the ruling relations, which discursively organized and governed them (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 90). Since the participants were all professionals who were pursuing graduate degrees in education, my study highlights their transitions from professional writing into academic writing practices. This group had unique needs as writers, as they wrote for dual audiences, for professionals in their fields and for academics. Many of them also faced difficulties as a result of working full-time
in demanding professional positions while studying. Those who were mothers faced additional challenges.

My research also highlights the importance and social relations of feedback the students received that assisted their writing and text production, feedback which they obtained in course discussions, at conferences, in study groups, at thesis proposal and mock thesis defense presentations, and most importantly from their supervisors, all of which are discussed in this thesis.

While conducting my research and analysis, I presented papers to three different scholarly areas, discourse and writing studies, sociology and institutional ethnography, and higher education,\(^3\) thus this thesis is located at points of intersection among these areas.

**Graduate Student Writing**

It is through the successful completion of reading-writing activities such as course papers, comprehensive examinations, grant applications, ethical review processes, thesis proposals and the thesis that graduate students complete course work, research and dissertation work, and all the other peripheral projects that are inherent to graduate work.

I assumed that graduate students have the capacities, interests, and motivations to engage in reading-writing activities in the fields they have chosen. I was curious about how they were able to accomplish the reading-writing activities required of them in order to complete their programs under changing conditions of graduate school program requirements, as graduate programs are asked to respond to the broader transformations taking place in the developed world due to globalization (Jones, McCarney & Skolnik, 2005), which have spawned new approaches to the production of knowledge referred to as Mode 2 (Delanty,

\(^3\) See Appendix A for a list of the papers and associations.
2001), a new epistemology that is “richly contextualized, socially robust and epistemologically eclectic” (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2001).

This phenomenon significantly qualifies the kind of reading-writing work required of scholars, researchers and graduate students, expanding reading-writing activities/work across institutional fields (translocally), which I refer to as ‘external communication of texts,’ while also generating specialized reading-writing activities/work within institutions (locally), which I refer to as ‘internal communication of documents.’ It is influencing the opening of new academic centres and ‘studies’ programs, similar to the Comparative, International and Development Education Center (CIDEC) at OISE/UT, established in 1989, creating links to external organizations such as international development organizations that teach/train beyond institutional boundaries.

It is through their reading-writing activity and text production that graduate students produce new knowledge in the form of the papers, publications, and theses required to complete a degree program – in an environment of social relations and administrative practices that optimally cultivate students’ progress and success.

**Personal Location**

I am a Caucasian woman, born in Canada to parents from Eastern Europe. Education was strongly emphasized in my upbringing. My background includes studying Fine Art and English at the University of Toronto, graduating with a B.A., then working as an artist and art instructor and running my own business as an artist/designer/craftsperson while raising three daughters. I returned to the University of Toronto for a B.Ed. degree, and subsequently taught English and Visual Art in secondary school. As a secondary school teacher, I drew on my own experiences and the needs of my students to design visual art activities and instruct my students towards high standards of creative expression and self-development. I approached the
teaching of English with sensitivity to the actual lives and needs of my students and how they expressed and articulated them in their writing.

I returned to university for a master’s degree in education which I completed on a part-time basis over a four-year period while continuing to teach full-time. In my master’s thesis research at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, I described and analyzed projects I had carried out with three consecutive grade 11 art classes on non-representational self-portrait projects that also involved self-reflection and journal writing. The theme of my study, titled “The Beneficial Effects of Self-Portraits and Journal-Writing Projects on the Self-Esteem of Grade 11 Advanced Level Visual Arts Students” (1997), made visible the threads of the students’ creative processes, along with their increased self-awareness of the influences on them of their pasts and possibilities for the future. Follow-up videotaped interviews helped reveal more subtle dimensions of their art-making activities and increased self-confidence.

Because I was a full-time teacher during my master’s program, daytime classes at the university were not a possibility, so I chose classes that were run in the early evening time slot. I really enjoyed the camaraderie of class activities with my fellow classmates, but was not able to join into activities outside classes because of the time constraints and demands of full-time teaching and looking after my children as a single parent. My meetings with my advisor were also very limited, so I didn't receive much guidance in regard to my thesis writing process, which is describe in the Autoethnography chapter of this thesis. But all in all, I loved the experience of engaging in graduate studies, of taking courses that explored familiar topics in new ways, as well as new topics that piqued my interest, meeting other students and learning of their backgrounds and areas of exploration, setting up a research study and
carrying it out, learning how to apply theory and methodology to a research topic, and learning how to write a thesis. It was an exciting project that led me to a new world of graduate education. All the possibilities it opened up stayed with me, and left me wanting to further explore it as a process from the inside, from the perspective of a student but also of an educator.

I returned to OISE/UT for doctoral studies in Higher Education seven years after the completion of my Masters of Education degree in order to investigate graduate education. I was very interested in the writing process and development of themes in writing from my experiences as a secondary school teacher of English. Fascinated by my own graduate school experience and that of others who related their experiences to me, I was drawn to study knowledge-making as the artful activity of graduate students in the social sciences, in particular, how students develop a topic of interest into a thesis.

I had a growing interest in graduate schools, graduate study and graduate students from observing people and events that touched me very deeply. Some people close to me who were in graduate programs left them, shifting to other programs and other directions. I wondered why some students became so discouraged and disenchanted with their programs. I read about the high attrition rates, and the possible causes. At the same time, the media portrayed the growing demand for graduate education. These were some of the experiences and questions that motivated me to look at graduate schools from the inside in an effort to investigate them with a focus on the social organization of graduate student writing and text production processes. I approached my graduate school experience with an open, inquisitive perspective both as an observer/ethnographer and as a participant.

My PhD experience was very different from my Masters experience, because I had the time to be a full-time student, and I lived close to my graduate school. I have documented my
doctoral journey in Chapter 5, Autoethnography, and interspersed in other chapters of this thesis.

**Outline of the Thesis**

In Chapter 1, Introduction, I describe my study, and explain why this study is important. I present my thesis question, information on the participants and their backgrounds, and discuss how I carried out my research. I also discuss graduate student writing, graduate education, my methodology and my personal location.

Chapter 2 is the Literature Review. I divide the literature into three different but related fields: first, *higher education studies*, more explicitly, graduate education studies, and specific topics: supervision, ‘older’ graduate students, study/peer/thesis groups, socialization, women/mothers/students, and identity formation. Next I discuss literature addressing *writing and discourse studies*, more specifically, studies of graduate student writing. The third field is *sociology*, more specifically, the critical feminist sociology of Dorothy Smith, known as institutional ethnography, which is included in this chapter because it intersects with writing and discourse studies. IE is discussed at length in the Methodology chapter as my main method of inquiry.

Chapter 3 is the Methodology/Research Methods chapter. This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, titled “Methods I Employed,” I discuss the different methods that I utilized in my research: qualitative research, bricolage, ethnography, autoethnography, and Laurel Richardson’s *Writing: a Method of Inquiry*. My research was also informed by institutional ethnography and the sociology of Dorothy E. Smith, which was my primary method of inquiry. In the second section, titled “Data Collection: Finding My Own Way,” I discuss the participants, the research setting, my research design, my data
collection methods, and how I carried out my data analysis. The third section, “Conclusion,” sums up this chapter.

Chapter 4, The Social Organization of Graduate School Governance, includes my research on and analysis of the handbooks and policy documents that organized and regulated the graduate students and their writing, documents and texts that they produced within their program work requirements.

Chapter 5, Autoethnography, is the story of my experiences in my doctoral program, beginning with my application and frustration at the beginning of my program. I describe my preliminary study, discussions with other students about their difficulties, and joining a study group. My grant application process, graduate school conference presentations, comprehensive specialization exam, and thesis proposal process follow. Presentations at national and international conferences and description of a thesis group that I facilitated are next. Lastly I describe the foreground and background of graduate school, and explain my divisions of graduate students’ work into ‘required,’ ‘extended,’ and ‘supplementary’ work.

Chapter 6, Professional/Graduate Student Participants and their Programs, includes information on the students’ backgrounds and what motivated them to pursue graduate degrees in education. I divided the students into four groups according to their motivations: those who wanted to explore their professions; those interested in researching and addressing specific problems or disjunctures they had encountered in their professional practices; those who studied a particular group of immigrants to Canada; and finally individuals who explored an area of great interest to them in order to contribute to research in that area. Excerpts from two interviews with professional/graduate students and my analysis of them follow. I also discussed the special programs that had been developed for working professionals at the graduate school, these students’ particular challenges, and the accommodations they required,
with a section on mothers/professionals/graduate students’ special needs. This chapter concludes with a section on how the professionals learned to write as academics.

Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, begins with definitions of ‘required,’ ‘extended,’ and ‘supplementary’ work of graduate students, which are discussed separately in chapters 7, 8 and 9 respectively. The rest of the chapter focuses on the required work of graduate students, beginning with my autoethnography of choosing a course and writing a course paper, followed by my ethnography of a course and interview with the course instructor, and an interview with a student on the development of her thesis topic. Next is an ethnography of students engaged in thesis proposal development with peers and supervisors in study groups, discussion of thesis research and writing, and professional and academic writing.

Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, focuses on conference paper development and presentation. Topics covered are: the value of student conferences, developing an abstract for a conference paper, developing the paper and presenting it, with examples from my own experiences and those of participants; conference papers as ‘externally captured’ texts that circulate outside the university, their regulation, and their benefits; and interdisciplinary communication of professional and academic texts.

Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, discusses work that students engage in to augment their required and extended work. Examples included in this chapter are: attending workshops; auditing extra courses; and participating in peer/study/thesis or writing groups, thesis proposal presentations, and mock thesis defense presentations. These activities help students to acquire additional information on methods or topics that were not sufficiently covered in course work or from other sources, to obtain feedback on ongoing work, and to socialize with other students.
Chapter 10 is the Conclusion, which begins with a summary of the thesis and its contributions. I discuss my findings about problem areas that were revealed by the research, including supervision, students with special needs, problems of part-time students and student mothers, identity issues, and writing problems. Next are beneficial activities, focusing on opportunities for students to present their research: presentations of course papers, thesis proposals, conference papers, mock thesis defenses, and study/peer/thesis groups and writing groups, followed by suggestions for additional supports for students, including writing instruction and monthly open meetings. Last is the conclusion, where I discuss the contributions of the thesis to my own knowledge and ideas for further research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Doctoral writing – a question of skills or a social practice?”
Section heading in Kamler & Thomson’s (2006) Helping doctoral students write.

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss where my study of the social organization of graduate student writing and text production fits into scholarly literature that is related to my study, what similar research has already been conducted, where there is a gap, and what research is needed to fill the gap. Because institutional ethnography is my main method of inquiry, I have followed IE methods in investigating the literature: “the work of conceptual framing of the research project identifies both what is known and what needs to be discovered about the topic to explicate its social organization. … [The researcher] must come to terms with the literature while delineating and maintaining her particular stance vis à vis discourses, authorized knowledge, and views that express a standpoint organized differently from the institutional ethnographer’s stance in the everyday world.” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 51). My study intersects with three different fields of knowledge: higher education, discourse and writing studies, and critical feminist sociology. I will discuss each of these briefly, below, and then in depth.

The first field is higher education studies; my work fits here because my study includes information on graduate students’ experiences in their graduate programs as they engage in their program activities, develop their thesis topics and write their theses. Higher education studies cover a wide range of topics in postsecondary school education, but my discussion is limited to graduate education studies that intersect with the topics covered by my study. Relevant higher education literature is discussed in this chapter.
The second field is discourse and writing studies, another broad topic. My work fits here because my research focuses on the social organization of graduate students’ writing and text production. A number of writing scholars in Canada, the US, Britain and Australia have researched and written about topics related to graduate student writing. Graduate student writing studies are discussed in this chapter.

The third field is sociology, specifically critical feminist sociology, focusing on the sociology of Dorothy E. Smith and the research method of inquiry she developed, known as institutional ethnography, or IE. Institutional ethnography, which includes Smith’s work on texts, constitutes my primary method of inquiry and my analytical lens, and is discussed at length in the Methodology chapter. Smith’s work on texts, specifically institutional texts (which are foundational to IE), is included in this chapter in the section on graduate student writing because it intersects with the work of graduate student writing scholars. Some examples of critical feminist research are included in this chapter as well.

**Overview of Chapter: Situating my Study in Academic Literature**

The following figure, Figure 1, Situating My Study in Academic Literature, summarizes the organization of this chapter, which will be followed by detailed discussions of the literature in each category.
SITUATING MY STUDY IN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

1. HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES  
   (In Literature Review Chapter)

   ↓

   Graduate Education

2. WRITING & DISCOURSE STUDIES  
   (In Literature Review Chapter)

   ↓

   Graduate Student Writing

3. SOCIOLOGY  
   (In Methods & Literature Review Chapter)

   ↓

   Critical Feminist Sociology

Graduate Education  

↓

Graduate Education Literature

↓

History of Writing Studies

↓

Critical Feminist Research

KEY TOPICS

- Supervision & Study/Peer/Thesis Groups
- Socialization & Identity Formation
- Personal Position: Mature Students, Women/Students/Mothers
- Writing

KEY TOPICS

- Text
- Genre Studies
- Sociocultural Theory
- Institutional Ethnography
- Writing Problems & Solutions

THIS STUDY:

→ LINKS WITH GRADUATE EDUCATION STUDIES  
   → LINKS WITH GRADUATE STUDENT WRITING STUDIES  
   → LINKS WITH IE RESEARCH STUDIES

Figure 1: Situating My Study In Academic Literature
Graduate Education Literature

Graduate education is an important area of study in the field of higher education. There has been a major expansion of graduate studies all over the world, but there is a general sense that graduate education can and should be improved because of concerns about attrition, time to completion, and student concerns (Noble, 1994; Holdaway, 1994; Elgar, 2003; Berkowitz, 2003; Williams, 2005; McAlpine & Norton, 2006).

In an effort to improve graduate education, the research literature has focused considerable attention on four main topics or themes that are relevant to this study: supervision (including study/peer/thesis groups facilitated by supervisors), socialization and identity formation, personal position (age, gender, family status – the focus here is on students of mature age, and women/students/mothers), and writing.

Supervision and study/peer/thesis groups literature.

The relationship between graduate students and their supervisors is considered the key relationship influencing graduate students’ progress through their programs and completion. The literature suggests that there are “best practices” for supervisors in the intellectual and affective dimensions, including being approachable, accessible; honest, helpful, supportive; friendly, caring, and understanding (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2011; Barnes & Austin, 2009; Frost & Taylor, 1996; Halse & Malfroy, 2010; Harman, 2003; Holdaway, DeBlois & Winchester, 1995; Wisker et al, 2003; Zhao, Golde & McCormick, 2005).

Study groups, also referred to as thesis or peer groups, where students discuss their ongoing work and any difficulties they are encountering, are often facilitated by supervisors as an extension to their supervision. The experience of presenting their work and receiving

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4 I use the term “graduate education” to cover doctoral studies as well as master’s studies that include a thesis, because a few of the participants in this study were in master’s programs; however, most studies in this area refer to “doctoral education” and “PhD studies.”
feedback from the supervisor and other students has been found to be a positive factor toward students’ success (Conrad & Phillips, 1995; Phillips & Pugh, 2005; Devenish et al, 2009; Cassuto, 2010; Martin & Ko, 2011; Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). Aitchison (2009) wrote about writing groups for doctoral students, and the value of giving and receiving feedback. Boud and Lee (2005) looked at students’ peer relationships, which are formed in such groups, as important components in graduate students’ communities of research practices (p. 504) which help them learn to work together.

**Socialization and identity formation literature.**

It is important to recognize that graduate education can be understood, and critiqued, as a socialization process (Chiang, 2003; Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman, Twale and Stein 2001; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Interactions between students and faculty, and between students, are key elements of this process (Bragg, 1976). The socialization literature also discusses the key role of conference presentations and scholarly publications to the socialization of graduate students (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek & Hopwood, 2013). Some scholars problematize the socialization process for certain students (Gardner, 2008; Turner & Thompson, 1993; Council of Graduate Schools, 2004). Gardner found that “women, students of color, older students, part-time students, and students with children” (p. 127) did not fit the standard mold, and were at risk, connecting lack of socialization with attrition and indicating that these students needed more support.

Issues of identity are another important topic in the literature, connected to socialization but a distinct topic. Green (2005), one of the first to discuss identity in reference to doctoral students, argued that the creation of subjects, or researcher identities, through supervision, “an ensemble of knowledges, capacities, identities and dispositions through the interplay of specific social relations and social practices, mediated by language” (p. 161), is as
important as the production of new knowledge by doctoral students. Others expanded on this theme (Burke, 2003; Colbeck, 2008; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; McAlpine, 2012). McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, and Hopwood (2013) write about influences on the identity development of doctoral students, as well as difficulties they encountered, which included isolation and writing problems. Of interest to my study is their finding that students most often listed “contact with peers” to the question “with whom [did] significant events occur” (p. 104), indicating that peer relationships were very important in developing their identities, as well as activities in which students engaged with others around their work, such as conferences, speaking about their work, and submitting work for publication, all of which were outside the requirements of their programs, in many cases.

Hall and Burns (2009) discuss the role of mentoring by supervisors on the identity formation of doctoral students, in which the supervisors model the desired behaviours and identities (pp. 52-53). This may be problematic, as students may have different ideas of their identities, especially those from marginalized cultures or racial backgrounds. Of interest to my study is their section on Identity formation in education doctoral programs, in which they discuss students whose situations are similar to the mature students who are the focus of my study. They state that:

These students … are likely to enter their programs with well-established professional identities and experience … outside university cultures (Labaree, 2003). They are often older and have more experience working in the professional world than other doctoral students (Labaree, 2003) … [T]hey must learn to develop arguments and theories that provide insights into education issues and knowledge that transcend the contexts with which they are familiar … negotiate new identities and reconceptualise themselves as both people and professionals (Austin & McDaniels, 2006) … [as they] enact [new] discourses in ways that identify them as members of that social group (Gee, 2000-2001). pp. 53-54

The authors also recommend that students be provided with opportunities to present their work to others (p. 62), and group experiences that “provide students with opportunities to
engage with discourse communities … to see how different people interpret and enact the identity of researcher and hear more about the successes and struggles their peers and mentors have experienced in doing so” (p. 64). Students’ presentations of their research are an important component of this thesis.

Li and Seale (2008), a student and her supervisor, wrote together about acquiring a sociological identity, documenting how the student transitioned from an “applied” identity as a nurse to a “pure” identity as an academic during the course of her supervision, a process that mirrors that of some of the participants in this study. It is not only the supervision, but also the process of writing, and the accumulation of pieces of writing that assisted this transformation, along with “discussions with fellow PhD students, which were highly influential on SL [the student] both in informing her about how to acquire a sociological identity and in providing emotional and practical support” (p. 999).

A similar theme was discussed by Seymour (2005) in “From ‘doing’ to ‘knowing’: Becoming academic”:

As an ‘academic’ I engage with ideas, not people; I manage thoughts; I think, I don't do … I am struggling with the separation of minds and bodies, of knowledge and practice … I had thought that I would be extending myself; adopting an identity that incorporated both doing and knowing and encompassed both practice and theory: blossoming into a new, improved ‘value-added’ me. Instead I felt – I feel – lesser. … There is little room left for the ‘practice’ - for the ‘applied,’ for the ‘doing.’ (pp. 461-463)

Seymour writes about issues of identity in her transition from professional practice as a social worker, in the applied realm of “doing,” of being immersed in direct practice, of engaging with people, to that of an academic, in the realm of academic “knowing” and the production of knowledge, engaging with ideas. Seymour was hoping to incorporate both aspects in her new role, but found this wasn’t easy.
Another example of a professional who transitioned to a researcher is an occupational therapist who returned to university to undertake PhD studies (Young, 2004). The possible path for practitioners to become practitioner-researchers comes in two different forms, such as research-nurse (who takes part in a research project without training in research methods), or nurse-researcher (who is trained in research methods, and undertakes research of her own or participates as a team member in a joint project) (Deave, 2005). Other examples include researcher-teacher and teacher-researcher. Many books and articles have been published that describe and advocate for researcher-teacher and teacher-researcher studies (Bartlett & Burton, 2006; Brock, Helman, & Patchen, 2005; Ragland, 2006).

Another slant on identity formation is provided by Schryer and Spoel (2005) who wrote about the role of learning and performing rhetoric genre in the professional identity formation of medical and midwifery students: “A rhetorical genre perspective can help elaborate how health-care communities and their members are engaged in ongoing processes of professional identity formation as they participate in their field’s discursive practices” (p. 258). Using the language of their academic genres helps students to form identities as part of those discursive communities, as they become experts in their fields.

**Personal position literature: Mature age, women students with young children.**

Other factors, such as age, gender, and family status also have an impact on the graduate student experience, but some of these have received relatively little attention. Here I focus on factors that are relevant to the participants in the study: mature age of students, and the special problems of women students who are mothers of young children.

Reports from Statistics Canada (2005) indicate that more than 55% of graduating doctoral students in Canada were aged 30 to 39, 24% were more than 40, and graduate
education graduates had an average age of 46 (quoted by Lauzon, 2011). In his article on older students, the only one I was able to locate, Lauzon (2011) wrote about the increasing average age of graduate students and their special needs. Seasoned professionals may experience difficulty transitioning into students again, according to Lauzon. The author stated that students need to feel a personal connection to their program components and their research in order to create meaning from it, as personal reflection is a task that is common during the second half of life. Lauzon feared that the trend toward a more utilitarian focus in graduate school may not meet the needs of older students.

This study includes participants who were women with young children, so a discussion of literature on this topic is relevant. Women often take longer to complete their programs because of intervening family responsibilities, which tend to be borne by women. Women may also experience gender discrimination in the professions and in the academy (Muzzin, 2005). Studies of women/mothers in the academy are also included later in this section since their situations are so similar to those of graduate students.

DeVault (1999), in *Liberating method: Feminism and social research*, writes about the need for “new methods for writing about women’s lives and activities” using feminist scholarship, because feminism gives us “distinctive ways of extending the methods of … qualitative sociological inquiry” (p. 59). DeVault writes about women’s talk:

My aim is to bring into the methodological discussion insights from feminist linguistics about women’s relation to language and to speech, and to examine, as aspects of social research, the processes of talking and listening “as women.” My understanding of what it means to talk or listen “as a woman” is based on the concept of “women’s standpoint” (Smith 1987, Hartsock 1981); the approach does not imply that all women share a single position or perspective, but rather insists on the importance of following out the implications of women’s (and others’) various locations in socially organized activities.
[W]oman-to-woman talk is quite different from talk in mixed groups – because women speakers are more likely to listen seriously to each other – and that it affords opportunities for women to speak more fully about their experiences. (p. 60)

The talk among women in a study group around the challenges they face as mothers and students is not a usual topic for discussion about graduate student education, but I argue that it is significant, because we need to acknowledge this group of students and their special needs. Several of the student participants were mothers in this position who discussed their problems, so this theme resonates with the study. Raddon (2002) wrote about the ‘greediness’ of both motherhood and academia and the need for a discursive framework to develop resistance and a “flexible working arrangements and equal opportunities legislation … to develop a truly inclusive academy” (p. 401). A study by three women academics (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009) of graduate student parents, in particular, mothers, found that: “Work-family issues of graduate students are nearly invisible, despite record numbers of men and women in graduate school during their peak childbearing years” and that “little is known about what, if any, services are available” to them (p. 435). The authors also discuss the “theoretical and practical tensions between society’s view of idealized mothering and academia’s vision of graduate students as idealized workers.” (p. 435). They talk about the chilly climate toward graduate student mothers: “Although sometimes subtle, there are constant reminders in the social and physical environment of the university that graduate student parents and their children do not truly belong” (p. 439). They also found that department policies were lacking, and that accommodation was based on individual cases. They stressed that “flexibility should be supported by official policies and practices” so students don’t feel they are “asking for a favour,” leaving them in a “precarious or vulnerable position.” (p. 444).
A study of women with children in academe (Armenti, 2004) found that these women encountered many obstacles that limited their careers, and found that their paths to higher positions were blocked. The author decries the lack of research on the lives of women/mothers in academe, and the lack of accommodation for them. The author found that women are more likely to interrupt or leave their careers because of childbearing and childrearing responsibilities. Armenti also mentions that the women experienced time constraints. Middleton (1993, p. 178) referred to the conflicts these women deal with every day as “the interpenetrations of work and home – the intersections of teaching, intimate relationships, institutional and public responsibilities – what Donna Haraway (1990a) referred to as ‘the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and the body politic’ (p. 212).” The literature suggests that the problems of women/mothers in academe, both graduate students and the professorate, require systemic changes to ameliorate the systemic discriminatory practices that subvert their efforts at advancement (Mason et al, 2013).

**Writing problems literature.**

Another relevant topic is writing problems of students and programs to assist them at each stage of the doctoral process. Although this topic is discussed in the section on graduate student writing studies, it has been addressed by graduate education scholars as well (Nerad & Cerny, 1991; Golde & Dore, 2001; Wulff & Nerad, 2006). Of particular interest to this study is on-going Council of Graduate Schools PhD Completion Project, which has engendered a number of papers and books, including *Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Policies and Practices to Promote Student Success* (2010). Some of the recommendations for helping students with their writing skills include: opportunities to participate in research and write it up early in their programs so they have early training in these critical skills, a writing clinic for students submitting articles to peer-reviewed publications to encourage students to publish
early, hands-on dissertation writing workshops, a doctoral student writing room where students can work and consult/collaborate with other students, and a writing institute for students who are “stuck.” Since quite a few of the participants encountered difficulties with their writing, this is an important topic.

The topic of the next section of this chapter is research on graduate student writing by writing scholars.

Writing and Discourse Studies: Graduate Student Writing Literature

I begin with a brief history of writing studies, and then I move to a discussion about the key concepts in literature on graduate student writing that relate to this study, including text, genre studies, sociocultural theory, institutional ethnography, and writing problems and solutions. Several scholars are exemplars in this area: Paul Prior, Dorothy Smith, and Anthony Paré; the discussion focuses on their scholarship. The major discussion of Dorothy Smith’s work is found in chapter 3, Methodology/Research Methods, however, her work also connects to this section because texts are central to her sociology, and one of the sources of her scholarship is Russian writing scholars Bakhtin, Luria and Volosinov (Smith, 2005, p. 2).

To begin, I wish to illuminate briefly some of the other theorists that have been important to the development of literature on writing.

History of writing studies.

There is long history of the study of writing, going back to Aristotle’s writing on rhetoric (1991). Writing studies have followed a number of different directions, becoming more focused in the 1960s. Some of them, along with their main scholars, are: activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978), speech acts (John Austin, 1962; John Searle, 1969), phenomenology and typification (Alfred Schutz, 1967; Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann, 1966), structuralism (Saussure, 1922/1959; Bakhtin, 1986), composition studies (Chomsky, 1957; 1972; Fish,
1976), rhetoric studies (Barilli, 1989; with genre studies, Miller, 1984), and more recently, genre studies (Bazerman, 1988; 2004; Russell, 1991; Swales, 1990).

Recently, the focus has shifted to sociocultural theories and methods, which will be discussed below. There are many other areas of study of writing, including discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and studies of work and organizational texts stemming from ethnomethodology. Some of these other approaches could be equally relevant; however, I have chosen to focus on studies that are more germane to my research because they challenge assumptions about graduate student writing as the actions of individuals working alone; instead they view writing as an embedded activity, with links to recognized academic texts and schools of thought. I begin with literature on texts, because texts are central to this study, as well as all IE research studies.

**Text.**

Roland Barthes (1977) wrote about the text and the joint activities of reading and writing, important concepts relating to this thesis:

The Text … decants the work … from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice. This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. The distance separating reading from writing is historical. In the times of the greatest social division (before the setting up of democratic cultures), reading and writing were equally privileges of class. (p. 162)

Although reading and writing are often separated, I consider this is an artificial separation, and agree with Barthes’ position that reading and writing are conjoined activities, which I refer to as reading-writing activities. Regarding the concept of ‘text,’ Dorothy Smith also uses text in a specific sense when she states that “texts … produce the stability and replicability of organization or institution … [and] coordinate people’s doings” (Smith, 2005,
Barthes also refers to ‘intertextuality,’ referring to the interconnections between texts:

The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text: to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas. (Barthes, 1977, p. 160)

Smith (2005) borrows the term ‘intertextuality’ from literary theory to refer to the “interdependence of institutional texts” (p. 226), meaning that each institutional text is connected to others, both within the same institution, and in other similar institutions. A thesis is an example of intertextuality. This concept is central to this study, as will be demonstrated.

Jakobs (2003) writes about ‘reproductive writing,’ which covers all forms of writing that involves other texts. Jakobs uses the term ‘text production’ but in a different sense than my use of the term: “The concept of ‘text production’ will be understood here to be more extensive than that of ‘writing,’ comprising as it does the whole range of actions employed by the writer in producing a text” (p. 893). “The main focus is on text production in which the writer has recourse to other texts and uses these for the development of his or her own ideas.” (p. 894). Jakobs’ process of reproductive writing can be used to describe graduate students’ ‘required program work’ and ‘extended work’ in the form of conference papers and publications, because in all cases, students are referring to and citing other texts, related to methodologies and schools of research. I prefer to use the terms, ‘documents’ and ‘texts,’ and ‘document production’ and ‘text production’ to describe graduate students’ writing; ‘documents’ when the writing circulates solely within the graduate school, and ‘texts’ for writing that circulates to sites outside the graduate school.
Genre studies.

Graduate students must be trained in the manner of reading and writing that is explicit to a particular discipline, which is identified as ‘genre’ by Bazerman (2004), and ‘discourse’ by Hyland (2004).

According to literacy professor James Gee (2010), ‘genre’ describes conventional ways of engaging in discourse, which are not learned through rules, but through use; genre is contextualized, structured to power and to the relationships of the people who use them.

Bazerman (2004) defines genre as: “[r]ecognizable, self-reinforcing forms of communication” (p. 316); “psycho-social recognition phenomena that are parts of processes of socially organized activities”…[that] arise in social processes of people trying to understand each other well enough to coordinate activities and share meanings for their practical purposes’ (p. 317). Swales (2009) quotes Bazerman in an edited extract:

> Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. … Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the familiar. (Swales, 2009, p. 6)

Students acquire the genres of their academic disciplines through reading articles and books, discussions with people who are proficient speakers/readers/writers in the genre, writing course and conference papers, and finally, writing their theses, under the guidance of their supervisors, who can discern what is suitable within a particular genre. Here is Bazerman (1994) writing on university department genres:

> The institutional framework is given a constraining interpretation by the department’s definition in the sequence, levels, and goals of courses, perhaps reinforced by syllabi, textbook lists, and departmental exams, as well as by its hiring and course assignment policies. Departments create their own regulatory and coordinating genres. (p. 27)
Giltrow and Valiquette (1994) describe the importance of genre studies, which “enable us to observe genre itself as a system for administering communities’ knowledge of the world – a system for housing knowledge, producing it, practicing it” (p. 47). Students writing in a genre “shadow the professional genres of the academic community” (p. 49); the instructor responds to their representation of shared knowledge and use of “insider knowledge” in evaluating student writing (p. 50).

Harris (2006) wrote a valuable text on academic discourse conventions, with chapters on rhetoric techniques that academics use to “to respond to and rework the position [another scholar] puts forward … [and] construct one’s own position in response” (p. 68). One technique is “forwarding,” extending the use of the text, and another is “countering,” noting its limits (p. 38). Graduate students may acquire these writing techniques through example, but instruction can illuminate them and assist students in their usage.

Hyland (2004) writes about disciplinary discourses, a term he prefers over ‘genre,’ in his study of academic texts, in order to provide a “powerful description of community practices and knowledge of academic disciplines” (p. 137). The goal of his research is to define an academic field’s particular genre, and the implications for teaching in that academic field (p. 144). Academic writing is not accomplished just through adherence to particular steps, because:

[D]isciplinary conventions are both subtle and complex, offering a guiding framework for writers as they struggle to present their arguments in the ways that are most likely to gain their readers’ acceptance. Writing is produced and mediated through writers’ experience of prior discourse, rather than explicit knowledge of rules, and involves making rational choices based on an understanding of how texts work within and for specific contexts and audiences. (p. 145)
This premise emphasises the importance of exposure to relevant texts related to a student’s area of study, so students can infer how to present their own work so it will be accepted by researchers working in the same or similar genre.

**Sociocultural theory.**

Sociocultural theory focuses on the role of social interaction in learning; “emerging from psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and semiotics … sociocultural theories represent the dominant paradigm for writing research today” (Prior, 2006, p. 54). Brian Paltridge (2004) is an important researcher working in the area of the sociocultural context of academic writing. He cites many studies in his work on networks of academic writing, genres, and discourse communities, all of which include “the ways in which academic texts are embedded in the communication activities of the academic community … which also gives us insights into the ways students both acquire and use genre-knowledge as they participate in the knowledge-producing activities of their areas of study” (p. 91, quoting Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Paltridge’s work adds to our understanding of graduate students’ enculturation into their academic communities, which is pertinent to this study.

Paul Prior⁵ (2006) provides us with a thorough history of research on interdisciplinary sociocultural theories of writing. He explicates that “literate activity is not only a process whereby texts are produced, exchanged, and used, but also part of a continuous sociohistoric process in which persons, artifacts, practices, institutions, and communities are being formed and reformed” (p. 139). Writing is seen as “a mode of social action, not simply a means of communication. Writing participates in making particular kinds of people, institutions, and cultures, as well as indexing them..[a] dual focus on situated meaning and social action” (Prior, 2006, p. 58).

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⁵ I am including Prior’s first name to distinguish him from Lindsay Prior, a different writing scholar with the same surname who is discussed later in this chapter.
Prior (1998) points out the “complexity, heterogeneity and particularity of academic writing tasks … [T]he streams of activity that converge in these accounts of textual production and reception blend talking and listening, reading and writing, thinking and feeling, observing and acting” (p. 137). This study includes ethnographies of graduate students working on their projects that reveal the full variety of actions that are involved in producing written work.

Prior provides three axioms of writing: it is situated in particular places and in the moment-to-moment flow of time (similar to Dorothy Smith’s idea of everyday/everynight practices, with the difference that Prior does not focus on the subject who is doing the literate activity; he considers a universal subject in its place). It is mediated; it is a “confluence of … trajectories that weave together people, practices, artifacts and institutions,” and it is dispersed. These three axioms constitute what Prior terms ‘literate activity’ (1998, p. 138).

A question that emerges from this perspective is, who is the author of the text? Prior refers to this as “the assumption of agency, of the writer as author,” an assumption that has been challenged by poststructuralist and sociohistoric theories that question authorship because of the “dissolution of text in intertext, self in intersubjectivity” (Prior, 2006, p. 140, quoting Phelps, 1990). This question is also addressed by Foucault (1997) in his lecture/essay “What is an author?” in which he refers to the ‘author-function,’ which is his term that describes the “plurality of egos” that influence the author as s/he writes, and the various systems to which the author is connected and accountable (p. 130). For Prior, this requires a move away from commonly held views of writing in the disciplines and in graduate school by lone students and academics which “construct authors as autonomous originators” (2006, p. 143).

An awareness of the embeddedness of an author in his/her milieu of other authors, other writings, current and historical institutions, is salient to understanding the enculturation
of graduate students to the genre system that they are apprenticed to, so they can be assisted in this process through course and program design, and supervision methods that nurture and encourage this process.

Prior’s work is important to my study, as he highlights the importance of creating connections to academic discourses and genres for graduate students when he explicates the webs of connections that an author is engaged in while writing:

All texts build on and respond to other texts, which means that the history of any text is linked to histories of others. All writing draws on writers’ knowledge, beliefs, and practices, built up through experiences of socially and historically situated life events. (Prior, 2004, p. 171).

However, Prior describes a generalized student-author instead of a specific person, working at her tasks, who brings her own genre of experiences with her to graduate school, perhaps specific issues from her workplace that she wishes to address in her research. The distinct methodological approach of Dorothy Smith, termed institutional ethnography, enables us to preserve the graduate student as the subject of institutional practices.

**Institutional ethnography.**

In contrast to Paul Prior and the other authors I have discussed, Dorothy Smith captures the active relation of the reader with the text being read. This process needs to be explicated in order to make possible an account of the program elements offered to graduate students for their training and preparation for their research and dissertations. The student is obliged to do the proper reading-writing as stipulated in a course, sometimes engaging in workshops as an adjunct to course work. Dorothy Smith discusses this dimension under the notion of ‘text-reader conversation.’ Like Prior, she situates reading within the trajectory of practice, but where Prior emphasises that many things are happening at the same time, in a “mangle of practice and the lamination of experience” (Bazerman, 1998, pp. vii-viii), Smith is
concerned with a particular course of action to which the text is embedded (a person, reading-writing a text, to produce an action), such as the reading or writing of a union grievance document, or the reading of a grade appeal procedure document by a student who is considering making a grade appeal.

While Prior and the authors he draws on study the process of literate activity from the outside for descriptive purposes, Smith explores the institution within which reading and writing happens, from the perspective of the person/subject/actor doing the reading-writing activity. Smith is interested in disclosing and unravelling how the institution penetrates the reading-writing activity of the subject and how the efforts and responses as well as resistances of the subject are articulated to the organization or institution.

At the university, Prior focuses on the students, what they will do at the university. In a way, he takes for granted the institutional setting, even as he tries to attend to its varied dimensions. His aim is not to understand the organization, but to have a richer understanding of the subject and the subject’s complex activity within the setting of the university. In my view, this interest in understanding the subject is actually a limitation, because Prior and related scholars are not accounting for the fact that the institution and its practices are the practices of those subjects. Thus there is no separation between the reading-writing subject and the institution. The institution is not prior to its routine and cyclical practices; it is those practices. Students, instructors and administrators are therefore always involved in what counts as institutional. Smith aims at obtaining ethnographic accounts of both the subjects and the institution through the exploration of practices from the standpoint of the subjects.

In Smith’s approach, the text is in some ways the institution, all the things to which the students respond and by which they are governed.
Institutions exist in that strange magical realm in which social relations based on texts transform the local particularities of people, place, and time into standardized, generalized, and, especially, translocal forms of coordinating people’s activities. Texts perform at that key juncture between the local settings of people’s everyday worlds and the ruling relations. (Smith, 2005, p. 101)

Texts aren’t usually seen in this way, in an active role of determining our actions.

Smith (2005) describes the work of Lindsay Prior (2003; 2008) and his concept of “documents in action” that aim to knit documents into people’s activities, but she problematizes this work, because “people have disappeared and documents become the focus of research” (p. 102). Smith writes of the ‘text-reader conversation’:

[The] activation [of a text] by a reader inserts the text’s message into the local setting and the sequence of actions into which it is read … [it] brings the text into action in the readers who activate it. It also, and equally important, anchors the text in the local actualities in which people are at work. (Smith, 2005, p. 105)

In local institutional settings, text-reader conversations regulate people’s everyday activities as institutional activities. This conversation seems one-sided, because the text does not change; it is a congealed form, while its ‘agent’ “responds to, interprets and acts upon it” (p. 105), although the text may have been meant to be interpreted differently in different settings of action (p. 107). According to Smith, this “constancy” is important, because it “produces for any institutional participant reading the text a standardizing vocabulary, subject-object structure, entities, subjects and their interrelations” and “it regulates the discourse effective among them” (p. 108). If the subject chooses to resist, repudiate, disagree or reject the institutional text, it can only be done from within and from the text’s agenda (p. 111).

Institutional discourses:

provide the terms under which what people do becomes institutionally accountable. They are distinctive in that they displace and subdue the presence of agents and subjects other than as institutional categories: they lack perspective; they subsume the particularities of everyday lived experience.” (Smith, 2005, p. 113)
The instructions of how the text is to be read are often contained in the opening of the text; there is no option for alternative readings. Institutions have capabilities to do certain kinds of very particular reading-writing that individuals cannot do without much effort and difficulty:

The institutional categories locate the subjects of institutional courses of action, not as particular individuals, but as a class of persons. … Agency is assigned to institutional categories. Someone who cannot be subsumed under the institutional categories assigning agency has no agency.” (Smith, 2005, pp. 116-117)

This is directly applicable to a study of the reading-writing activities of graduate students and their regulation through institutional texts of the graduate school and university, such as handbooks. The reading-writing activities of students are not just limited to writing required for their courses or other degree requirements. An example of other reading-writing activity is proactive reading-writing work done by students who challenge institutional practices of graduate schools that restrict or impede their progress by submitting petitions for special consideration of their particular circumstances.

**Literature on Graduate Student Writing Problems and Solutions**

Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson are Australian professors of graduate education who have written together and separately on aspects of graduate student writing. Their 2004 article on writing abstracts tied writing to identity, as did Schryer and Spoel (2005) in the section on Identity earlier in this chapter. Kamler and Thomson position abstract writing as an important skill that should be taught by supervisors. Writing is deemed a social practice, and is equated with research; they encourage students to:

write early and all through the period of candidature. We suggest that they write outside of the dissertation structure in order to work on segments of literature, method and data produced in field work. Such writing, be it conference papers or journal articles, helps in the process of clarifying argument, as well as doing important reputation work. (Kamler & Thomson, 2004, p. 196)
Abstract writing helps students become known as legitimate scholars in their communities.

Scholarly writers locate themselves by virtue of the literatures noted, the theorizations mobilized and the places they name as ontological/epistemological homes (Kamler & Thomson, 2001). However, this text work is not neutral; it is shaped by the genres and power relations of the academy, which in turn shape ‘academics’ and how they are read by others. (Kamler & Thomson, 2004, p. 197)

The authors present a heuristic for developing an abstract, a valuable tool for students. They reiterate that advice and tips are not enough to help graduate students with their writing, but that they need to be taught the “complex writing practices associated with research” (p. 207).

Kamler and Thomson’s book, Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision (2006) provides guidelines on an aspect of supervision that is often neglected: teaching doctoral student writing skills as “institutionally-constrained social practice … the patterned routines of both individuals and institutions,” rather than a “skills-based orientation” (p. 5) which is found in the plethora of advice books on how to write a thesis that “reduce writing to a set of arbitrary rules and matters of etiquette” (p. 7). The authors critique a number of such books (in a 2008 article as well), as well as books on supervision. Their focus is on doctoral writing “as research … text work, identity work, and … discursive practice” (2006, pp. 12-13). Two chapters are of the greatest relevance to my research; the first one is titled “Institutionalizing doctoral writing practices” (pp. 145-161), which includes descriptions of “[s]upervisor-initiated reading/writing groups” (p. 145), “[w]riting for publication groups” (p. 147), “thesis writing circles” (p. 151), and “[w]riting courses” (p. 154). All of these are designed to assist doctoral students in their development of important skills to critique and improve writing, because “writing and doctoral research are one and the same” (p. 158).

The other highly relevant chapter is “Rethinking doctoral writing as text work and identity work” (pp. 167-178), in which the authors promote a “writing culture,” including
writing-centred supervision, focusing on developing literature review skills, critical writing
skills, and “joint texting,” which is working with students jointly, viewing a section of the
students’ early draft writing on the screen, and discussing and modelling how subtle shifts in
the text could improve it, working collaboratively to improve the text, building writing skills
and confidence in the student as ‘text worker’ (pp. 173-177). Kamler and Thomson’s work is
important to this study because the authors provide a lot of valuable suggestions to improve
graduate student writing.

Anthony Paré and his associates at McGill University, including Doreen Starke-
Meyerring, Lynn McAlpine (who has already been mentioned), and Cheryl Amundsen,
designed and carried out a longitudinal study of the doctoral experience in Canada, looking for
factors related to the successes and failures of students to complete. The study has resulted in
many publications of interest to my study.

Paré, Starke-Meyerring and McAlpine (2009) discuss the dissertation as multi-genre,
“responding to multiple exigencies, functioning in multiple rhetorical situations, addressing
multiple readers” (p. 180).

Not only does the dissertation contain variations on a number of distinct sub-genres
(the literature review, the essay, the experimental article), it also responds to various
exigencies and performs a range of social action in several different contexts, including
the supervisory dyad itself, the doctoral committee, the academic department, the
disciplinary community, and the research setting. (p. 180)

Academic genres are necessary to produce knowledge; students must learn the genres
associated with their research. Supervisors refer to implied genres during the course of
supervision, but the authors argue that making them more explicit would elucidate the writing
process for graduate students.

McAlpine and Amundsen co-edited a book, *Doctoral education: Research-based
strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators* (2011), which includes many
chapters that are directly relevant to this study. Chapter two, on doctoral student experiences, explicates their finding that students often isolated themselves, assimilating a culture of academic individualism from their departments, instead of sharing difficulties with their supervisors. The authors recommend encouraging supportive networks among students.

Chapter four, on supervisory feedback on writing the dissertation, state that supervisors struggle to help their students with their writing, and that they would benefit from knowledge of books about academic writing; the authors provided a list of resources for that purpose. The only book about dissertation writing that they recommend is Kamler and Thomson’s book, *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision* (2006), which was discussed above. Chapter five of McAlpine and Amundsen’s book covers students’ difficulties with writing, problematizing the lack of language about writing between students and supervisors, because of the “cloak of normalcy and universality that keeps writing invisible in institutions of high education” (p. 92):

As a result, for doctoral students, writing as a vital site of inquiry and learning to participate in disciplinary knowledge-making practices is lost, with students disoriented, afraid to ask questions about the very knowledge-making practices in which they are to participate, and left without opportunities to actively negotiate complex identity struggles involved in that participation. (p. 91)

A chapter by Paré, Starke-Meyerring and McAlpine (2011) in the book, *Writing in knowledge societies*, on knowledge and identity work in supervision, states that supervisors shape their students as rhetorical subjects, but

If the rhetorical nature of the process of subject formation is shrouded in common sense, students are given few opportunities to reflect on who they are becoming, how they are aligning themselves, or whether they wish to reproduce certain disciplinary logics and values. Therefore…a robust theoretical rhetorical awareness of and participation in disciplinary knowledge and identity work is vital to advancing not only knowledge production within and across disciplines themselves, but also to increasing student agency in the production of the subject positions that produce that knowledge. (p. 233)
This quote eloquently iterates a fundamental problem in graduate student writing, and the potential value to students of learning rhetorical techniques of academic writing that could facilitate their completion of their theses and other related writing. The work of these Canadian scholars is central to this thesis.

One sign of the difficulties encountered by graduate students around thesis writing is the proliferation and variety of books on how to write a thesis. Two that offer some direct and practical advice are: *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day* (Bolker, 1998), which includes suggestions about getting organized and setting up supports, and *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book or article* (Becker, 1986; 2007), which offers some good advice and amusing stories; however, neither of these books describe how to write a thesis. Kamler and Thomson (2008) decry such books and advice. Their book which was previously mentioned, *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision* (Kamler & Thomson, 2006), deals with every aspect of writing a thesis. Although it was written for use by supervisors, it includes a lot of useful, practical information for graduate students as well, as does Lovitts’ (2007) book, *Making the implicit explicit: Creating performance expectations for the dissertation*, which includes criteria for each thesis chapter.

An article, *Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation* (Boote & Beile, 2005), focuses on the literature review. These texts are relevant to this study, as they address problems encountered by students in writing their theses, and provide tools to help them.

There has been an increase in the number of online resources for doctoral students, as expounded by Manion (2005): “emergent researchers are formulating new networks not only nationally but increasingly inter-regionally and internationally in response to an increasingly globalized (academic) world” (p. 87). These resources include sites for dissertation-writers,
such as the All-But-Dissertation Survival Guide, PhinisheD, The Thesis Whisperer, The Graduate Junction, specific university graduate studies sites and graduate writing sites; and a plethora of sites offering dissertation assistance and writing services, for a fee. There are also many advertisements for “writing coaches”; several student participants in this study engaged the services of coaches to help them complete their theses. Marshall (2003) wrote about this trend, and attributes it to a lack of adequate supervision around writing problems. These resources are relevant to the study, because they indicate that some students are seeking support and advice to help them complete their theses, which is indicative of a need for more support from their supervisors, graduate departments and schools.

Critical Feminist Research

Many of the participants in the study engaged in thesis work to address problems in their professional practices. Most of them employed IE as their critical feminist method of inquiry. Literature on critical feminist research is discussed next.

An example of how a social problem is demarcated, articulated, and addressed as a local civic problem, and then posed as a problematic for academic research, and how institutions are eventually brought to recognize and respond to it, is succinctly provided by Betsy Stanko. In her article, *From academia to policy making: Changing police responses to violence against women*, as well as other published work, Stanko (2007) illuminates this process:

As a teacher and a scholar, I explored the meanings and impact of violence on women, and was very active in my local community in setting up direct services for women who experienced violence. I was part of a group of feminist academics who raised the problem of women’s violence at the hands of known men to the level of a social problem for criminological theory and practice. My book—*Intimate Intrusions* (1985)—broke new ground for criminology. …

While academics can afford to deliberate—debating the nature of public protection to appropriate support to civil society via public order policing—I weave these musings
into policy discussions that have implications for how we do business now and how we might do it better in the future. ... My contribution to helping the MPS [police service] consider how it treats the public as a result of any contact is grounded in academic debate. (p. 216)

This piece is a vivid telling of the passion inherent in moving beyond the role of researcher in an area of grave injustice to women to that of an activist working to document these injustices and provide refuge to women victims of violence. Combining her two modes of knowing, as an activist and as a critical feminist academic sociologist, Stanko participated in the collective effort of raising this problem to the level of institutional discourse and practice in order to effect change at the community level.

Another example is an activist who was inspired to return to the academy for further credentialing in order to enhance his activism work. IE scholar Eric Mykhalovskiy (Mykhalovskiy & Church, 2006) worked with George Smith, an academic and activist, on several community AIDS projects after completing a M.A. in Sociology at York University. Through these projects and that relationship, he was initiated into new methodologies as an AIDS community practitioner that he brought to his ensuing doctoral work.

Other examples using Institutional Ethnography are the work of Gillian Walker (1995) and that of Ellen Pence (1993; 1999; 2001), scholars who researched and deconstructed police practices and legal protocols that were counter-productive for battered women, and then worked to change those practice and effect positive changes for the women.

Participants in my study are also moving across these kinds of divides. IE is well suited to analyze how these divisions are organized and experienced, because it examines the lived experiences of people who are enmeshed in institutional practices, as well as the texts of those institutions that discursively organize them.
Gaps in the Literature

Next, I wish to explicate where I perceived gaps in the literature that I have explored.

1. None of the graduate education scholars or graduate writing scholars employed institutional ethnography as their method of inquiry. None of the literature covered research on the social organization of graduate students’ writing and text production.

2. The literature does not cover the particular group of graduate students that were participants in my study, professionals who returned to graduate education programs to acquire advanced degrees, masters and doctoral degrees which required a thesis.

3. There is very little literature on older graduate students, and this demographic is increasing in numbers.

4. There is little literature on the lived experiences of graduate students as they move through their programs and learn to write their required texts from their perspective.

5. There is not much written about the actual experiences of professionals learning to write as academics and developing a thesis.

All of the above topics are discussed in this thesis.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have described and discussed the scholarly literature that is relevant to my research. I included literature from the three different disciplines upon which the study is based: higher education, more specifically, graduate education; writing and discourse studies, more specifically, graduate student writing studies; and sociology, more specifically, critical feminist research and institutional ethnography, highlighting the most
relevant works. I engage with some of the literature discussed in this chapter in the
Conclusions chapter of the thesis. This body of literature demonstrates that graduate students’
experiences and graduate student writing are important topics, and that further related studies
will add to this body of knowledge.

The next chapter is Methodology/Research Methods, in which I discuss the methods I
employed in order to carry out my research based on my thesis question and fill the gaps in
literature that I described above.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY/ RESEARCH METHODS

“The researcher knows what she wants to explain, but only step by step does she know who she needs to interview, or what texts and discourses she needs to examine.”
(Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 45)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on how I carried out my research, the research methods I employed, the terms I used from those methods, and terms I developed. I also describe how I collected and analyzed my data.

I have divided this chapter into three sections. In the first section, titled “Methods I Employed,” I cover the different influences on my data collection and analysis. My study required a variety of methodologies to analyze the various types of data I collected. They included: qualitative research methods, bricolage, ethnography, autoethnography, Laurel Richardson’s writing as a method of inquiry, and institutional ethnography, which was my primary method of inquiry.

In the second section, titled “Data Collection,” I present information about the participants, or research population, the research setting, my research design, my data collection methods, and how I carried out my data analysis.

The third section is the “Conclusion” to this chapter. I begin with the description of my methods.

Section 1: Methods I Employed

A number of different methods informed my research design. According to Denzin and Lincoln, “[t]he combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood … as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (2008, p. 7). My initial intent was to
apply concepts and tools from institutional ethnography, or IE, which was a major influence on my work; IE is designated a “sociology for people” by its founder and developer, Dorothy E. Smith. Another early influence on my work was Laurel Richardson’s work on writing as a method of inquiry. Her suggestions for using creative means to express ideas influenced the different styles of writing I employed in this thesis, and my use of the first person.

I have included information on qualitative methods, since my work falls into this category of research paradigms. I also include information on ethnography, since ethnography is one of my methods, and autoethnography, since I include my writing about my own experiences. Bricolage was the last addition, since I learned about it more recently; it seemed to fit with my work, since I have used different sources. I have reordered my discussion of these methods in order to present them more logically as follows:

1. Qualitative Research
2. Bricolage
3. Ethnography
4. Autoethnography
5. Laurel Richardson, Writing: A Method of Inquiry
6. Institutional Ethnography and the Sociology of Dorothy E. Smith

**Qualitative research.**

The two major divisions for research in the social sciences, which includes education, are quantitative and qualitative. Since I am studying the social relations and lived experiences of professionals/graduate students learning to write and produce texts as academics, qualitative research is my chosen paradigm. To Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting

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6 Her 2005 monograph is titled: *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people.*
to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 4)

I did not utilize all of the possible methods listed above; I focused on interviews, conversations, field notes, and textual materials that were relevant to my study, which was carried out in the settings where the graduate education students and I were situated while engaged in our graduate program work and other related activities. I took ethnographic notes while I observed graduate students in their activities, as well as notes about my own experiences and the students’ experiences as they related them to me. My interviews included students, professors and supervisors.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), personal experience and introspection are included in the empirical materials that are collected for research purposes, because qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way. Hence there is frequently a commitment to using more than one interpretive practice in any study. (pp. 3-4)

I believe that my use of various techniques of gathering information adds to the richness of my description and presents a more complete picture of the social relations of students’ activities, work practices and experiences that I depict in this thesis. I next discuss bricolage.

**Bricolage.**

My exploration of my thesis question engaged several different methodologies, therefore I can call myself a bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001). According to French dictionaries, a bricoleur is a “handyman or do-it-yourselfer,” a person who works at projects with the tools at hand; the verb, bricoler, means to cobble together; the work that is produced is referred to as a bricolage. This term is used in many different contexts, including  

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art, music, and computer program design, as well as research, where it means putting together diverse found objects or methods to produce a work of art or other product: “1. a construction made of whatever materials are at hand; something created from a variety of available things. 2. (in literature) a piece created from diverse resources. 3. (in art) a piece of makeshift handiwork. 4. the use of multiple, diverse research methods.”

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) use the term bricolage in reference to research. They compare using different methods of qualitative research to making a quilt, patching together different methods as needed for a particular research project:

The qualitative researcher as *bricoleur* or maker of quilts uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials are at hand (Becker, 1998, p. 2). If new tools or techniques have to be invented, or pieced together, then the researcher will do this. The “choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context” (Nelson et al., 1992, p. 2), what is available in the context, and what the researcher can do in that setting. (p. 4)

The methodological *bricoleur* is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection and introspection. (p. 6)

I identify with this term because I have utilized methods that are familiar to me, and therefore, at hand, such as institutional ethnography, along with autoethnography, which was part of my practice in carrying out my study.

Kincheloe (2001) is another scholar who has written about bricolage:

As researchers draw together divergent forms of research, they gain the unique insight of multiple perspectives. Thus, a complex understanding of research and knowledge production prepares bricoleurs to address the complexities of the social, cultural, psychological, and educational domains. Sensitive to complexity, bricoleurs use multiple methods to uncover new insights, expand and modify old principles, and re-examine accepted interpretations in unanticipated contexts. (p. 687)

Kincheloe introduces the concept of multiple perspectives that emerge from different methodologies. The different methods I employed uncovered different perspectives: my

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autoethnography revealed my own experiences; my interviews and conversations revealed the experiences of students, professors and supervisors; and my ethnography of activities in which graduate students were engaged revealed the interactions between students and other students, and between students and professors and supervisors.

More from Kincheloe (2001):

To be well prepared, bricoleurs must realize that knowledge is always in process, developing, culturally specific, and power-inscribed. They are attuned to dynamic relationships connecting individuals, their contexts, and their activities instead of focusing on these separate entities in isolation from one another. In this ontological framework, they concentrate on social activity systems and larger cultural processes and the ways individuals engage or are engaged by them. (p. 689)

My research looked at larger cultural processes in the graduate education school that I studied. I observed the changes that occurred over time in relation to dissemination of important information that was relevant to students, and the changes in the presentation and running of workshops, as well as the attitudes towards students’ presenting their ongoing research at conferences. Also, I focused on the relationships between students, professors and supervisors in the different activities in which they were interacting, activities organized by the graduate school, and activities outside the graduate school, such as national and international conferences.

Kincheloe believes that bricolage is an important strategy for qualitative researchers: “If the cutting edge of research lives at the intersection of disciplinary borders, then developing the bricolage is a key strategy in the development of rigorous and innovative research” (p. 698).
Ethnography.

Ethnography originated as “a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual cultures.” It has been adopted by sociologists and other researchers in the social sciences and humanities as a method of observing research subjects in particular environments and taking notes of those observations. Here is Tedlock’s (2000) description of these newer proponents of ethnography:

Long enshrined as a method, a theoretical orientation, and even a philosophical paradigm within anthropology, ethnography has recently been extended (primarily as a useful methodology) to cultural studies, literary theory, folklore, women's studies, sociology, cultural geography, and social psychology. It has also proven useful in a number of applied areas, including education, counseling, organization studies, planning, clinical psychology, nursing, psychiatry, law, criminology, management, and industrial engineering. Wherever it has been adopted, a key assumption has been that by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people (one's own or others) in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of their subjects than they can by using any other approach (Hammersley, 1992). (p. 455)

I observed and wrote about the social relations of the participants: graduate students, professors and supervisors, as they interacted in settings at the graduate education school and at other venues such as conferences, engaged in activities related to graduate education work, such as program activities, conference presentations, and other events. My ethnography reveals the range of activities and interactions of the participants. My notes were influenced by my particular research interests and style of writing, as well as my choice of methods. From Tedlock again:

Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into a written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives. (p. 460)

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Ethnography allows the researcher to make observations of participants, but also to self-reflect, and to include both types of observation as part of their research data:

Instead of choosing between writing an ethnographic memoir centering on the self or a life history or standard monograph centering on the other, an ethnographer can allow both self and other to appear together within a single narrative that carries a multiplicity of dialoguing voices. (p. 471)

Ethnography that centres on the observations and reflections of the researcher is also known as autoethnography, which is a method used by social science researchers that has its own particular body of knowledge and scholars, therefore I have devoted a separate section of this chapter to it, which follows.

**Autoethnography.**

I have included an autoethnography of my own process of moving through a graduate program in education; that is, I have included my own observations and accounts, which are a combination of narrative, autoethnography and autobiography. Many scholars have written about autoethnography; I discuss only a sampling of them here, choosing those with whom I most resonated. One of my models for this method is Tami Spry (2001), who defines autoethnography as: “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. According to Spry, autoethnography is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes” (p. 710). Some scholars have written about autoethnography in very creative ways. A seminal piece is by Ellis and Bochner (2000), who tell a story about how they instructed a student to use autoethnography in her thesis. Similarly, Wall (2006) wrote an autoethnography about her experience of learning how to write an autoethnography.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) wrote about the importance of the voice of the researcher; I was fortunate to take a course with Connelly in my master’s program, which influenced me to write self-reflectively, and to include my personal experiences in this thesis.
To Denzin (1997), the embodied presence of the researcher becomes a part of the research, “to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual” (p. xv). Duncan (2004) encouraged researchers to use autoethnography “to investigate their reality more fully,” because “there is a place in scholarship for shining the light of research where one stands for attempting to know one’s own experience and sharing that knowledge” (p. 28).

Butz (2010) described autoethnography as a “blurred genre,” with no distinct definition, referring to it as “self-conscious, reflexive,” as it “seeks to perform experience textually” (p. 138); he provided many different examples of how ethnography has been interpreted and utilized. Hamdan (2012) wrote about her school experiences as a middle-eastern Muslim woman in Canada. She argued that autoethnography is appropriate for educational research, and referred to it as “privileged knowledge,” because “it provides an insider account and analysis of weaved power structures that an outsider cannot dismantle” (p. 587).

In regard to using autoethnography with institutional ethnography, Taber (2010) wrote about combining the two in her thesis work in which she included her own experiences as part of her data. Dorothy Smith and Alison Griffith began their research into their book, Mothering for schooling (2005) from their own experiences as single mothers dealing with the expectations of their children’s schools: “You can begin with your own [experiences] … You can expand from your own experience, as did Alison Griffith and I … and then stretch out to engage with others similarly engaged in the institutional processes that organized your own experience” (2006, p. 7; also p. 59 for examples of other IE researchers who began their investigations with their own experiences).

Chapter 5 is my autoethnography, but elements of autoethnography can be found throughout my thesis. I describe my processes of completing my required program work,
beginning with my struggles over writing a course paper. My descriptions are embodied reactions to challenges that I wrote about at the time they were occurring. I wrote freely, without regard to the style of the writing so I could convey to the reader exactly what I was experiencing at that time. Next, I will discuss how Laurel Richardson’s work influenced my research.

**Laurel Richardson, Writing as a method of inquiry.**

Laurel Richardson is a feminist scholar who uses writing as a method of inquiry (1994, p. 516). Richardson decried static, boring writing, and looked for ways to put herself into her writing. The problem, to Richardson, is that researchers are trained to conceptualize writing as “writing up” the research, rather than as a method of discovery. Almost unthinkingly, qualitative research training validates the mechanistic model of writing, even though that model shuts down the creativity and sensibilities of the individual researcher. … How do we put ourselves in our own texts, and with what consequences? How do we nurture our own individuality and at the same time lay claim to “knowing” something?” These are both philosophically and practically difficult problems. (p. 517)

At the graduate school of my study, there is considerable variation in the theses. I saw evidence of this in the styles of writing and formats of the theses of the participants who completed their programs during the time of my research. Some of the participants wrote in a more traditional format, while others chose to alter the format of their thesis. Instead of adopting the traditional titles of chapters, such as introduction, literature review, methodology, data and analysis chapters, results and conclusion, they created their own individualized formats and chapter titles. Others infused their writing with their own personalities and creativity: one of the participants wrote poems to introduce each of her chapters.

Richardson credited the postmodern movement for allowing the introduction of new styles of academic writing, including thesis writing: “[A] postmodernist position allows us to know “something” without having to know everything. Having a partial, local, historical
knowledge is still knowing” (p. 518). This stance was important for my research, because I only gained a partial sampling through my interviews and study, yet this stance justifies the relevance of a small sample. Another influence cited by Richardson is poststructuralism, which “directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said to everyone” (p. 518).

Richardson also discussed the historic background of writing conventions, the division of writing into two camps, literary writing and scientific writing, which dates back to the 17th century: “Literature … was associated with fiction, rhetoric, and subjectivity, whereas science was associated with fact, plain language, and objectivity” (p. 518). Although this division was blurred by the late 19th century, this positivistic ideal continues to influence writing in the social sciences. The conventions of what constitutes sociological knowledge “hold tremendous material and symbolic power over social scientists. Using them increases the probability of one’s work being accepted into “core” social science journals” (p. 520).

Qualitative texts try to emulate this model: “like ethnography, the assumption of scientific authority is rhetorically displayed in these qualitative texts” (p. 520), but new texts are challenging this model and creating new forms, which she called experimental representations, that “transgress the boundaries of social science writing genres” (p. 520). My own master’s thesis was non-traditional, and included a video as well as a written thesis.

In a later work, coauthored with Elizabeth St. Pierre (2005), Richardson restated, reworked and updated these ideas. She renamed ‘experimental representations,’ “CAP, or creative analytical processes, ethnographies … wherever the author has moved outside conventional social scientific writing. CAP ethnographies are not alternative or experimental; they are, in and of themselves, valid and desirable representations of the social” (p. 962).
Richardson encouraged writers of ethnographies to find concrete practices through which we can construct ourselves as ethical subjects engaged in ethical ethnography, inspiring to read and to write … engaging in self-reflexivity, giving in to synchronicity, asking for what one wants, not flinching from where the writing takes one emotionally or spiritually, and honoring the embodiedness and spatiality of one’s labors. (p. 965)

This stance is important for my research, because it links writing to self-development and the creation of knowledge. I am empowered by Richardson’s work, which inspired me to use non-traditional writing in my Ph.D. dissertation as well, including “narratives of self,” “highly personalized, revealing text in which an author tells stories about his or her own lived experience” (1994, p. 321). Dorothy Smith employed this type of writing in a number of her publications, for example, in her Introduction to *The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge*, where she wrote about visiting several psychiatrists when her marriage was faltering (Smith, 1990a, p. 5). As a graduate student researching the social organization of the reading-writing activity and text production of graduate students, this approach allowed me to reveal my personal experiences as a meaningful artistic expression. In the next section, I will describe how I used institutional ethnography in my research.

**Institutional ethnography (IE) and the sociology of Dorothy E. Smith.**

Institutional ethnography, or IE, was my main method of inquiry. It is an alternative sociology conceived of and developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith. It is a critical feminist sociology, founded on Marx and other influences.

It has kin, notably in Marx – though not in the subsequent theoretical developments of Marxism – but also to some degree in ethnomethodology. What institutional ethnography shares with these is a commitment to begin and develop inquiry in the very same world we live in, where we are in our bodies. And because it makes language a key to the ethnographic discovery of how institutions are coordinated, it draws on the tradition of symbolic interaction originating in the work of George Herbert Mead, linking it with Russian traditions of thought on language, notably that of Mikhail Bakhtin, A. R. Luria, and Valentin Volosinov. (Smith, 2005, p. 2)
IE was developed by Smith as a reaction to the male-dominated sociology that was prevalent at the time of her doctoral research and writing and her early work as an academic. To Smith and her followers, it is a “method of inquiry,” (Smith, 2005, p. 1) rather than a methodology, with an emphasis on “research as discovery rather than … the testing of hypotheses or the explanation of theory as analysis of the empirical” (Smith, 2005, p. 2). The series editors of Smith’s 2005 book provide a good explanation of institutional ethnography in their Series Editors’ Forward to the book. The terms will be explicated in the following sections.

This method is ethnographic but goes beyond most practices of ethnography. What she [Smith] calls institutional ethnography builds knowledges of how the relations of ruling operate from the standpoints of the people participating in them and creates maps whereby people can see the workings of institutions and their own locations within them. She distinguishes institutional ethnography by emphasizing its practices of exploration and discovery; conventional ethnographies and other sociological methods are, according to Smith, profoundly constrained by a priori conceptual frameworks. Institutional ethnography, in contrast, resists the dominance of theory; it is an alternative sociology, not just a method of inquiry. Language is central to this model. Smith emphasizes language as the medium in which thoughts and ideas move reciprocally between individual people and the realm of the social. The forms of coordination that constitute institutions occur in and through language. (Howard, Risman & Sprague, 2005, pp. xi-xii)

Smith herself described institutional ethnography in her 2006 book.

Institutional ethnography isn’t about studying institutions as such. Rather it proposes a sociology that does not begin in theory but in people’s experience. In avoiding theories that command interpretive allegiance it avoids commitment to the institutions of sociology that deploy the political effect of theory to master other voices. … [We are] beginning where we are as bodies in the actualities of our lives and exploring the society as it embeds, masters, organizes, shapes and determines those actualities as we live them. (2006, pp. 2-3)

And here is Smith’s definition of IE:

Institutional ethnography explores the social relations organizing institutions as people participate in them and from their perspectives. People are the expert practitioners of their own lives, and the ethnographer’s work is to learn from them, to assemble what is learned from different perspectives, and to investigate how their activities are coordinated. It aims to go beyond what people know to find out how what they are
doing is connected to others in ways they cannot see. The idea is to map the institutional aspects of the ruling relations so that people can expand their own knowledge of their everyday worlds by being able to see how what they are doing is coordinated with others’ doings elsewhere and elsewhen. (2005, p. 225)

Institutional ethnography is not easy to describe or define. Carrying out IE research is a subjective process, relying on the researcher’s own good instincts to determine what to investigate and how to carry out her research. Employing IE methods of inquiry include: using the standpoint of the workers/students/patients that are central to the investigation, conducting interviews of the participants and others who interact with them, investigating ruling texts, making IE maps to illuminate how the texts are regulating the actions/work/experiences of the research participants, and identifying where the texts lead to actions that can have negative repercussions, making suggestions about changes that could lead to better consequences for the actors. Campbell and Gregor stated that a “particular orientation of the researcher’s interest and attention” is needed (p. 45), and that “The researcher knows what she wants to explain, but only step by step does she know who she needs to interview, or what texts and discourses she needs to examine” (p. 45). This is a good explanation of my research path, as I learned by doing throughout my research journey.

**Why I chose IE as my main method of inquiry.**

I employed institutional ethnography as my main method of inquiry to develop an account of the textually mediated social organization of the graduate education programs of the participants and myself, and the texts that linked our work to local and translocal institutions, as I observed, recorded and analyzed their experiences and my own in my study. My objective was to uncover what practices supported the reading-writing work and text production of the students, and what practices, if any, hindered them or were detrimental to their continued progress and timely completion of the components of their programs.
I chose institutional ethnography because:

1. I wanted to engage in a process of “research as discovery” (Smith, 2005, p. 2), which is fundamental to IE, in my investigation of the social organization of the graduate education programs of my professional/student participants and me.

2. I wanted to employ the standpoint of graduate students as they and I were embedded in our graduate programs, and using the standpoint of people embedded in the practices of an institution is central to IE.

3. I wanted to study the embodied everyday work of the participants and myself, as we engaged in our program work and peripheral work and developed our theses; beginning in people’s everyday experiences is also fundamental to IE.

4. Also, I wanted to study the textually based practices of the graduate programs, to identify and analyze the texts that governed the students and all their reading-writing activity and text production; studying the texts to discover how they coordinate the actions of people who work or study or are patients in an institution is another concept from IE, which focuses on texts.

5. I wanted to identify where there might be problems, or disjunctures for the students, that impeded their progress through their programs; locating disjunctures in institutional practices is another concept in IE.

6. I wanted to investigate the processes around the writing, document and text production of the participants and myself in order to locate any problems students were experiencing in completing their written work, and especially, their theses. Dorothy Smith’s work on texts was foundational to my work in this area, as well as the terms she developed about texts. I created several terms of my own that extended from some of Smith’s terms and those of IE scholar Lauren Eastwood.
To sum up, I wanted to study the institutional processes integral to the graduate education programs at the school in which I conducted my research in order to ascertain whether the institution was meeting the needs of the professionals/graduate students and me in completing our written work. Studying institutional processes is also an area of investigation of IE.

IE guided and informed my research process of locating my standpoint and problematic/research question, discovering how to proceed in my study one step at a time. My data collection methods were also informed by IE and included: autoethnography, interviews and conversations with graduate students, course instructors and thesis supervisors; ethnographic studies of courses, thesis study groups, mock thesis defenses, workshops, conference presentations and other group activities of graduate students.

To learn about IE, I read IE texts, I audited a methods course that included IE, participated in and helped to facilitate a study group with students who were also using IE, took IE workshops, attended conference sessions and talks about IE, and wrote and presented conference papers about my ongoing research and my use of IE as my method of inquiry.

**How my research is similar to other IE research, and how it differs.**

Dorothy Smith states that:

It is important that institutional ethnography not become a sect, a group of insiders who know how to talk and write it, and insist on a kind of orthodoxy in its practice which puts in hazard its fundamental commitment to inquiry and discovery. Institutional ethnography is distinctive among sociologies in its commitment to *discovering* “how things are actually put together,” “how it works.” The colloquialisms leave what “things” are or what “it” is undefined, but establish the ideas of encountering the actualities of people’s everyday lives, or research that discovers the social as the ongoing coordinating of people’s activities, and of the researcher as being changed in the dialogue of research … [W]hat we’re calling the social is only to be discovered among actual people and their ongoing activity. (Smith, 2006, pp. 1-2)
In my research, I did “encounter the actualities” of my own and the professional/graduate student participants’ lives as students, and interactions of professors and supervisors who worked with them. I observed them and recorded their dialogues in students’ program activities, in courses, at thesis proposal presentations, and at mock thesis defenses, as well as in their extended activities, presenting papers at conferences, and in their supplementary activities, in study/peer/thesis groups, as well as other venues. I learned about the social coordination of their activities by observing and examining the ways the institution organized their work and hearing students discuss their encounters with professors and supervisors that directed and regulated their writing. I certainly was changed through my research, in gaining a greater understanding of professionals’/students’ processes of developing a thesis topic, learning to articulate it in spoken and written form, researching and writing a thesis, as well as the social organization of graduate education programs.

My research did not study the institution of the graduate school; it investigated the experiences of my professional/graduate student participants and my own experiences, as we were organized and shaped by the graduate school and its textually based practices in which we were embedded.

The reach of inquiry goes from where actual people are in their own lives, activities, and experiences to open up relations and organization that are, in a sense, actually present in them but are not observable. Institutional ethnography aims to discover [them] and make [them] visible. … [I]t’s that looking up and into as a process of investigation, of progressive discovering, and assembling what you’ve got as a base from which to move to investigating further and more widely that’s the key to institutional ethnography. (Smith, 2006, pp. 4-5)

Entry-level data is about the local setting, the individuals that interact there and their experiences. The research goal is to explicate that account. Some more research must be done and some more data collected … Some detective work must be done to discover the missing organizational details of how the setting works. … Perhaps there are some documents … that will be useful. (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 60)
I began in the local setting, the graduate school, and with some of the individuals that interacted there, students, professors and supervisors, and recorded and explicated their experiences. Then I did further research to learn about the texts and policies that governed the students, and explicated how they organized the graduate school practices of the students.

The theory upon which institutional ethnography relies tells us that the settings that we investigate are organized and ruled in definite ways, albeit in ways that are often not fully understood by participants … the purpose of establishing such linkages is to explicate relations of ruling. This kind of inquiry makes power understandable in terms of relations between people, relations that rule. Institutional ethnography’s focus on explicating ruling relations gives this scholarly research its potential for being a resource for activism and for transformation of the conditions of people’s lives. Learning how people’s lives are organized outside their own knowledge and control makes it possible to understand domination and subordination. (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 61)

[A] feature of institutional ethnography … makes it most useful to those who want to make changes in practices that oppress or subordinate. (ibid. p. 101)

Institutional ethnographers generally have critical or liberatory goals; they undertake research in order to reveal the ideological and social processes that produce experiences of subordination. (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 19)

This is where I digress from many IE studies, as described above. Although I did examine the ruling relations and organization that structured graduate students’ everyday practices and the texts that discursively organized them with a critical feminist lens, my goal was not to make visible domination or subordination. I did not investigate them to discover aspects of suppression, repression or oppression of the participants or myself, which is the goal of many institutional ethnography studies, including those of some of the participants who were using IE as their methods of inquiry in their work. Those words are too strong to describe what I sought and found. I was seeking the answer to my thesis question from Chapter 1: “What social organization of graduate education programs supports the reading-writing activities and text production of professionals/graduate education students in programs requiring a thesis?” I was seeking out what practices supported the students’ writing and text
production, and what problematic practices, disjunctures, or omissions, if any, might be imped ing the students’ progress. Disjunctures are definitely negative factors, but they are not in the same category as oppression, suppression, or domination.

In carrying out my research, I recorded my own experiences related to writing and text production and those of the participants through hand-written notes. Later I typed and analyzed them to uncover the positive and negative practices mentioned above. When writing the thesis, the descriptions of experiences became a significant focus of the thesis, which is why I call the study an ethnography and not an institutional ethnography in the title.

**Limitations of IE.**

There have been a number of criticisms of institutional ethnography as a research method, or ‘method of inquiry,’ (Smith’s term). First of all, the method is very complex and it is hard to grasp the essential concepts and how they can be applied to a given study. Many students in my study were using IE for their research, and they struggled with its application, as did I. This is a common theme among researchers using IE.

A limitation that is mentioned by Smith herself is that IE is a learn-by-doing method:

> [T]here are necessary limitation to the practice, the ethnographic commitment to learn from those involved just how they go about doing things is preserved throughout. At the outset then, the institutional ethnographer may be unable to lay out precisely the parameters of the research, sometimes a source of difficulty with the ethical review processes of universities and with funding sources that require a clear account of who the “subjects” are and what kinds of questions they will be asked. (Smith, 2005, p. 35)

Another criticism is that students must be familiar with the various theorists that are the foundation of Smith’s method in order to understand it, and that students must do extensive background work before approaching IE texts. None the less, increasing numbers of students are learning about and employing IE as their methods of research for their theses worldwide, alone or combined with other methods.
**Explanation of IE terms.**

There are a number of terms that have been developed by Dorothy Smith, to describe her sociology. Some are combinations of words in common usage that have a particular meaning in IE; others are terms specific to IE research. To avoid confusion, I list below some of the IE terms that I employ in this thesis, along with their explanations.

- **Disjuncture/Fault Line**: Institutional practice that creates discomfort, difficulty, hardship; that “chafes” people who are workers/patients/students in an institutional setting. (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 48)

- **Institutional Capture**: Institutional discourse has the capacity to subsume or displace description based in experience. Institutional capture can occur when both informant and researcher are familiar with institutional discourse, know how to speak it, and hence can easily lose touch with the informant’s experientially based knowledge. (Smith, 2005, p. 225)

- **Ontology**: [A] theory of being … used to denote a theory of how the social exists. Institutional ethnography’s ontology provides a conceptual framework for selective attention to actualities. It moves toward inquiry that goes on in the same world as that which the ethnographer is exploring; it moves away from an ontology that affords agency to concepts. (Smith, 2005, p. 226)

- **Power**: In institutional ethnography, institutions are seen as generating power through the coordinating functions of language and texts. … The texts that constitute and regulate institutions establish agency, that is, textually specified capacities to control and mobilize the work of others. Textually sanctioned agency produces capacities for action accountable within the institutional hierarchy creating powers that are generated by the textual concerting and mobilization of people’s work. (Smith, 2005, pp. 226-227)

- **Problematic**: [S]ets out a project of research and discovery that organizes the direction of investigation from the standpoint of those whose experience is its starting point. (Smith, 2005, p. 227)

- **Ruling Relations**: Translocal forms of social organization mediated by texts. (Smith, 2005, p. 227)

- **Social organization**: [D]istinct forms of coordinating people’s doings … that are reproduced again and again. (Smith, 2005, p. 227)
Social relations [O]rient the researcher to viewing people’s doings in particular local settings as articulated to sequences of action that hook them up to what others are or have been doing elsewhere and elsewhen. (Smith, 2005, p. 227)

Standpoint, Women’s Standpoint, People’s Standpoint A methodological starting point in the local particularities of bodily existence. Designed to establish a subject position from which to begin research – a site that is open to anyone – it furnishes an alternative starting point to the objectified subject of knowledge of social scientific discourse. From women’s standpoint, we can make visible the extraordinary complex of the ruling relations, with its power to locate consciousness and set us up as subjects as if we were indeed disembodied. (Smith, 2005, p. 228)

Text [Text] is used here strictly to identify texts as material in a form that enables replication (paper/print, film, electronic, and so on) of what is written, drawn, or otherwise reproduced. … Texts … produce the stability and replicability of organization or institution. The capacity to coordinate people’s doings translocally depends on the text as a material thing, being able to turn up in identical form whenever the reader, hearer, watcher may be in her or his bodily being. Institutional ethnography recognizes texts not as a discrete topic but as they enter into and coordinate people’s doings, and, as activated in the text – reader conversation, they are people’s doings. (Smith, 2005, p. 228)

Translocal This term is used in descriptions of social organization or coordination of people’s doings that are mediated by texts elsewhere and elsewhen, formerly referred to as extralocal; outside the local. It doesn’t refer to a particular place, but rather is a general term to designate governance from afar through texts. Note: this term is used, but not defined in IE.

Work This term is generally used for what people are paid to do. The Wages for Housework group expanded the concept to refer not only to housework but to anything that people do that takes time, effort and intent. Institutional ethnography has adopted this conception of work in exploring the actualities of institutions. It orients the researcher to what people are actually doing as they participate, in whatever way, in institutional processes. (Smith, 2005, p. 229)

My use of IE terms in my research, analysis and thesis writing.

Social relations.

IE is used to investigate the social relations of people’s experiences, connecting local happenings to external, or translocal, forces that regulate them: “Finding out how people are putting our world together daily in the local places of our everyday lives and yet somehow..."
Institutional ethnography starts from people’s everyday local experience and explores the translocal that is present in and organizes their everyday… it recognizes that our everyday doings are coordinated with those of others in relations of which we are generally only marginally, if at all, aware. The everyday is deeply penetrated, organized, shaped by social relations that coordinate people’s local doings with those of others, both those immediately present and others elsewhere or elsewhen. (Smith, 2008, pp. 410, 420)

In *Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring the relations of ruling*, Smith (1990b) stated:

I am interested here in making documents or texts visible as constituents of social relations [which have] opened the way to the investigation of reasoning, facticity, rationality, and sense-making not as processes going on in people's heads but as social practices. … They are, of course, accomplished only by individuals in every day local settings, who entered into and participate in objectified forms constituting organizational and discursive relations beyond themselves. Such objectified and objectifying forms are essentially textual. (pp. 210-211)

In my study, I am focusing on the participants, that is, the professionals/graduate students in my study, and my own production of documents and texts enmeshed in the social relations of our graduate education programs. Campbell and Gregor (2002) define social relations as

actual practices and activities through which people’s lives are socially organized … the complex practices that coordinate people’s actions across separations of time and space, often without their conscious knowledge. … [P]eople actively constitute social relations. People participate in social relations, often unknowingly, as they act competently and knowledgeably to concert and coordinate their own actions with professional standards or family expectations or organizational rules. (pp. 30-31)

Smith (1987) described social relations thusly:

This sense of social relations understands people’s activities as coordinated in actual temporally concerted sequences or courses of action. In and through these the work of a multiplicity of people known and unknown to one another is coordinated … [in] an ongoing concerting of courses of action in which what people do is already organized as it takes up from what precedes and projects its organization into what follows. (p. 183)
The social relations of graduate education programs refers to the courses of action of the students, professors and supervisors, as well as others who act to enable the continuity of the running of graduate program activities, just as they were run previously, and as they will be run in the future. Similarly, there are similar social relations in other graduate education programs at other universities. Although students produce their texts individually, it is in the context of their graduate programs and also within their textual relations to handbooks, course syllabi and other text based directives from their departments and their graduate schools. These “organizational and discursive relations” are similar to those at other graduate educational schools.

In the distinctive formation of social organization mediated by texts, their capacity to transcend the essentially transitory character of social processes and to remain uniform across separate and diverse local settings is key to their peculiar force (though that transcendence is itself an accomplishment of transitory social processes). (p. 211)

**Problematic.**

The problematic is another IE term that is central to the practice. It refers to the experiences of participants that initiated a research study:

Institutional ethnographers treat people’s lived experiences of the everyday world as the problematic of an investigation. A work process for institutional ethnography begins in, explores, and explicates a particular problematic that is there, being lived by someone, in the everyday world. The notion of problematic also helps the institutional ethnographer identify her own stance in relation to the inquiry – as opposed to methodologically removing herself from it. Identifying a problematic in institutional ethnography requires the researcher to notice and name the relations in the research setting into which she is stepping. One way of distinguishing the relations is for the researcher to write an account of her own knowledge – but one that preserves the voices and actual interactions of those involved – of what happens that contains a puzzling event. (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 46)

The problematic is also referred to as a disjuncture in institutional ethnography (Smith, 1990b, pp. 83-104; Smith, 2006, p. 169; Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 48). In my case, my problematic emerged as I moved through my graduate program, and as I observed other
students’ experiences, conversed with them, and interviewed them, as well as professors and supervisors who worked with graduate students. I encountered difficulties around writing, and so did many of the students with whom I interacted, difficulties with writing course papers, grant proposals, thesis proposals, comprehensive examinations, and most of all, theses. I wanted to investigate the source of those difficulties, and whether they could be traced to institutional practices, or texts; if something was missing from the texts, or if they were not being fully observed by all professors and supervisors.

**Standpoint.**

Standpoint is another concept that is central to IE. In my study, I take the standpoint of graduate students. My concept of standpoint is based on Dorothy Smith’s ‘women’s standpoint,’ developed by Smith as an alternative to male-dominated traditional sociology, to make women’s work and subject position visible and worthy of sociological study, as well as a way to reveal ‘ruling relations’ (translocal forms of social organization and social relations, mediated by texts of all kinds) (2005, p. 227):

Women’s standpoint: A methodological starting point in the local particularities of bodily existence. Designed to establish a subject position from which to begin research – a site that is open to anyone – it furnishes an alternative starting point to the objectified subject of knowledge of social scientific discourse. From women’s standpoint, we can make visible the extraordinary complex of the ruling relations, with its power to locate consciousness and set us up as subjects as if we were indeed disembodied. (2005, p. 228)

Smith (2005) expanded women’s standpoint into people’s standpoint, which is further explicated as a subject position for anyone undertaking an institutional ethnographic study:

[W]omen’s (rather than feminist) standpoint is integral to the design of what I originally called “a sociology for women,” which has necessarily been transformed into “a sociology for people.” It does not identify a position or category of position, gender, class or race within the society, but it does establish as a subject position for institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry, a site for the knower that is open to anyone. …. [It] creates a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge of society or
political economy. It is a method of inquiry that works from the actualities of people’s everyday lives and experience to discover the social as it extends beyond experience. A standpoint in people’s everyday lives is integral to that method. It is integral to a sociology creating a subject position within its discourse, which anyone can occupy. The institutional ethnographer works from the social in people’s experience to discover its presence and organization in their lives and to explicate or map that organization beyond the local of the everyday. (p. 10)

I developed the standpoint, or subject position, of graduate students, based on Smith’s concept of standpoint, from the following sources and practices:

1. Learning from my graduate research participants through interviews and other dialogue;
2. Observing and participating in academic support among graduate students;
3. Ethnographic observation of their performances in different settings;
4. My own ongoing graduate study experiences, self-reflection and autoethnography; and
5. The published work of graduates that explicate their own program experiences and work.

It is a perspective developed to make visible and valorize the graduate student participants’ many activities that they engaged in to produce their reading-writing work and text production. The standpoint of graduate students is a subject position, similar to Smith’s ‘standpoint of women,’ worthy of being heard, and resists being the “objectified subject of knowledge of social scientific discourse” in the above quote, which is often the case in articles and books about graduate education. The standpoint of graduate students focuses on their work, problems, dilemmas, embodied tasks, and accomplishments related to the production of papers and other texts, as they moved through their graduate programs. Using the standpoint of graduate students to provide me with a footing from which to explore the social relations of the graduate students’ writing and text production, I observed them in their every day, every night program activities, work, and struggles. Observing participants in their everyday activities is another aspect of an IE study.
I also included my own experiences as a graduate student embedded in the social relations of my graduate school program, from my own “multiple locations and subjectivities [and] experience … it is … in these contradictions that I exist, and therefore think, speak and write” (Ng, 1995, pp. 134-135). My writing about my experiences is unique, as are the experiences of the participants which were related to me through conversations and interviews, and through my ethnography of activities in which I observed them:

I do away with the false notion that the knower/writer can be “objective,” as is commonly assumed in social scientific writing, that she can occupy a position that transcends all viewpoints. I attempt to preserve the knower/writer as an active subject in the text, grappling with her own multiple locations and contradictions. (Smith, 2005, p. 135)

Graduate students standpoint is not static; it is constantly shifting and moving, “in the ongoing, never-stand-still of the social … in that ongoing process of which you’re part” (Smith, 2006, p. 2).

**IE interviews.**

IE interviews are described as “talking with people” by IE researchers: “institutional ethnographic uses of interviewing should be understood in this wide sense as stretching across a range of approaches to talk with informants” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 22). They are describing the dialogical discovery process of IE in action.

“Informal,” on-the-spot interviews can be combined with later “formal” or planned interviews … “talking with people” is not necessarily confined to settings and occasions that occur during formal field research … opportunities to talk with people about institutional processes can arise for the researcher serendipitously, as it were, in her or his daily life … depending on the topic of research. (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, pp. 22-23)

The institutional ethnographer does not approach an interview with a prepared set of questions; instead, she guides the interview: “I tell people what I’m interested in, things I’d like to hear about, rather than asking questions” (Smith, quoted in DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p.
In my interviews, I found that new topics arose naturally in the course of our discussions, as I sought clarification on a point that had been made, or when it reminded me of something related. I occasionally asked questions to direct the talk to areas that I wanted to cover, although the only time I had prepared questions was for my first interview, with a professor after I had completed an ethnography of her course, which is included in the section on Course Work and Course Papers in chapter 5. I referred to my list of questions from time to time, but learned that the conversational tone and flow of the interview allowed for more interesting dialogue. My experience was that once they got started, people wanted to talk about their work and the effort that was behind it, as well as what they wanted to accomplish, and problems they encountered.

Exchanges with graduate students and the stories they shared with me about their experiences in their programs and in their reading-writing processes positioned me in the midst of their real lives, their embodied experiences, as well as my own, as I talked to them singly or in groups, in study groups, after classes, after mock thesis defenses, at conferences, in cafés, at workshops; in person, on the telephone or in emails. Exchanges with professors and supervisors added their perspective to the stories.

Institutional ethnographic interviewing is typically organized around the idea of work, defined broadly, or “generously” (Smith 1987) … the point of interest is the informant’s activity, as it reveals and points toward the interconnected activities of others. The idea of work provides a conceptual frame and guides interview talk; the point is not to insist on the categorical status of any activity, but to hold in place a conception of the social as residing in the coordination of people’s actual activities. (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 25)

Textually-Mediated relations.

Texts are central to institutional ethnography, as they are to our society:

Our knowledge of our contemporary society is to a large extent mediated by texts of various kinds. The results, an objectified world-in-common invested in texts, coordinates the acts, decisions, policies and plans of large-scale organizations. The
primary mode of action and decision in the superstructures of business, government, the professions and the scientific, professional, literary and artistic discourses is utterance – verbal and, more importantly, textual. (Smith, 1990a, pp. 61-61)

Smith’s sociology focuses on texts as “technologies that shape action and experiences in local settings while linking the local to the extra-local, for example, a primary level classroom to a Ministry of Education via curriculum guidelines” (Heap, 1995). This is important to our understanding of how texts and textual practices link graduate education programs to other similar programs in other universities locally, in the same province or state, and translocally, to that of universities in other provinces or states, and in other countries, as well as to governments, corporations, and international organizations.

Another important text from Smith (2001) is her article, *Texts and the ontology of organizations and institutions*. In it, Smith writes about the centrality of texts in the organization and functioning of institutions, in regulating and coordinating people's doings, and coordinating institutions with others locally and translocally. Smith coined the term “the ruling relations” as

emerging historically as an objectified order of relations differentiated from the local and particular … The concept of the ruling relations welds organization and institution as components of a complex of relations. … [P]eople’s doings in particular local settings are recognized and attended to as participating in relations in which they are active and through which their local doings are coordinated with those of others elsewhere … Somehow the objectified and translocal character of the ruling relations is accomplished in the local actualities of people’s work and work settings. (2001, pp. 161-162)

Smith's focus on the importance of texts in the regulation of institutions and her concept of ruling relations are important to my work because part of my research involved looking at the ruling texts that represent the ruling relations of the graduate education school that governed the graduate students who were enrolled in its programs, as well as professors,

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10 Other scholars have a different slant on texts, such as the semiotic approach of Barthes (1977) and McGann (1991).
supervisors and other staff (explicated in chapter 4, The Social Organization of Graduate Student Governance). As well, the texts that students produced within and outside their programs while they were graduate students were required to adhere to the larger ruling relations that regulated graduate programs in the social sciences, and requirements for theses of their universities.

To Smith, texts mediate

people's activities through standardized and standardizing genres such as forms, instructions, rules, rule books, manuals, procedural manuals, funding applications, statistical analyses, libraries, journals, and many more. Texts are integral to people's daily and nightly activities on the job. (2001, p. 173)

All the activities that students engaged in from their applications to their programs through to obtaining their degrees involved texts, from the standardized forms and applications they were required to complete as well as their writing and texts in the form of course papers, thesis proposals and theses that fulfilled the requirements of their programs as delineated in their handbooks, and other textual resources of the department, graduate education school, and school of graduate studies of their universities. All the institutional texts are the same for all students:

The replicated identical text as utterance activated by participants joins them in a situation which it names and defines, standardizing among them the terms in which they can know, understand, and evaluate it, regardless of how its naming and its terms provide for the utterance of what they are actually experiencing … All participants are joined into the same utterance, hence in the same set of categories, connections, subject-object relations, etc., carried by the text … a virtual reality standardized across multiple settings. … Formal or large-scale organizations and institutions exist as such in just these text-mediated forms of co-ordinating people's work, as do discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) and other dimensions of the ruling relations. (Smith, 2001, p. 176)

Further in the same article, to illustrate the connections between institutional texts, Smith analyzes a grade appeal of a student in order to show the interconnections of the grade appeal document with other institutional texts and with other people who are brought to act by
the grade appeal document; in the following passage, she also discusses the complex interconnections around a course:

In multiple ways the text relies implicitly on features of organization: the status categories of student, instructor, and so on, objects such as the grade, the paper, the course, and ‘bodies,’ such as the executive committee. These are more than discursive subjects, agents or objects, they are accomplished as organizational features in just such dialogues of authorized text in particular doings [as in a grade appeal]. A person who attends lectures, writes tests, and completes other assignments of a course is only a student if her name locates a file on record in the Registrar’s office and her payment of fees is up-to-date. What constitutes a course is produced in definite procedures that include the departmental submission of a course description as part of a program, procedures that ensure that a given course proposal doesn’t encroach on the disciplinary jurisdiction of other departments, evidence that guarantees that the course topic is sustainable by competent literature, and so on, as well as the administrative processes that enable students to register and that produce a course list and assign a room. … The grade appeal text both hooks particular courses of action into the institutional frame and reproduces/produces that frame in how the doings of participants are articulated to each other and to the organizational/institutional work. (Smith, 2001, pp. 186-187)

This passage is important to my research, as I explored the social organization of graduate education programs, and their connections to the ruling relations of the graduate education school. I also noted instances where there was dissonance between the regulations and how they were carried out and students’ needs.

Intertextuality.

Smith (2001) also wrote about intertextuality in relation to organizations and institutions. Examining one institutional text leads the researcher to other texts that connect with it:

[A] text is necessarily embedded in a complex of texts. [Since people’s activities are coordinated by texts,] intertextuality projects exploration of the complex of the sequences of activity … This textual web creates the conditions under which the work of teaching and learning can be transformed into an authenticated record of student achievement. … The grading procedures of a university hook it up into a complex of relations with other universities, hence a university must be able to guarantee the value of its grades by ensuring their authenticity (the student named did the work; the instructor evaluated her/his work and recorded the grade; the proper reporting procedures, including the instructor’s signature have been followed; the computerized
system is protected against hackers, and so on). … Every step of this sequence is
textually organized in the agents and the types of activities that will be organizationally
recognized are scripted. The texts both regulate (though they do not prescribe) and
appropriate people’s activities as organizational/institutional actions performed by
people who can be named as members of an organizational/institutional category. …
These organizational/institutional sequences are vested in texts and it is texts that
produce them as organizational/institutional. (2001, pp. 187-190)

Smith's concept of ‘intertextuality’ (2005, p. 212) is important for a study of graduate
students’ texts. Texts produced in graduate programs as graduate students progress through
their programs lead to the creation of verifiable institutional records of the students’ completed
work.

Textual communication, hence intertextuality, does not only happen between students
and supervisors, or between organizations; graduate students partake in the communication of
texts in their own graduate programs as they move between the production of different types
of texts both inside the program requirements and outside them, for example, in conference
papers and publications. In addition, graduate students with professional backgrounds, such as
the participants, may continue to produce texts that circulate in their own professional practice
areas.

This thesis is intertextual, because it connects and communicates with many articles
and books through its citations and reference list. It can be seen as one of a group of
interconnected texts related to graduate education, professional practices, sociology,
institutional ethnography, and so on. When graduate students present their work at conferences
and publish, they increase their intertextual connections to other scholarly work. The term,
‘external textual communication,’ which will be explicated later in this chapter, describes this
kind of text production.
‘Text-Reader conversation.’

An important concept of Smith’s in relation to graduate students’ text production is the “text-reader conversation,” which “brings the text into action in the readers who activate it. It also, and equally important, anchors the text in the local actualities in which people are at work” (Smith, 2005, p. 105). The text is the “fixed” side of the conversation, and is a “constant point of reference against which any particular interpretation can be checked”:

The replicated identical text as utterance activated by participants joins them in a situation which it names and defines, standardizing among them the terms in which they can know, understand, and evaluate it, regardless of how its naming and its terms provide for the utterance of what they are actually experiencing. … Texts provide the basis of a technology enabling, among other things, an order of facticity suppressing divergent perspectives and establishing shared and enforceable common ground, a virtual reality standardized across multiple settings. (Smith, 2001, p. 176)

This process is practiced by graduate students when they give themselves to a text for the time they are engaged in ‘conversations’ with it (Smith, 2005, pp. 155-157). Students taking a course actualize text-reader conversations in relation to a chosen text of the course syllabus, which anchors the reading-writing activity of the students around the same themes, problematics, and issues. It gives them a common perspective, common references from which to discuss and debate. The texts of the syllabus turn the enrolled students into a community of scholars exploring delineated problems.

In Smith’s ‘text-reader conversation,’ the students are ‘captured’ by the text in order to become conversant with the discourses in it, and they will be ‘intentionally captured’ (Eastwood, 2006, p. 189) when they communicate with others using its language. I am using these two IE terms outside their original usage in order to convey the holding and carrying power of the ‘text-reader conversation.’
‘Institutional capture.’

Smith’s ‘institutional capture’ is manifested when a professional or other employee in an institution employs descriptive language about her work and work setting that is aligned with documents that have been officially sanctioned by the institutions’ representatives, which constitute the ‘ruling relations’ of that institution, instead of her own words, when describing her work to researchers. Here is one of Smith’s descriptions of ‘institutional capture’:

This is a barrier created by the ways in which institutional discourse may enter into and, from the point of view of the ethnographer, pervert the dialogue that produces work knowledge. The researcher is up against the capacity of institutional discourse … to subsume or displace descriptions based in experience. … The particulars of the informant’s local work are displaced by “the organization’s organizational account.” (2005, pp. 155-156)

As a representative of the institution, the professional/worker has learned this institutionally-sanctioned language through its use in documents that circulate within the institution, and she is expected to use this language herself when communicating with people from within and without the institution as a representative of the institution. She learns and assimilates the specific language, the jargon, of the institution through its texts and uses it in her discussions at work and about her work. It conditions her understanding and description of the institution and who she is and where she fits into it. The institution’s documents and texts ‘capture’ her, as they instruct her on what to do and how to do it; what to say and how to say it. In this way, they limit, direct, manipulate and program her activities.

Professors, supervisors and staff at a graduate education school all employ the language of the institution, which is also found in the handbooks and websites of the institution. I am not saying that ‘institutional capture’ is something negative. It is not something that a graduate student tries to avoid. It is a fact of organizational life that one must work within, a condition of organized practice. The challenge for a student is to figure out how
to open space for innovative work and avoid being overpowered by institutional regulations that may restrict inventive, creative reading-writing work and text production. In other words, the resourceful student puts her own stamp on her work without being stifled by institutional texts and interpretations, to satisfy the requirements of institutional capture, and work in collaboration with her supervisor and thesis committee while maintaining her academic and creative integrity.

‘Institutional capture’ is manifested in the various disciplines when scholars are restricted to certain traditional genres that are deemed acceptable by the academic community, rather than allowing other less traditional forms into their academic writing and text production.

Smith wrote about her own experience of ‘institutional capture’ when she was working on her doctorate on state mental hospitals in the early 1960s at the University of California at Berkeley and her dissatisfaction with the sociology that overpowered the production of her dissertation. Her supervisor had advised her to work within the accepted boundaries and constraints of the sociology of that era and to employ Robert Michels’ theories on organizations as the scaffolding on which to structure her data and analysis of her observations of the hospitals in writing her thesis. Here is her description of that process:

I was left at the end of this effort with a feeling of dissatisfaction, not with the thesis as such, but with the sociology that had been its maker. Looking back from positions gained later, I see that I had remained entirely within the discourse, subordinating everything I had learned during my fieldwork in a state mental hospital into the theoretical web I had created out of Michels and other theorists and studies. The state hospital I knew in this way became merely an expression or instance of the discourse. I started in theory, dipped down selectively into the somewhat chaotic fieldwork materials, and picked out and reconstructed the pieces that seemed to fit so that the story instructed by the theory could be told. (Smith, 2003a, p.154)

Smith’s study was subjugated to the male-dominant positivistic sociology that was venerated at that time. Looking back on the experience, she expresses her dissatisfaction and resentment...
that she was restricted in what she was able to articulate from her research and that she was forced into an artificially-constructed mold not of her making and against her wishes. Smith has described this type of situation as “a felt disjuncture in texts in which an institutional discourse overrides and reconstructs experiential or descriptive writing” (2003a, p. 154).

I began to think about how to remake sociology. Rather than transporting the sociological subject into the transcendence of sociological theory, I would have to begin in the actualities of people's everyday lives and experience and, from that standpoint, explore the beyond-the-everyday into the social relations and organization in which the everyday is entangled. (Smith, 2003a, p. 152)

Smith described the alienation she felt in her struggle as an intellectual and as a woman in a man's world and a man's sociology, as well as the disjuncture she experienced between her everyday, lived world and that of institutions and discourse. She resisted being ‘captured’ by mainstream sociology, and strove to create a new kind of sociology based on people’s actual practices and perspectives, rather than theory, which became her life’s work.

**IE mapping.**

Mapping is a process of discovery through graphic representation developed by institutional ethnographers that “recognizes the extraordinary capacity of texts to produce and to organize people’s activities and extended and general relations in local and particular sites” (Turner, in Smith, 2006, p. 139). IE maps are not like other charts or diagrams. IE researchers find their own ways of making illustrations to explicate the actions initiated by particular texts. Susan Turner is best known for this work; she developed an elaborate system of mapping in her study of municipal governments and land development, which is described by Dorothy Smith:

Her account is powerful not only because of the complexity of the work-text-work sequences she explicated vividly and with clarity but also because she is particularly successful in showing the connections between work primarily in textual modes and
how texts mediate work done at one stage at one site and the multiple connections set up by a text with work done in multiple governmental sites. (Smith, 2005, p. 178)

I used mapping in my study to obtain insights into the local workings of the participants in their graduate schools and the translocal institutions they interacted with through the texts that coordinated these interactions. IE maps also helped me illuminate the actions sparked by a student’s completion of her written work in the form of the documents and texts that were required for each stage of the graduate program, as delineated in department handbooks and other institutional texts. I did not use them exclusively, as I also found other types of diagrams useful as well. An IE mapping workshop that I attended, taught by Susan Turner, is described in chapter 9, in the section on Workshops.

**New Terms to Explicate the Writing Work of Graduate Students:**

**Reading-Writing activity.**

In relation to this discussion on texts, I want to open up the term ‘writing’ in the context of graduate student writing and research and explore the many kinds of activities that are done in its name which I have personally experienced: locating a book, getting it from the library, scanning or photocopying part of it, reading it, analyzing it, incorporating it into a course paper. As well, there are the activities of note-taking, handwriting, highlighting, writing in the margins, writing on the computer. When does writing begin? Which of these many activities does ‘writing’ refer to? All are part of a rich set of research activities, which are not reflected adequately in the term ‘writing.’

‘Reading’ in graduate education is also a complex activity: a student may decide to read the work of a particular scholar, but may fail to comprehend the concepts in the act of reading. Then the student may look for another text to aid in deciphering the scholar’s texts, or enroll in a course to work through the scholar’s works and concepts together with the instructor and other students, in order to become a knowledgeable reader of that scholar’s
work. This was my experience when I wanted to learn about the work of Foucault. I was not able to adequately comprehend his concepts from reading his original works, so I located texts that analyzed his work. Still not satisfied, I enrolled in a course on Foucault to learn about his work in the context of the course (this process is further described in chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students).

In real life, the reading and writing activity of graduate students are accomplished together and are not separable; I call this joint activity ‘reading-writing,’ and use the terms ‘reading-writing activity’ and ‘reading-writing work’ when referring to it. In my use of the terms, I am referring to the complex activities engaged in by graduate students to produce their course work, and other writing. The hours spent sitting at the computer, typing and editing, and all the other tasks, all of this work takes up many daytime and nighttime hours in the lives of students. All program work, all knowledge production, every text created by a graduate student bears the reading-writing labour of that student, all their effort and embodied work, work that is mostly hidden and not acknowledged.

Through my own experiences as a graduate student and my observations of other students, as well as what they related to me, I have come to realize that it is not students in their quality as human beings, (as sons/daughters, mothers/fathers, thinking, curious, conscious, experiencing people) following individual interests (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 512), using the graduate school as a place to satisfy their individual curiosity, but their societally-organized and -accountable reading-writing activity as trained and enrolled students that produces knowledge. In other words, it is the subject plus the event that produces knowledge. By event I mean a societally-organized event that enables the production of knowledge, such as a graduate program and its components.

11 I am employing Gundogdu’s (2006) usage of these terms as meaning the complex set of activities necessary to produce institutional documents and texts, which he employed to describe text production in the EU.
Documents and texts of graduate students.

Two more terms that I wish to clarify are ‘documents’ and ‘texts.’ Similar to Geisler’s (2001) distinction between private and public texts in organizations (p. 299), I make a distinction between documents (institutional texts) and texts (trans-institutional/organizational texts) when referring to the work of graduate students, engaging with Gundogdu’s (2006) distinction between document and text production; in writing about the European Union (EU), he stated: “A distinction is made between document production, for internal use of organizations, and text production, for inter- and multi-organizational coordination and regulation of societal practices.”¹² I refer to texts produced as program work before the thesis as documents, because similar to documents produced in other institutions, they only circulate internally within the institution, and not outside it. I use the term ‘documents’ to refer to: 1. the actual writing of graduate students in their graduate programs, their required work, that is submitted to, and circulates between the student and the professor running a course, or between the student and her supervisor, such as course papers, comprehensive examinations, thesis proposals, and thesis chapters, as well as: 2. any other paper work written by students and circulated within the graduate school, such as a petition or a request for a program extension or change of supervisor, as well as: 3. the forms that are generated by different people in the graduate school in regard to the transactions in 2. and 3. and that circulate within the graduate school and in some cases to the School of Graduate Studies as well, according to the rules and regulations of the graduate school and the School of Graduate Studies, as articulated in the handbooks of the departments, and the website of the School of Graduate Studies.

¹² Gundogdu includes a historical perspective on the use of documents and texts in early institutional practices.
Administrators and department heads ‘activate’ forms and documents as part of their assigned work within the terms of the policy directives that govern them. Smith (2006, p. 67) refers to forms and documents as ‘texts’ which lead to actions by people that carry out, that actualize the inherent purpose of the form. Smith illustrates this process with a diagram of an Act – Text – Act sequence, in which the first act, that of a person completing of a form, creates a text (the completed form), which then initiates a further proscribed act or action by another person that is built into the text of the form.

For example, when a student’s thesis proposal has been accepted by her supervisor and committee, the supervisor completes a form and submits it to the person in his/her department responsible for student programs, who then submits the form to the department chair for signature, and then to the registrar’s office, and/or another department. So the completed document, the thesis proposal, requires the completion of another document, a form, to be completed and circulated within the graduate school. Students are not cognizant of all the documents/forms that are generated by their progress through their programs; the forms coordinate and initiate the necessary tasks and work of many people in the graduate school who activate the progression of each graduate student along the ‘assembly line’ to graduation, when they leave the system, leaving behind their textual presence in the form of copy of their thesis on a shelf in their supervisor’s office, an electronic copy, and a transcript stored in the records of the university.

**Internal communication and capture of documents.**

The new term I am introducing here to describe the movement of documents within an institution is ‘internal communication’ and ‘internal capture’ (based on Smith’s ‘institutional capture’) in document production and in institutional practices; ‘internal’ because documents are moving within the hierarchy of departments within the institution. The documents are
‘captured’ by the strict terms of their use to organize the work of people that activate institutional documents. The documents are also ‘captured’ by their exclusive use and communication or circulation within the institution; they rarely move outside it.13 ‘Internal communication’ can be diagrammed, or ‘mapped,’ using Susan Turner’s IE mapping techniques, which were described earlier in this chapter in the section on IE Mapping. According to Turner (2006), “tracking a sequence of text-based work gives us a way to not just map position locations within an institution, but to make visible the power of texts to organize what is getting done and how” (p. 159).

In universities, there are regulated forms that are used to record specific program requirements for each graduate student; the requirements correspond with information in department handbooks and department, graduate school, and university websites. These are uniformly utilized to record and process the completion of program components, such as the requirements for a course and the assignment of a grade. These forms are documents that circulate exclusively within the graduate school and move internally from the instructors and supervisors to the department, then to the registrar’s office where the marks are recorded on the students’ records. When the record sheet of all degree requirements is completed for a student, it is passed to another office to initiate the degree-granting process. All the components of a graduate program that are recorded on these forms, from the application, through all the designated writing activities/texts, to the thesis completion are ‘internally captured’ by the regulations within the graduate department, school and university. The graduate students and the university staff are all required to comply with them; they are all ‘internally captured’ by them as well.

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13 In fact, there are legislated privacy provisions covering some of these documents that are designed to prevent them from being released outside the university (e.g. student grades cannot be released without the student’s permission).
Application to a Graduate Program, Illustrating ‘Internal Communication and Capture.’

The application to a graduate program is a document. Once it has been submitted to the graduate school, it circulates between registrarial offices and the departments of the graduate school and the university that are directly involved with aspects of the application process. Applications are also circulated within departments and programs, as they are reviewed and assessed by faculty in the applicants’ prospective field. Because the application and subsequent actions it initiates do not move outside the institution, the application process is an example of ‘internal communication and capture of documents’ within the university.

Staff involved in the application process at the graduate school and the university are highly selective of graduate students. In the case of professionals, they are looking for students who not only have academic credentials but also insider experience in the textually administered sites of contemporary organizations. They are looking at the specific reading-writing capacity of the applicants to accomplish all the writing and text production tasks required in a graduate program in order to complete them successfully as well as produce new knowledge in their particular areas of study. They are also looking for good matches with the ongoing intellectual practices of the departments, with their programs, special study centres, and the interest areas of the professors in the departments. Academic department are dependent on a fresh supply of scholars with specific capacities who can work collaboratively within the program, and in many cases, join the research projects of faculty members. Graduate faculties are knowledge-text production sites as well as internal document production sites.
Tracing the development of two new terms, internal communication (of documents), and external communication (of texts).

My development of the terms, ‘internal communication of documents’ stemmed from my analysis of the work on texts of Dorothy Smith, Lindsay Prior, and Lauren Eastwood. I have already described Smith’s term, ‘institutional capture,’ and how I expanded on the concept to create ‘internal communication and capture of documents.’ In this section, I describe how I worked with and interpreted the work of these three scholars to develop my new term, and how I developed a related term, ‘external communication and capture of texts.’

Lindsay Prior (2008)\textsuperscript{14} writes about documents in social research:

Documents … can influence episodes of social interaction, and schemes of social organization … New approaches to the study of documents … revolve around the ways in which documents are used and integrated into various kinds of knowledge networks, as well as with how documents are exchanged and circulate within such networks. (Prior, 2008, pp. 822, 824)

Lindsay Prior’s description of documents and their connection to “social interaction” and “organization” is similar to what Smith (2005) calls the “textual coordination of institutional work” (p. 199). Smith also refers to ‘documents’ in this context, which is the term that I also prefer, as I take ‘documents’ to mean texts that circulate within institutions, for their exclusive use. Lindsay Prior’s documents circulate among ‘knowledge networks,’ while Smith’s are confined, for the most part, to the local institutions within which they circulate. I prefer to call outside circulating documents ‘texts,’ as I have stated above, and refer to their movement as ‘external communication’ because they move outside institutions, reaching far afield, sometimes internationally, circulating between organizations and institutions, and connecting with other texts in those locations.

\textsuperscript{14} I include Lindsay Prior’s first name to distinguish him from Paul Prior, another writing scholar who I discuss in this thesis.
Lauren Eastwood (2006) wrote about her work on UN document production in relation to forest policy negotiations, using the sociology of institutional ethnography. Drawing on Smith’s concept of “institutional capture,” in which “the particulars of the informant’s local work are displaced by the ‘organization’s organizational account’” (Smith, 2005, p. 155), Eastwood extended Smith’s term to describe how UN delegates intentionally adopted language and terms sanctioned by the UN Forestry commission in their “institutional discourses,” describing this process as “intentional institutional capture,” which she defines as “a way that practitioners are constrained to translate their experiences and ‘interests’ into something that is recognizable to the organization (Eastwood, 2006, p.189).

Eastwood wrote that she had attempted to ‘map’ the UN forestry department texts, but found it very difficult to map them, because “it is … very challenging to see what people do with the texts … once they are produced” (Eastwood, 2006, p. 187). The UN forestry department texts are ‘internally captured’ and governed (from within the institution) on their content and use of terms, but they are also ‘externally captured’ in the UN Forestry department’s collection of official texts, available to be “taken up in various settings by various people who may be otherwise unconnected with one another” (p. 187). They exist as a group of texts of more or less equal ‘weight’ and importance, accessible to authorized people who can ‘externally capture’ them, by selecting and utilizing them for their own specific purposes that are outside, or external, to their original usage.

A paper may have its origins as a course paper, a document which was ‘internally captured’ by the course paper requirements, and circulated, or communicated within a graduate school, between a student and professor. If it is reworked to include methods, topics
and terminology particular to a conference or publication, it is then ‘externally captured’ by the specific requirements of that external site.\textsuperscript{15}

**Section 2: Data Collection**

I went about my data collection experientially, learning by doing, my preferred method. After obtaining ethical approval, I initiated my research in the summer of 2005 at a large university in Ontario, Canada by conducting an ethnographic study of a graduate course, recorded through hand-written notes, and a semi-open ended interview with the professor at the end of the course, which I audio recorded and later transcribed.\textsuperscript{16} I continued to work with some of the students from that course as I encountered them in other settings. At the time, I did not feel the material from the preliminary study was sufficient to write my thesis. In retrospect, I could have worked with just those data, but it would have been a very different thesis. I sensed there was a lot more to be discovered. I wanted a bigger picture.

In order to accomplish my goal, after amending my ethics protocol, I observed graduate students in various settings and events at my graduate school, and at outside conferences and other venues. I was always taking notes, handwriting them and later typing them on the computer. My notes were part ethnography, part interviews, and part field notes.

During a six-year period, I observed and interacted with many professionals/graduate education students as they progressed through their programs, in courses with them (six credit courses, plus six audited), four different study groups (one of which I facilitated), grant application writing, thesis proposal presentations, mock thesis defenses, workshops, conferences – local, national and international (nine conference papers, and three conference

\textsuperscript{15} See “Standards for Externally-Captured Texts” in chapter 8.
\textsuperscript{16} My ethnography of the course and my interview with the instructor can be found in chapter 6, Required Work of Graduate Students, in the section, Course Work and Course Papers, Interview with the Course Instructor and Ethnographic Research of the Course.
sessions that I organized) – and at other venues, such as cafés. Encounters with graduate students, as well as with professors and thesis supervisors, comprised my IE interviews: planned or unplanned meetings, conversations about aspects of their programs and difficulties; one-on-one or in groups; in person, on the phone or in emails. In this pursuit, I did not study the actual writing of the students for the most part, though in some cases it is addressed. I focused instead on the social organization of their programs that directed their required writing, \(^{17}\) and the social relations within which they carried out their program activities and the extra activities that they engaged in to augment their program activities.

**Participants.**

Here is information on informants, or participants, in IE research:

In institutional ethnography, there is no proscribed number of informants. Emphasis is instead placed on features of experience, diversity, and social location. It is important that informants have first hand experience with the issues or processes being studied, and it is analytically useful if persons represent various diversities. (Bisaillon & Rankin, 2013, p. 5)

In my research, I engaged in conversations and conducted interviews with graduate students, professors and supervisors to expand my knowledge and understanding of the social relations of the graduate program processes, and its effect on the reading-writing activities and text production of the participants in their particular graduate school, from different perspectives. I did not follow a set group of people throughout my study, rather I worked with whoever was present and available at a given time, although there were some people that I followed for several years.

Each of the students in my study was a professional practitioner who was enrolled in or had completed a graduate program in education in a master’s or doctoral level program that

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\(^{17}\) Required writing includes: applications, course papers, comprehensive examinations, thesis proposals, and theses.
required a thesis. Most were women, aged from early thirties to mid-sixties; some were from minority groups, although I made no deliberate attempt to recruit a representative sample from minority groups.\footnote{More information about the participants can be found in chapter 1, Introduction, and in chapter 4, Professional/Graduate Student Participants and Their Programs.} Since I was a member of this group myself, as a secondary school teacher enrolled in a doctorate program, and since I had been recording my own experiences since beginning my doctoral studies, I included my own experiences as part of my study, in the form of an autoethnography. In addition to my student participants, a number of professors and supervisors who taught and supervised the students also became participants, as I encountered them in study groups, at conferences and other venues. I obtained their permissions to include information from notes I had taken at meetings and from conversations.

I disguised all the participants, changing their names, professions, and other information so they cannot be identified from any of the material in this thesis. I obtained permission from each of the participants in the form of a signed consent form, a copy of which can be found at the end of this thesis. I did not obtain consent at public meetings, or for short conversations.

**Developing data analysis through conference papers.**

I began to present my work at conferences at the same time that I was collecting my data; first, at a graduate student conference, in 2005; next, at a national conference of the Canadian Sociological Association (CSA), then for the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE), and the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) in the US. Each paper covered a different aspect of my developing work. I found that writing a paper to explain what I was learning from the data I was collecting and exploring at that time helped me to clarify and develop my emerging analysis, and led me to new directions and angles to explore in future papers. My writing became more scholarly as I completed abstracts that were
accepted for conference sessions, then wrote papers and presented them, gaining confidence through the positive reception and encouragement I received from others attending my conference sessions, and the feedback and suggestions from discussants and audience members. I continued to do this for six years. I integrated material from this set of unpublished conference papers\textsuperscript{19} on my ongoing data analysis into my thesis.

\textbf{Data sorting.}

Since I had a considerable amount of data, in the form of typed notes from my conference papers and comments from discussants and others, notes from conference presentations of other students, data from my preliminary study, notes from four different study groups and ten mock thesis defenses, notes on workshops and courses, notes from interviews and conversations, my first priority was creating a system to organize it. I grouped my data manually in two ways: by participant, and by category, that is, by the venue in which I recorded my notes about them. For example, all my transcribed notes on each of the four study groups I attended were arranged chronologically by date of meeting in files, one for each year that I attended and took notes. Then I went through the files, and made a list of who had presented their work at each meeting. Next I made a list of the students and the dates on which they had presented. I had observed some students in several different venues, so those students were cross-referenced. I made separate files for students for whom I had a lot of information, for example, if I had attended both their thesis proposal meeting, and later their mock thesis defense. I had separate files for people who I had interviewed. I also had a file labelled “conversations” where I kept all my notes on conversations that had taken place at different times and in different situations and locations.

\textsuperscript{19} A list of conference papers is located in the Appendices of this thesis.
Thesis chapter development.

My next task was deciding how to write my thesis. First, I wrote an Introduction chapter, which I agonized over. I’ve heard from other students that the first chapter is often the hardest, because the student can be seized with the fear of committing ideas to paper, of getting it wrong, of not being scholarly enough, and so on. Once I got over that hurdle and completed the chapter, I next created a chapter titled “Professional/Graduate Student Participants and Their Programs” which included information about my main student participants, their projects, and their special programs. Later, I grouped the students into four categories according to their reasons for entering their graduate programs. I added information about the special programs that the graduate departments had developed for them. Afterwards I added interview material from two participants, and a section on the special needs of the group. I also included a section about some of the participants who were also mothers and their challenges and difficulties which came out during my interviews and conversations with them.

After that, I grouped the rest of my data relating to the writing work of students according to the different types of activities that the students engaged in, in order to complete their required program components, present their work at their graduate schools, and expand their horizons to present their work outside their universities. I created three categories for this work: “Required Work of Graduate Students,” which includes the program work that students had to complete to obtain their degrees; “Extended Work of Graduate Students,” which includes conference papers and publications, with a focus on students presenting conference papers; and “Supplementary Work of Graduate Students,” including extra activities that students engaged in to augment their required and extended activities. I looked at my data that fit into each category, and determined the best order in which to present the data. Once I had
placed the data into the chapters, I went back over the chapters and added my analysis, adding and subtracting comments as I proceeded, and adding some citations as well from literature I had read that was pertinent to that section. I wasn’t sure where to put my autoethnography. After trying it in several places, adding it to other chapters, I decided to make it a separate chapter, preceding chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, although my autoethnography is also dispersed throughout the data/analysis chapters, chapters 7, 8 and 9.

I wrote my Methods chapter and Literature Review, then I edited my Introduction chapter, and wrote the Conclusion chapter. I constructed the Reference List as I wrote each chapter. I submitted my chapters one by one to my supervisor, and received his comments and feedback, then I edited each chapter, with my thesis question taped to my computer. I eliminated quite a bit, and some things that I had worked on for a long time were scrapped. They had seemed important at the time of writing, but didn’t fit well with the edited version. Slowly, as I edited the chapters, the thesis took on a life of its own; it started to feel like one story, with one chapter flowing into the next. Once I had that feeling, it was a wonderful experience to rework the chapters, to tweak the details. The best was when I opened all the chapters, and they were lined up at the bottom of the computer screen. I was jumping from one chapter to another to check details, to make sure it all jibed, feeling exhilarated that I could see the whole thesis at once for the first time, and feeling proud that I had brought it to this point. That was my second draft, and it was submitted to my supervisor one chapter at a time, in the right order this time. There were fewer comments on his copies when he returned them to me, but those comments elicited a lot of work on my part. The third draft felt very good. I felt much more confident about my writing, about the contents of each chapter, about the flow from one chapter to the next, and from one section to the next within the chapters. It was
feeling and looking like a thesis. And I was feeling like I had accomplished something worthwhile, that all my work had come to fruition.

Section 3: Conclusion

This chapter introduced my research methods and terminology, focusing on institutional ethnography and the sociology of Dorothy Smith. I explained my development of new terms to describe my study, and explicated how I carried out my research.

In the next chapter, chapter 4, The Social Organization of Graduate School Governance, I describe my analysis of the texts and policies that govern graduate student writing and text production. In the following five chapters, I apply the tools introduced in this chapter to describe and analyze my own experiences and the experiences of the participants, which present a real life depiction of our journeys through our graduate education programs.

Chapter 5, Autoethnography, covers my own graduate school experiences. Chapter 6 focuses on the Professional/Graduate Student Participants and their Programs. It is followed by chapter 7, the Required Work of Graduate Students, which covers the participants’ experiences as well as my own, as we engage with the components of our programs. In the next chapter, chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, I explore experiences outside the regular program work, where texts are developed for conference presentations. Lastly, in chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, I explore venues that augment graduate students’ knowledge of the process of graduate education as well as hone their skills and help them develop their thesis topics.
CHAPTER 4

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF GRADUATE STUDENT GOVERNANCE

“The mission of the School of Graduate Studies is to promote university-wide excellence in graduate education and ensure consistency and high standards across the divisions.”20

Introduction

In this chapter I describe how graduate students and their writing and text production are governed through texts and text-based practices, in the form of handbooks and policies of the department, graduate education school, and school of graduate studies of their universities, and through the guidance of their supervisors, acting as representatives of the university. I also discuss the bodies that govern their graduate departments and universities, and those that exert indirect influence.

The social organization of graduate student governance refers to the purposeful coordination and organization of graduate students in their programs by their schools and universities through texts. Graduate programs are an example of ‘textually-mediated social organization,’ a term coined by Dorothy Smith “to express the notion that engagement with textsconcerts and coordinates the actions of people” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 29). The graduate students in my study, professionals who returned to university for graduate studies in education, were governed by the policies of their school, the school of graduate studies, and their university. All the writing and text production of the student participants was governed through handbooks and websites that laid out the requirements for every piece of written work that they submitted to the registrar, their professors, their thesis supervisors and thesis committees, and any other representative of the graduate school, school of graduate studies and university. This was also the case for optional written work that required a specific form or format, such as petitions and special requests.

I discuss the graduate school as an institution within a larger framework, beginning with the local graduate education school and university that I attended for my graduate work as an example, moving to the different institutions and government organizations that regulate the graduate education school and the university through texts, from the local institutions to the translocal ones (at a greater distance, physically and institutionally).

**The Graduate School Directs and Works the Students**

The graduate program works graduate students in and out of courses, meetings, seminars, workshops, study groups and other venues. Competence is about writing skills, talent, and a good handle on academic language, but when I say it *works* the student, I mean it is something like a house that is being built with already in-place standards, codes and ways of usage; it cannot be idiosyncratic. Graduate program administrators, professors, and thesis supervisors have the task of guiding graduate student workers on how to assemble all the materials and expertise to build an institutionally-sanctioned thesis.

Graduate students’ thesis work is completed in and through the social organization of graduate programs, from the application to the program to the thesis defense, all the institutionalized, piece-meal, sequential and collective study, research and work in which program participants are involved. This moves graduate work away from any individual's motivated expression of a reality viewed from an individually-pursued form of life, and instead sees their intellectual activity as a response based on intellectual capacity and institutional resources that produces a socially-known form of product. Texts produced by graduate students are produced under very specific conditions. Although professionals/graduate students bring a great deal of themselves and their life work to the university, the university shapes them within its programs into a certain kind of scholar that represents that particular department. Even in the process of selection, students are chosen
according to their areas of interest to make a good fit with the mandate of the department, among many other criteria. Within each course, their work is vetted and guided by their professors. Thesis topic selection, choice of methodology and theory, research process, and thesis writing are also subjected to guidance and direction by the students’ supervisors and committee members, so that the completed thesis fits in with other theses completed in that department at that university. In the graduate school, we see a model of the extended social relations of academic text production of the larger society.

The Role of Texts

There are specific directives enabling the production and finalization of graduate students’ texts that are integral to graduate programs, and relayed to the students for the most part through texts: printed and online information, as well as personal communications from professors, supervisors and committee members, administrators and other staff at the graduate school, which will be discussed further in this section.

At my graduate school, it is the School of Graduate Studies that is responsible for ensuring that all degree requirements have been met, that the paperwork for the students is complete, and that they have followed all the necessary procedures in order to receive their degrees from the university. Within the graduate education school, the departments and the registrar’s office oversee students’ records to ensure that students fulfill the particular requirements of their programs, as stipulated in the departmental handbooks, the School of Graduate Studies website, and policy documents that are accessible online. Within the department, the department head may provide direction to students as well, to be sure that students follow the directives in the department handbooks. Also within the department, thesis supervisors act in their roles as representatives of the university in guiding their students to fulfill the codified requirements for their degree.
The Supervisory Relationship

The relationship with their supervisor is the most important relationship for graduate students in their thesis processes and the most prolonged one. It is also codified in the form of information on supervision on the website of the School of Graduate Studies\textsuperscript{21} of the University of Toronto, as well as a document titled “Graduate Supervision: Guidelines for Students, Faculty and Administrators.”\textsuperscript{22} Although there is a great deal of variation in the types of relationships between students and supervisors, their mutual goal is to get the student through the thesis process successfully. More about the role of the supervisor may be found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students. Next, I will describe the process of governing graduate students’ writing and text production in detail.

Governance of Graduate Students’ Writing and Text Production:

‘Internal capture’ of required work of graduate students.

I use the term ‘internal capture’ to refer to documents and processes that are confined to an institution. From the moment of their application to a program, the graduate student is ‘internally captured’ by the university, the graduate program, and their policies and approved texts, and academic personnel, all of which represent the ‘ruling relations’ of the graduate school and university. The ruling relations of graduate schools are codified in the various texts, such as handbooks and policy documents, which regulate students in their progress through their graduate programs. ‘Ruling relations’ is a term in institutional ethnography to describe the complexity of the social organization based on texts that rules, or governs people in their relations with institutions:

\textsuperscript{21} Retrieved from: \url{http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/informationfor/students/track/superv.htm} on July 24, 2013.

The concept of the ruling relations directs attention to the distinctive translocal forms of social organization and social relations mediated by texts of all kinds (print, film, television, computer, and so on) that have emerged and become dominant in the last two hundred years. They are objectified forms of consciousness and organization, constituted externally to particular people and places, creating and relying on textually based realities. (Smith, 2005, p. 227)

The following figure illustrates how the documents and texts of a graduate student are ‘captured’ by different texts and personnel in the graduate department and school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘RULING RELATIONS’ GOVERNING GRADUATE STUDENTS</th>
<th>REQUIRED TEXTS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administration of the Graduate School</td>
<td>Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration of the Graduate Department</td>
<td>Program requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>Course requirements and papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Supervisors &amp; the Graduate Department</td>
<td>Comprehensive requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethical review protocol process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research, data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition of Committee &amp; Outside Examiner</td>
<td>Oral Defense, approval &amp; degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(\downarrow\) = documents and texts to be completed sequentially as explicated in graduate school and department handbooks, or “doctoral genre set” (DeVitt, 1991)

*Figure 2: ‘Internal capture’ of a graduate student in a graduate program*
Students are restricted and controlled by the parameters and limitations imposed by graduate school and department texts and administration, in the case of program requirements; the course syllabus and their professors, in the case of choice of readings, assignments, topics for papers and grading of their courses: governing texts and their supervisor and the graduate department, for comprehensive requirements, thesis proposal, ethical review protocol, research and data collection and interpretation, content, structure, language and style of writing of the thesis. There is also a sequential requirement, that one component is completed before the student moves on to the next one, as the writing requirements are completed and graded/accepted.

At the graduate school where I completed my PhD studies, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, or OISE/UT, once the thesis has been completed by the student and approved by the supervisor, and the thesis committee has added their suggestions and approved the thesis, the external examiner must be approved by the School of Graduate Studies. Next other members are added for the final oral examining committee, and the oral examination is called; then the edited thesis is submitted to the outside examiner, or external, by the supervisor. The external reviewer assesses the thesis and provides feedback to the student and other members of the examining committee. The Registrar’s Office organizes the defense, or oral defense, where the student addresses the feedback from the external and fields questions from the supervisor, committee and external. After the thesis is accepted, the School of Graduate Studies arranges the granting of the degree.

The thesis is the climax of all the preparatory steps that precede it. Theses have a different circulation outside and beyond the graduate school, a global circulation, especially now that many universities require electronic submission of theses, so I refer to them as
‘texts,’ and to their movement as ‘external communication of texts’ because they move outside
the graduate school and university, to other universities and organizations, contributing new
knowledge.

**Textual governance of graduate students.**

The requirements for graduate programs and courses, as well as procedures related to
them, are inscribed in the documents and texts of graduate schools/institutions. In Smith’s
approach, its texts are in some ways the institution; in the case of graduate schools, its
applications, other forms, course syllabuses, grant applications, handbooks, policy texts, that
students respond to and are governed by.

Institutions exist in that strange magical realm in which social relations based on texts
transform the local particularities of people, place, and time into standardized,
generalized, and, especially, translocal forms of coordinating people’s activities. Texts
perform at that key juncture between the local settings of people’s everyday worlds
and the ruling relations. (Smith, 2005, p. 101)

Texts aren’t usually seen in this way, in an active role of determining our actions. Institutional
discourses “provid[e] the terms under which what people do becomes institutionally
accountable” (Smith, 2005, p. 113).

The following figure, “Texts Governing Graduate Students (Ontario, Canada),”
illustrates some of the different levels of text-based regulation and control to which a graduate
student at a graduate school in the province of Ontario, Canada is subject. I have only included
regulatory texts and governing bodies that have jurisdiction over graduate education, and have
excluded advisory bodies, which will be described briefly later in this section. The governing
texts are connected to each other, the higher level texts controlling and shaping the lower level
ones in intertextual relationships (Smith, 2005, p. 226).

I structured this diagram to read from bottom to top, similar to Dorothy Smith’s
“Figure 1.1: A Women’s Standpoint: Single Parenthood and Educational Institutions,” where
she placed the “small hero,” representing a single mother, at the bottom of the diagram, with a
number of boxes representing institutions and discourses above her, representing the “complex
of relations beyond her view” (Smith, 2006, p. 3).

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Ontario,
Canada is the graduate education school that served as the model for this figure. Structures
would be similar at other graduate schools of education in Ontario, but may differ in other
locations in Canada, and elsewhere.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRANSLOCAL</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect Governance Of Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges &amp; Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Toronto Act</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCAL</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Governance Of Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Governing Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy Documents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Website of School of Graduate Studies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Handbook of Graduate Department</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Application to Graduate School &amp; Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3:** Texts governing graduate students, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto
**Explanation of figure, Texts Governing Graduate Students.**

At the bottom of the diagram, looking at up the textual bodies that govern her is the graduate student, representing all graduate students at this graduate school (Dorothy Smith’s “small hero”).

Immediately above her are the texts that exert direct governance over her in her local setting, which is her department and graduate school, beginning with her application to the graduate school and specific program. The application process is highly regulated, and involves many texts that are activated sequentially by different people in different departments of the graduate education school and university.

Once she has been admitted, the student receives written information that refers her to the *handbook* of her graduate department and to the *website of the School of Graduate Studies* of the university, which provide information on the proper order of completion of the various components of her graduate program, and the expectations for each requirement (which are fulfilled in the form of written texts), as well as other pertinent information. Handbooks are discussed further in this section.

In the box above the box representing the School of Graduate Studies website are *policy documents* that regulate the students, faculty and staff; they “set out expectations and guidelines for behaviour and action in specific areas,”\(^\text{23}\) including codes of conduct, ethical review policies, and intellectual property policies. Policy texts may be referenced online by the student, her professors, her supervisor and committee, and other staff in her department and graduate school. The policies of the university are overseen by the Governing Council, a corporation mandated to govern and administer the university:

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The Governing Council, established by the University of Toronto Act, 1971, oversees the academic, business and student affairs of the University. It is composed of 50 members - 25 members from within the internal University community, including administrative staff, teaching staff and students, and 25 members external to the University, including alumni and Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council appointees. At the top of the figure are governing bodies and texts that would not normally be referenced by the graduate student or those that interact with her, but that govern her indirectly, because they govern the university in which she is enrolled. The line above the Governing Council delineates the division between direct and indirect governance of the student.

The first text that exerts indirect governance is the Act of the University in which the student is enrolled. In Ontario, each university is established through an Act of Parliament, which is updated periodically. For the University of Toronto, it is the University of Toronto Act of 1971, which superseded earlier Acts. The Act confers authority on the Governing Council, as described above.

Moving upward, an important provincial body that has jurisdiction over graduate education is the new (2011) Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA), developed by a “special task force of the Vice Presidents Academic of Ontario Universities, and supported by the Executive Heads of Ontario Universities.” The OUCQA is responsible for quality assurance in Ontario publically-funded universities:

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council) is an arm’s length body designed to ensure rigorous quality assurance of university undergraduate and graduate programs.

The Quality Council is responsible for the approval of new undergraduate and graduate programs (see Program Approvals), as well as auditing each university’s quality

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26 Previously graduate education was heavily influenced by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies.
assurance processes on an eight-year cycle (see Audit Reports).

The roles and responsibilities of the Quality Council, while respecting the autonomy and diversity of the individual institutions, are the following:

- To guide Ontario’s publicly assisted universities in the ongoing quality assurance of their academic programs
- To review and approve proposals for new graduate and undergraduate programs
- To ensure through regular audits that Ontario’s publicly assisted universities comply with quality assurance guidelines, policies and regulations for graduate and undergraduate programs
- To communicate final decisions to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
- To review and revise, from time-to-time for future application, the quality assurance protocols of the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, in light of its own experiences and developments in the field of quality assurance
- To liaise with other quality assurance agencies, both provincially and elsewhere
- To undergo regular independent review and audit at intervals of no longer than eight years  

Moving upward, Ontario universities are governed by the *Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities*. In the area of postsecondary education, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities is responsible for:

- Developing policy directions for universities and colleges of applied arts and technology
- Planning and administering policies related to basic and applied research in this sector
- Authorizing universities to grant degrees
- Distributing funds allocated by the provincial legislature to colleges and universities
- Providing financial-assistance programs for postsecondary school students  

One of the goals of the Ministry is to increase graduate education in the province.  

The Ministry publishes a Results-Based Plan every two years.

There is a solid line above the provincial governing bodies because there is no higher level of governance, no federal department of education or integrated national system of

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education, making Canada unique among the Anglo countries. Jurisdiction over education at all levels, including at the university and graduate studies level in Canada is provincial and territorial, in the ten provinces and three territories, as mandated in the Constitution Act. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities are responsible for the administration of laws relating to education and skills training. The advantage of this decentralized system is that the provinces and territories can develop innovative institutions and policies that tailor the system to the needs of their individual populations and locations. The disadvantage is that Canada lacks a unified vision of education, and in particular, graduate education, federally.

Advisory bodies.

There are a number of advisory associations that do not have jurisdiction over the graduate student, but they do exert influence over graduate education. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) is an arms-length advisory council to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The research publications of the HEQCO include some topics related to graduate education, but graduate education does not appear to be an area of high priority. Another provincial association, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), conducts studies of different issues related to universities, including graduate education, stressing the importance of graduate education for the economy of Ontario, and the need for increased funding for graduate education, providing information and recommendations to relevant groups such as the provincial government. The Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS), an affiliate organization of the COU consisting of Deans of Graduate Studies at each university in the province, was mandated to “ensure quality graduate education and research

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across Ontario.” While OCGS remains responsible for the promotion and management of graduate education in Ontario, the responsibility for reviewing and ensuring the quality of university programs, which was their mandate in the past, now resides with the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (The Quality Council), described above. The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS), which represents 58 Canadian universities with graduate programs and the three federal research-granting agencies, promotes graduate education and research.

Next I will discuss graduate students’ production of their required program texts, following the requirements delineated in some of the institutional texts which have just been reviewed.

**Department handbooks.**

Graduate school department handbooks are institutional governing texts that reduce all the myriad of tasks engaged in by graduate students into terms that are embedded in institutional texts that are “key to institutional coordinating, regulating the concerting of people’s work in institutional settings in ways they impose an accountability to the terms they establish” (Smith, 2005, p. 118).

Handbooks were issued yearly by the various departments at OISE/UT online; at the beginning of my program, they were issued in print format. The Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, the department where this thesis was produced (formerly The Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education), included the following in the Table of Contents of the 2012 – 2013 Student Handbook:

An Invitation from the Chair and Associate Chairs

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Of greatest interest to my thesis research was the section on The Graduate Life Cycle, especially the following:

“The Role of the Advisor and Supervisor,” which refers students to the online booklet, Graduate Supervision: Guidelines for Students, Faculty and Administrators.

“Courses,” which refers students to Course Requirements in the Handbook, and in the OISE Bulletin, another publication that deals with regulations and requirements for different programs, as well as information on the professorate. It also offers tips to help students choose courses and register in them.

“Thesis Proposals” refers students to the online “Guidelines for Theses and Orals,” lists professional development workshops related to thesis proposals, and lists online resources.

“Thesis” describes a workshop that is recommended, and lists additional resources, on support centres of the university, and online sites for support and information. As well, this
section refers students, in the page titled “Thesis,” to the OISE “Guidelines for Theses and Orals” website\textsuperscript{34} for “policies and procedures concerning the formal thesis requirements for graduate degrees in education.”

Here is the “roadmap” for my graduate department, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, around thesis development as explicated in the department Handbook:\textsuperscript{35}

1. Selection/Definition of a Thesis Topic
2. Selection of a Thesis Supervisor
3. Developing the Thesis Proposal
4. Composition of the Thesis Supervisory Committee
5. Official Formation of the Thesis Committee
6. Securing Approval of the Thesis Proposal
7. Obtaining Ethical Review Approval
8. Conducting Research
9. Preparing the Thesis
10. Submission of Thesis
11. Doctoral Final Oral Examination

It seems like an orderly process, as if this task list and accompanying information can guide students smoothly through all the steps required by the institution, but in reality, it is a complex, messy process, according to my own experiences and those that were related to me by my student participants. Some of the above involve layers of ‘institutional capture’ by outside organizations that articulate with the graduate university, serving as bridges to the ruling relations that govern doctoral students in their local setting, as well as other institutions in which graduate students may be engaged while carrying out their research projects, such as research centres; in addition, they are linked up to the ruling relations of other universities, both locally and translocally, as well as other organizations, corporations, governments, and world bodies, nationally and internationally.

\textsuperscript{34} Retrieved from: \url{http://ro.oise.utoronto.ca/OISE_Theses_Guide.pdf} on July 24, 2013.
The Supervisor as an ‘Institutionally Captured’ Representative of the Graduate School

I experienced ‘institutional capture’ while working on my thesis for my master’s degree in education, which was brought back to me when I read Dorothy Smith’s recollections of her thesis process, described in chapter 3 in the section, Institutional Capture in the Disciplines. My research evolved while I was teaching grade 11 visual arts classes as a secondary school teacher. I had collected data from three consecutive art classes who had completed the same project on non-representational self-portraits that also involved journal writing and drawings. My thesis supervisor instructed me to use grounded theory as the methodological basis of my thesis, and to incorporate theory from a social science discipline. I took out some books from the library and learned about grounded theory, then applied it to my data. Grounded theory methodology helped sort my data into categories, which was useful. Regarding theory, my first attempt, using research in art therapy as my theoretical perspective, was not accepted by my advisor, so I found literature in psychology in the area of self-esteem, which was accepted. The concept of self-esteem became the theoretical framework under which my observations of my students’ creative activities made ‘sense’ and confirmed the utility of my research. At the time, it felt like an artificial imposition that had no connection with the actual project or its results. My experience with my supervisor directing my choice of method and theory during the writing of my master’s thesis was my induction into the exercise of authority granted to thesis supervisors to interpret the requirements for what is institutionally sanctioned as a ‘thesis’ and to make decisions about how to direct each graduate student’s thesis development to fulfill those requirements. I realize now that in this process, I was subject to ‘institutional capture.’ My supervisor acted in her role as an agent of the institution, and interpreted the requirements and expectations of the program as explicated in the various handbooks of the department and policies of the school on my behalf in moulding my work into an
institutionally acceptable and accreditable form. My supervisor was “institutionally captured” by the graduate school, who had invested her with the task of interpreting the institutional texts in regard to the requirements for a graduate thesis. Her task was to “institutionally capture” me, as her graduate student, as well in the process of my supervision.

As a doctoral student in the Higher Education Group, of the Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education (later the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education) of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, I was required to follow the requirements and regulations of my group, my department, my graduate school, and the University of Toronto, as stated in all the handbooks, websites and policies of each of these regulated and regulating bodies, as interpreted on my behalf by my supervisor. In addition, I was required to follow the suggestions of my supervisor and the members of my thesis committee as representatives of the graduate school and university. So, my study and research encountered processes of ‘institutional capture’ in multiple texts and text-bound practices.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described how graduate departments and schools guide and work students through their programs. I discuss the texts, policies and university representatives who directly governed the written components of the participants’ and my own graduate programs and thesis production, including descriptions of the bodies that exert indirect influence. In the chapters to follow, I describe my own experiences and those of the professional/student participants in this study as we worked within these textually-based regulations to complete our program work, and develop our thesis topics, conduct our research and write our theses.
CHAPTER 5
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

“I had to find my way through the fog to discover clarity, understanding and purpose in my personal doctoral journey.” Quote by the author/researcher of this thesis.

Introduction

In this chapter I present the story of my own journey through my doctoral program from my application, my frustrations and difficulties around obtaining information and seeing the whole picture at the beginning of my program, through my preliminary research study, grant applications, comprehensive examinations, to conference paper presentations, conference session organization, and participation in a supervisor-facilitated study group. I also discuss the shift in the development of my thesis topic and what influenced that shift. I present a graphic illustration of the foreground and background of graduate students’ work, as an introduction to my division of graduate students’ work into three categories, which are presented in three separate chapters subsequent to this chapter: ‘required’ program work, ‘extended’ work, and ‘supplementary’ work.

Story of My Ph.D. Journey as an Entry Point to My Study of the Thesis Process

This chapter is a reflexive exercise on the development of my thesis problematic and the shifts this problematic underwent in the years of my PhD program. My thesis journey had its own peculiarity, because the object of my study was the very process I was experiencing first hand. Although I started out with an idea of what my study would encompass, that idea shifted and evolved along the way into something I could not anticipate. Each of those shifts occurred due to a disjuncture, a fault line I came up against, which caused me to question my direction, and to make a change. Let me take you back to the beginning.
I began my doctorate in Higher Education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto in May, 2004. My application to the Higher Education Group of what was then the Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education\(^{36}\) included a Statement of Intent in which I outlined my plan to study the reading-writing work of graduate students in its many sites. A caveat in my statement anticipated that my path would take me in unpredictable directions, as I wrote about “possible modifications that may occur during my course and other work.” I was acquainted with institutional ethnography and the sociology of Dorothy E. Smith, which inspired me towards the possibility of studying the dynamics of graduate work with a focus on writing and text production as a sociological phenomenon.

**In a fog.**

During the course-taking period of my program,\(^{37}\) I felt that I didn’t have a handle on the ‘big picture,’ the whole scope of a doctoral program in my department and graduate school. The big picture included not only the required program work, but also the ‘extras,’ the community activities that connect graduate students to networks associated with their research areas. I heard bits of information here and there about additional events, workshops and conferences, and I wanted to be part of some of these venues outside my course work, but found it very difficult to get information on what was available that might be pertinent to my study. Some students seemed to be well-situated in networks that were savvy about apparent and hidden aspects of graduate work that I was in the dark about. I was quite frustrated and wished the vista was clearer, that options were more accessible and open, and that the possible paths were easier to locate and navigate. One student told me, “I think it’s deliberate, that students are expected to figure things out; that’s part of surviving graduate school.”

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\(^{36}\) It is now the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education after restructuring of the university departments.

\(^{37}\) My ethnography of my course paper process can be found in chapter 6, Required Work of Graduate Students, section on Course Work.
The orientation meetings and workshops\textsuperscript{38} that I attended in my department and graduate school in my first year were disappointing. They were really lectures rather than workshops, as there was no hands-on involvement or opportunity to apply the information or follow up with the presenters. There wasn’t a central resource centre or easy-to-navigate website to obtain information at that time, although occasionally there were flyers on my department’s bulletin board. I discussed this with other students who confided to me that they also were in a fog about such things. The printed material given to us in the form of department and graduate studies handbooks\textsuperscript{39} listed program requirements and some resources only. How could I find out about events, such as conferences, that might be of interest to me? It took me a long time to obtain this information.

**Pondering my place.**

I thought a lot about how things could be different so my path and that of other students could be more transparent, smoother and friendlier. I wondered if graduate departments wanted to keep their students on track to complete their required components, and therefore didn’t encourage extra activities, considering them a distraction from their “real” work. Or was it left up to students to figure out where to find out about these resources and activities?

I was enrolled in the Higher Education Group, of the Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, under the School of Graduate Studies, of the University of Toronto. All of these five levels of the university had an interest in my successful completion of my program. But what role, what responsibility did

\textsuperscript{38} Further information can be found in Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Workshops

\textsuperscript{39} Further information can be found in Chapter 4, The Social Organization of Graduate School Governance, section, Department handbooks
they have to help me acquire what I needed to optimize my chances of completing my program?

My first year, 2004 - 2005, was focused on fulfilling my course requirements, so I put these concerns aside, and focused on my courses. In the spring of 2005 I also wrote my General Comprehensive Examination, which was a requirement of my program at that time. In the summer of 2005 I completed the ethical review for my proposed preliminary study of graduate student writing and text production. I realize now that this was not the usual sequence, because I had not yet completed my doctoral specialization comprehensive examination, or my thesis proposal.

**Preliminary research study.**

After I obtained ethical approval, I was eager to begin my study. I conducted a preliminary study in July and August 2005. The study took the form of ethnographic research of a graduate course on anti-racism, and an interview with the professor teaching it. I had completed the same course with the same professor for credit the previous summer; I obtained permission from the professor and the students to conduct research in the class during its second offering. I sat in on all the classes and took notes. My aim was to discover how the students discussed the readings and related them to their own experiences, and how they acquired the background and skills to write their course papers. I also conducted an interview with the course instructor at the end of the course to discover what techniques she had employed to direct the discussions in class, and help the students acquire the knowledge and language to write their final course papers.40

I got to know other students through taking courses with them, and I discussed my struggles to make sense of my program with them. Many students confided to me that they

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40 Further information can be found later in chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section on Course Work, which includes my interview with the professor, and some of my ethnography of the course.
also were uncertain about many things in regard to their graduate programs. Although they had read the handbooks which laid out all the requirements and steps, and attended the workshops, many students still had a feeling of not being in control, of not having a firm grasp of what they were doing and where they were going. A student recounted that during her course work phase, “I had a lot of difficulty seeing the whole picture; it was somewhat of a mystery to me.” A thesis supervisor told me that many students related similar experiences to her, often saying they were “in a fog” at various stages of their programs. Reinforcing this comment, students I spoke with described confusion they felt at different points of their thesis programs. Some had difficulties writing course papers, which is discussed in chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students. Many described isolation during the comprehensive examination and thesis proposal stages, when they were no longer in regular program activities with other students. The doctoral specialization examination stage was a difficult phase for me, and for many other students with whom I communicated. Like them, I felt cut off from others, forced to solve formidable problems alone.

The place where I was able to find some of the information I was seeking was a study group, which was facilitated by a thesis supervisor. I was invited to join in the fall of 2005, the second year of my program. Most of the students were presenting their thesis proposals to the group, while I still had my doctoral specialization comprehensive examination ahead of me. Still it was good to have the experience of hearing students who were ahead of me in their programs discuss their work, as it gave me perspective of what to expect. As well, information was exchanged about many relevant topics, including writing problems, conferences and publishing. Being in a group that met monthly led to important connections with other students, people with whom I could ask questions and share my ideas; some of those connections continued through my program and evolved into friendships. But obtaining
information was still somewhat hit and miss for me; I often heard of events after they had occurred.

The fog clears.

It was the experience of presenting papers at conferences 41 outside my graduate school, beginning in 2006, that expanded my vista by connecting me to other events and conferences, as well as networks of scholars whose work intersected with mine. Slowly I emerged from the “fog” and acquired a clearer view of graduate education through many experiences, positive and negative, as I obtained more and more information that was relevant to my own study. I listened carefully to groups of students talking about activities they had heard of, kept my eyes open for notices and posters, and asked a lot of questions.

Some of the questions I came up with were: What information and skills do graduate students need at the beginning of their programs? What information and skills do they need at each stage as they move along in their programs? What responsibility do graduate schools have to help graduate students acquire that information and those skills? In what format is it most effectively presented? What responsibility do graduate students have to acquire the information and skills they need themselves? What is the view of professors and supervisors on these matters? What is the view of students at various stages of their programs, and of those who have recently graduated?

My thesis supervisor suggested that I use my preliminary study as the basis of my thesis research. She was anxious for me to get on with it, but I was not convinced that I had enough information yet to proceed with my thesis. I didn’t know where to turn to, how to find my direction. I knew that others were already exploring the topic of graduate student writing from different perspectives (Bazerman, 1988; 1994; 2004; Giltrow & Valiquette, 1994; Harris, 41 Conferences are discussed in Chapter 7, Extended Activities of Graduate Students
2006; Hyland, 2004; Paltridge, 2004; Prior, 1994; 1998; 2003; 2006), that it constituted a known study area, but the texts that I located had a different perspective than the perspective/standpoint of graduate students, which was my starting point.

**Grant application process.**

As a flexible-time PhD student, I was not funded by the university, but in the fall of 2005, at the beginning of my second year, I learned that I was eligible to apply for a government grant/scholarship, a SSHRC, from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, or an OGS, an Ontario Government Scholarship. I threw myself into the application process, pulling in other students with me. I attended workshops, studied successful applications, and rewrote my grant proposals many times, trying to emulate the polished writing styles exhibited in the sample winning applications while working with other students on their applications.

I submitted my applications, and waited to hear about them. I was not successful, and experienced disappointment. I had put in so much time and effort, seemingly for nothing. Others shared with me that they had not been successful either, and were also let-down. I learned later that you usually needed publications to get through the first round of the grant process, another piece of information that was not revealed in any of the written information available or in the workshops. Never in my master’s program did anyone suggest that I should try to publish my papers or my thesis, in case I decided to enroll in a Ph.D. program in the future. But one of the students I convinced to apply, who had a publication record, got a large grant, so our efforts led to the success of one of us, making it a worthwhile endeavour.

I came to realize that it was necessary for students to draft their grant proposals to communicate with assessors beyond the department and the discipline area in which the

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42 Flexible-time status is explained in Chapter 6, Professional/Graduate Student Participants and their Programs
student was working, which requires considerable skill. As well, as I mentioned, I realized that
the grant application process advantages those graduate students who come from professional
life or master’s degrees with publication records. It also made me aware of departmental
power relations, that professors in each department are required to rank their students for these
funding processes, and made me conscious of outside factors involved in the grant process. I
shifted my gaze outside the department due to my curiosity about how these grants operated,
to include trans-departmental, and even trans-university contexts in my consideration of the
processes of grants, and other aspects of graduate education.

My own experience of writing scholarship proposals and encouraging other students to
apply and helping them with their applications as they helped me was very illuminating. It
made visible the many challenges of the process for graduate students. This undertaking and
its aftermath illustrates the ups and downs that students experience during their graduate
programs, and the importance of sharing with others who can provide support to help students
put their disappointments into perspective and carry on with their projects.

Participating in this process had a transformational effect on me; getting other students
involved through friendly encouragement, working together on our grant writing, made me
realize the importance of collaboration, of trying out ideas on others and getting their
feedback. Looking back, I realize that was an important juncture in my research work, because
at each further stage of my own thesis process, I found ways to join with other students in
collaborative learning processes in study groups, conference sessions, and more informal
venues, such as café gatherings. The group of students grew over time and came together in
different groupings at different times. We supported each other in each phase of our program
work; there was always someone to call or email, or get together with to discuss problem areas
in our work. At conferences at our own and another local university, we met other students working in similar areas, and connected with them, so our academic community expanded as we moved outside our own department and university. Larger Canadian and US conferences led to further growth of academic friendships and expansion of our knowledge of academic scholarship.

Participating in the grant writing process was an important turning point for me in my research process. I came out of it a different researcher. It expanded my horizons, and made me realize the importance of presenting ideas at an early stage of their development to others, verbally and in written form, and getting their feedback. Participating in and forming collaborative graduate student groups, formal and informal, became an important component of my thesis research process.

First graduate conference presentation: Getting my feet wet.

I heard about a graduate student conference that would take place at my graduate school at the beginning of April, 2005, and decided to submit a paper. I didn’t make a good choice, though. I chose a course paper I had written on a then-current provincial review of post-secondary education and published review. The paper was titled, “The Absence of Graduate Work in the Rae Report,” in which I questioned some of the report’s conclusions regarding the future of graduate education in the province of Ontario. It was my attempt at a Higher Education paper, since my course professor was a well-known scholar in that area. It is a truism that we learn best from our mistakes. I made quite a few on that occasion, and I learned a lot. I was just getting my feet wet in terms of writing an academic paper for a conference, not realizing that a conference paper is different from a course paper, and how to make the necessary changes. I also learned that it would have been a better idea to talk about
my own ongoing research. I also learned about timing, because I ran out of time in the presentation and didn’t get to draw any conclusions. And I learned that the audience only had so much patience for the topic I was presenting, so I needed to limit my presentation to a few main arguments. In retrospect, that conference was an ideal forum to present for the first time, because it was a safe environment where other graduate students were taking the same risks as me, putting themselves in front of an audience of peers and professors to see what responses they would elicit, what advice would be offered to improve their papers and presentation styles in the future. And that is the reason for such conferences within graduate schools, along with celebrating the diversity of research topics of their students.

**Comprehensive examination process.**

Meanwhile, I began my doctoral specialization exam process, which had been delayed by a year, because of my supervisor’s busy schedule. Since none of the choices of standard exam topics in my department related to my work, I requested an individuated exam based on my research topic, to be prepared by my thesis supervisor, and to be completed at home during a ten-day period in November, 2006. Although a part of the exam, related to exploring the literature on my area of study, proved useful as a starting point for my literature review chapter, I researched and rewrote the literature review extensively after I conducted all my research and began to write this thesis; there was little else from the exam that proved to be of use. Other students related similar stories to me, leaving me thinking that this exam bears re-examination and repurposing.
Second graduate conference presentation: Making a splash.

The following year, in March 2007, I presented again at the OISE/UT Dean’s Graduate Student Research conference, this time, on my area of study. The title of my paper was: “Inverted Priorities in the Processes of Graduate Study: Program and Grant Applications, Publication, and Course Work.” This was the first paper in which I discussed my own on-going research work, “a study of graduate students’ reading-writing work within the ‘graduate factory,’” and the importance of graduate conferences “to create opportunities for training graduate students, and reworking their graduate course papers towards their presentation in national and international conferences, as well as preparation for publication … [because] suggestions and critique made by audience members and discussants play a significant role in reworking and improving a paper.” My paper was well received by the graduate students attending, and a number of them approached me after the session to discuss their own difficulties around writing. For the first time, I was presenting my own ongoing work, and was accepted outside my group of close associates as a researcher in the area of graduate student writing. This experience buoyed me up to continue my research and prepared me for future conferences.

First “outside” conference experience.

Around this time, I had finally acquired information about important outside conferences in Canada and the US related to my area of research. I travelled with a group of doctoral students to the Qualitative Inquiry conference in Illinois in May, 2006, which was an exciting adventure for all of us. We drove there together, talking all the way, roomed together, and were introduced to many of the authors of articles and books we had read in our Qualitative Methods course. We attended a session in which one member of our group
presented with her supervisor, and we were all very proud of the student and her excellent scholarship that was evident in her presentation. That was the first time I had seen this type of collaborative work between students and supervisors. That student was fully funded, and had been a research assistant for the supervisor. Later I realized that being funded positioned a student at a higher echelon that an unfunded student, like me. I realized there was a hierarchy of graduate students under the same supervisor, an unspoken, unwritten power structure. Those students who had a research assistant position with their supervisor as part of their funding package had more cachet and access to information and involvement in extended activities because of their connection with their supervisor they were assisting (Plutzer, 1991).

A few other students that I spoke to made connections with professors through taking their courses, and some of those students were invited to present with the professor at conferences, or to co-author articles or book chapters; such opportunities enriched their graduate school experience and provided valuable curriculum vitae additions, resources and connections for the future. Those students who were not funded usually did not have these same opportunities; as well, they were often working full- or part-time in their professions, and therefore did not have the same time availability for extra activities.

I really enjoyed the experience of going as a group, and having the opportunity to share our experiences with each other. In addition, the group bonded together, and remained a supportive group, another example of the value of group activities to improve graduate students’ experiences and assist them in their thesis work.

**My thesis proposal process.**

My next program task was the production of a thesis proposal, which required another four months of intense reading-writing work following my doctoral specialization comprehensive examination. The title of my thesis proposal submitted in March 2007 was:
“An inquiry into the social organization of graduate students’ work: Text production through reading-writing activity.” My intention was to study the required written components of a graduate program from the standpoint of graduate students. My use of the term ‘standpoint’ was based on Smith’s (2005, p. 228) ‘women’s standpoint,’ which is explicited in chapter 3, Methodology/Research Methods. This illustrates the shift in my thesis focus from that on my original application to the doctoral program, in which my intent was “to study the reading-writing work of graduate students at many sites.” Now I was distinguishing reading-writing work or activity from text production.

At my first thesis committee meeting, my committee members expressed concern that I was taking on too much in looking at the reading-writing work of all program requirements/activities, including the application to the program, grant applications, course work, comprehensive exams/requirements, thesis proposal, thesis research and thesis writing. They suggested that I confine my study to the thesis proposals of the participants, so I added “with a focus on the thesis proposal” to the proposal title.

This was the first time my thesis committee, three women from three different departments in my graduate school, had actually voiced their acceptance of my plan to explore the writing and text production processes of graduate students. At first, I had a feeling of relief, a sense of striking a bargain. However, I later experienced discomfort at being steered in a direction that might not work for me. In retrospect, I realize that they had seen many students take on too big a project, with the ensuing difficulties, and that they were trying to direct me away from that quagmire. Also, I have a habit of finding my own path through projects, my own direction, and that is often a meandering journey of discovery, rather than a direct route from A to B.
First “outside” conference session organization and paper presentation.

Reflecting on the positive experience of attending the Qualitative Methods conference, I had the courage to apply to a graduate education conference at another Toronto university in the spring of 2007. I put together a session on “Using Institutional Ethnography for Research in Education,” to include my own paper about my ongoing work, and that of three other students from my cohort group who were also using IE as the method of inquiry for their thesis work. My proposal was accepted, and our session was positively received at the conference, with a high attendance. Although all the members of our session were at different stages in our programs, we each had a positive outcome as a result of presenting our papers. This was an ideal place for us to present to a new audience, as the graduate students in attendance were attentive and asked good questions. We also got valuable feedback from our discussant.\footnote{\(\text{This conference experience is described in Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students.}\)} This turned out to be my dry run for presenting my work at outside conferences.

Other conference paper presentations.

I had sent abstracts to two other conferences that year, and was accepted at those as well. So after the aforementioned conference, I presented a paper entitled “Trafficking of reading-writing labour in graduate school: Recruitment of knowledge workers for the academy” in June 2007 to the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan at the large annual Canadian Congress of the Humanities & Social Sciences, which includes over fifty different academic associations meeting at the same time at a Canadian university. This was the first time I presented at a session of a scholarly association, as the previous conferences had been graduate student conferences; the presentation went well, and I received some good feedback.
In August 2007, I presented a paper at the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) annual conference, Institutional Ethnography section, in New York City on “Using Institutional Ethnography to explore the dynamics of students’ reading-writing activities in doctorate programs in the social sciences.” This was my first exposure to the SSSP, and I was delighted to meet so many people involved with IE. I found this group to be very hospitable, welcoming, and responsive to my work.

I subsequently presented papers at other conferences to the previously-mentioned associations, the CSA, SSSP, CSSHE, and to another association, the Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing (CASDW), a group that I first encountered in Saskatoon. I put together another conference session in 2009 for the CSA. A list of my conference papers may be found at the end of this thesis. Except for the first one, all my conference papers described my ongoing research, which was very useful to me in learning how to write about my work, preparing me to write this thesis. Also, the feedback I received from the discussants and other session participants was productive toward moving my work along, reinforcing my position as a researcher on the topic of graduate student writing, and as a researcher using institutional ethnography as my method of inquiry. I also made valuable connections with other students and academics at the conferences, and got to see some new cities and university campuses as a bonus.

Facilitating a thesis study group.

I was becoming more and more aware of the importance of presenting one’s work to others to receive valuable feedback and suggestions, and looked for a way to continue that process back at my graduate school. After discussing this with other students, I started a thesis

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44 Information on that process and the session can be found in chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section on Developing a Conference Session.
45 More about my conference experiences and those of the participants may be found in Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students.
study group. There were five of us who met four times in total. Acting as the facilitator for the group was a new learning experience for me, and for the others who participated in the group, as it functioned differently and provided a different kind of support than a group facilitated by a supervisor. Facilitating the thesis study group, researching and writing conference papers, organizing conference sessions, and presenting my work in process to different associations helped me to gain confidence and to shape my research.

**Discovering the Foreground and Background of Graduate Program Work**

As I moved through my program, the focus of my inquiry and along with it, my problematic of my research had shifted. At each turn, I felt I was coming closer to understanding my own experiences and the experiences of the graduate students with whom I was interacting, the activities in which we were participating, the venues in which we carried out our program work and other activities, how our interactions with each other and with professors and supervisors were helping us develop our work, and what factors were impeding our progress. I felt my understanding and the accounts I could give were becoming much more concrete.

What I have discovered in the course of my own trajectory through the graduate program and my research of other graduate students’ activities and efforts in completing their work is that the official path towards completion of the dissertation, that is, completing all the required program work, appears quite limited in accounting for all the actual work of graduate students. In the process of self-managing my own way in the seemingly impersonal, at times overwhelming sphere of graduate school, I engaged in and uncovered all kinds of alternative or self-organized group activities and associated processes outside core program work.

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46 I have written more about this study group, as well as the three other study groups in which I participated in Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students
Here’s another way of seeing this shift. Since I have a background as an artist and art teacher, I like to use visual aids, like drawings, diagrams and maps to explain ideas and concepts. An optical illusion that most people have come across is an illustration of a white vase on a black background; as you stare at it, gradually there is a shift in your perception between the foreground, or ‘figure,’ and the background, or ‘ground’ and an opposite image becomes apparent: the silhouettes of two people facing each other on a white background.

Figure 5: White vase optical illusion⁴⁷, Edgar Rubin

During the course of my thesis process, my perception and perspective of graduate student work have undergone a similar figure/ground shift. Just as the white vase seems to jump out at you at first, grabbing your attention, what I first perceived and focused on was the most apparent and visible work of graduate students: the official, required program activities. These are listed in the handbooks as a list of components in the form of writing and texts to be completed in order for the program to be fulfilled and the degree to be granted. Beginning with the successful application, program activities include: course work and papers, comprehensive examinations, ethics protocols and thesis proposals, culminating with the thesis. There may be other requirements, such as grant/scholarship applications, and/or

applications for assistantships. I refer to these activities as the ‘required activities’ of graduate students. These activities can be ‘mapped’ (I am referring to institutional ethnographic mapping). Later, similar to the way the black silhouettes of the profiles of two people facing each other slowly become visible in the optical illusion, the background activities of graduate students gradually came into focus for me.

The “(back)ground” activities are the less-apparent activities of graduate students, which I call their ‘extended’ and ‘supplementary’ activities. ‘Extended activities’ include graduate student conferences, other local, national and international conferences, and publication. ‘Supplementary activities’ include workshops, auditing extra courses, study groups, writing groups, and academic events such as thesis proposal presentations and mock thesis defenses. The ‘extended’ and ‘supplementary’ activities of graduate students I explored are more difficult-to-map terrains of activity. As my thesis work developed, it encompassed both required program work, which was my original research topic, and the extended and supplementary activities of graduate students that I encountered or initiated. In reality, required, extended and supplementary activities overlap temporally.

A dynamic account of graduate student work takes into account all of these, not just how a student responds to program-identified requirements. By sustaining a focus on the social organization of reading-writing activity and text production, it becomes possible to see how the program-delineated activities/requirements and the extended and supplementary activities of graduate students complement one another. My study illuminates the important roles of extended and supplementary activities to graduate students’ text production.

48 I have included a number of IE maps as figures in this thesis.
49 Required, Extended and Supplementary activities of graduate students are discussed in detail later in this thesis as follows: Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students; Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students; and Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students.
Conclusion

Autoethnography is an important component of this thesis. One of my contributions to literature on graduate student writing is to document my own experiences as a graduate student acquiring the writing skills to complete my program work and this thesis.

This chapter describes my experiences at the beginning of my program, when I was quite lost, unsure about activities outside my program work. The workshops I attended initially didn’t help very much. I finished my coursework and undertook a preliminary study, an ethnography of a course and an interview with the professor. Next I joined a study group and acquired a lot of information there, and connected with other students. I included detailed information about conference paper presentations, and the grant/scholarship application process, in which I brought in other students. That was a turning point for me, discovering what I wanted to study, and that I wanted to be proactive with my professional/student participants, forming conferences sessions with them, and facilitating a study group for them. I discussed my thesis proposal process, my discovery of the foreground (required program work) and background (extended and supplementary work) of the graduate education students and me.

Although this chapter is titled “Autoethnography,” in fact my autoethnography permeates the thesis. In this chapter, I documented the beginning of my doctoral program process. In subsequent chapters, I present further examples of my own experiences as a graduate student and as a researcher of graduate students’ experiences inside and outside their programs.

My autoethnography of my thesis process is a bridge to my descriptions of other students’ processes of engaging in and completing their required program work. The next chapter describes the participants and some of their experiences.
CHAPTER 6

PROFESSIONAL/GRADUATE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR PROGRAMS

“It’s an enormous challenge to be working full-time in a professional position, and doing a graduate degree at the same time.” Quote from a participant.

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the professional/graduate education student participants who participated in this study, including details of their backgrounds and their reasons for engaging in thesis-based graduate education programs. I divide the students into four categories according to their reasons for undertaking graduate studies and I provide some information about their research and goals. In this chapter I also discuss some special programs that were designed for these professionals, their special needs and if/how they are met, and the experiences of graduate students who are mothers. I also discuss professionals’ socialization into academic writing, as they learn new skills that transition them from professional writers into academic writers.

Profiles of the Professionals/Graduate Students

The student participants were professionals who were engaged in or had completed graduate programs in education in master’s or doctoral level programs that required a thesis, professors who taught graduate programs in these programs, and supervisors who supervised the students’ thesis work at a large Canadian university. Unlike graduate students who enter graduate school directly from undergraduate degree programs, these ‘older’ professionals returned to university for graduate studies in education after working in their professions in one or more positions for varying lengths of time. The ages of the participants ranged from early-thirties to mid-sixties; the majority appeared to be in their 30s and 40s, but the exact ages of individuals were not ascertained. A 2005 survey found that the average age of doctoral
graduates in education in Canada was forty-six (Lauzon, 2011, p. 289). The majority of them were women; the graduate education department attracted more women than men, a trend in the US also (Nerad, 2005). Some of the students were working full-time and studying part-time. A few of them were international students. This reflects a global trend toward an increase in older graduate students, women, part-time students, and international students attending graduate school (Nerad, 2011). Most of them worked and lived locally, though some travelled considerable distances; some commuted for two hours or more each way to the graduate school.

Some of the professionals/students were from visible minority groups, although I made no attempt to recruit participants from particular groups. The graduate school included quite a few professors and students from visible minority groups. Only one of the participants brought up issues of racial discrimination in describing her professional workplace; gender was also an issue in that case. My focus was on students’ experiences around writing, but I was open to anything that came up in our discussions and in my observations. Issues of gender also emerged in regard to women graduate students who gave birth during their programs, or were caring for children. Their difficulties are discussed at length in this chapter. Issues of race were discussed in my interview with a course director in chapter 6. The title of that course included antiracism, so that topic was central to the course readings and discussions.

The graduate education school had a number of different departments when I conducted my research and the different departments tended to attract professionals from different backgrounds. Because I interviewed students from all but one of the departments, they covered a variety of professions, though most were from the health care professions and different areas of education. They included the following: public health nurse, nursing instructor, physician, dietitian, physiotherapist, social worker, university administrator,
university instructor, college instructor, college administrator, primary school teacher, secondary school teacher, education developer and lawyer. Some participants were observed over a long period of time, through several stages of their graduate programs, while others were observed for short periods.

These students brought extensive training and experience in their professions to the academy. Since many continued in employment in their professions while attending graduate school part-time, they occupied multiple positions and were active in multiple sites. For example, three professionals/students I interviewed - Claudia, Lynne and David - worked for a medical research facility full-time while pursuing PhD degrees part-time. Their PhD work intersected with their professional work and contributed to it because their thesis topics were engendered from their own experiences and issues they had encountered there. In addition, they supported and consulted each other on their graduate program work and thesis work, and attended each other’s thesis proposal presentations and mock thesis defenses, which enhanced their experiences as graduate students and colleagues, and furthered their scholarship and knowledge production in their field. They are making important contributions to their particular worksite, and through the production of their theses, presentations and publication of their work, to other similar sites globally.50

Professionals’ Reasons for Pursuing Advanced Education Degrees

Most of the professionals I interviewed sought further credentialing: 1) in order to retain professional positions when their credentials were deemed inadequate by their superiors

50 The requirement for electronic submission of theses by many universities has exploded the distribution and availability of theses worldwide. In the past, bound theses were stored in university libraries; as well, they were available through various resources online, such as Dissertation Abstracts International, and before that, on microfiche sheets or microfilm at university libraries. Now the completion of a thesis means that the work will circulate far and wide as soon as it is put online, and may be read and cited by many scholars.
or their own self-assessments, 2) to advance to higher positions in their professions, or 3) to change their professional positions.

In addition, interviews revealed that the professionals had different objectives for engaging in graduate studies in education. Some wanted: 1) to explore their professions, to add to knowledge about and recognition of their professions; or: 2) to research and address specific problems or disjunctures they had encountered in their professional practices. Another group was: 3) professionals who wished to study the immigration and settlement of a specific group of people from their country of origin or the country of their parents to Canada. This group included international professionals who had worked for governmental or non-governmental organizations; some in this group are recruited abroad for graduate programs in education in Canada and then are encouraged to stay, though special immigration policies that have been initiated for this purpose.\(^{51}\) Other students wanted to: 4) explore problems in the community in order to contribute to research in that area. This list is not exhaustive; there is some overlap, and there may be other reasons professionals return for graduate degrees, but these are the main reasons I encountered among the participants.

Examples from Each of the Four Groups of Participants:

**Those who wish to explore a profession, to add to its profile and recognition.**

Ruth, a university administrator, had worked for some time in a field of education related to international education previous to her current position, and wished to explore how others working in similar positions were faring, as well as the training offered to future workers. Because of her busy schedule and the demands of her position, she could only devote ten hours a week toward her doctoral program work. She was not able to engage in peripheral

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\(^{51}\) Opportunities Ontario: Provincial Nominee Program (Ontario.ca/newcomers) is a program that fast-tracked international PhD graduates to permanent residence status without a job offer, and referred students to become a fan on its Facebook page at Opportunities Ontario.
extended activities, such as presenting papers at conferences or publishing her work-in-progress while she was engaged in her doctoral studies, but she did participate in a student-led thesis study group. She maintained her focus throughout her program and completed her degree, which has added to knowledge of international education workers, as well as augmenting her credentials and capacity for future positions.52

Claudia had worked in an uncommon career training medical professionals for many years, but she felt her particular profession was not well understood, documented or researched. She wanted to explore it through the process of a doctoral thesis in order to increase the profile and recognition given to members of her profession. She adopted a novel theoretical approach to her study, and produced a very creative, insightful thesis that has added to the literature on her profession.53

Cynthia, an educational developer, enjoyed her work, but realized that it was not well known. Although this field can be traced back fifty years, it has matured and grown in the last five to ten years. Cynthia choose to explore how people enter this field, the internal and external influences on them, and the kind of work developers do, in a doctoral program using qualitative methods and coding to analyze her data. Her goal was to provide an in-depth

52 Ruth’s thesis process is further discussed in the following chapters and sections:
1. Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Creating Flow, p. 209
3. Chapter 9, Supplementary Activities of Graduate Students, section, Student-initiated and -facilitated study group, p. 294
4. Chapter 9, Supplementary Activities of Graduate Students, section, Mock thesis defenses held separate from a study group: Ruth’s mock defense, p. 311

53 More on Claudia’s thesis process is in Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Students discussing their experiences of presenting conference papers, p. 233
Those who return to address specific problems/disjunctures in their professions.

Anna, a college nursing instructor, returned to the academy for doctoral studies to address whether her program was preparing nursing students for the realities of working as nurses in hospitals. She interviewed her participants, nurses who had recently graduated from college nursing programs similar to hers and were now employed in hospitals. In addition, she analyzed the documents and texts that govern nursing practices in hospitals. Anna’s thesis included her findings and her recommendations. She has now returned to her teaching practice and is attempting to address the disjunctures she identified.

Grace was troubled that the college training program for health professionals in which she was an instructor was downgrading or omitting certain recent scientific findings from the curriculum. She considered that information essential to her students’ professional education, but was told by her superior at the college not to include it. She engaged in graduate studies in education so that she could investigate this disjuncture between her position and that of the

54 Cynthia’s thesis process can be found:
1. Later in this chapter, in the section, Professionals’/Students’/Mother’ Special Challenges, p. 156
2. In Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Casual arrangements between students for mutual writing support, p. 310
3. In Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Mock thesis defense held with an ongoing study group: Cynthia’s mock defense, p. 317

55 More on Anna’s thesis process may be found:
1. Later in this chapter, section, Relations between the University and Professional Practice Sites, p. 164
2. In the diagram later in this chapter, How the Texts Produced by a Professional Create Actions that Move Her from Her Professional Practice Site to Graduate School and Back to Practice, p. 166
3. In Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Conference Paper Development and Presentation, p. 227
4. In Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Interdisciplinary Communication of Professional and Academic Texts, p. 240
5. In Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Mock thesis defense held separate from a study group: Anna’s mock defense, p. 313
administrator of the training programs in an academic setting where she could discuss her concerns and develop her position and arguments openly, without fear of sanction.\textsuperscript{56}

Joyce, a community college administrator with a particular interest in a marginalized contingent of the student population at her college, returned for a doctorate to address her concerns related to this group and learn from the students themselves, as well as others in their community, about the challenges facing this group of students in higher education, and specifically in the programs at her college. Through her research and the writing of her thesis, she created opportunities for many people from the group to add their voices, providing comprehensive profiles of these students and their difficulties. Based on her research, her thesis includes suggestions for administrators to facilitate the entry, progress, and completion of their college programs for students from this group. In addition, her doctoral degree added to her qualifications and helped facilitate her move to a higher position in her college.\textsuperscript{57}

Marian, an educator in the corporate sector working in organizational learning, became interested in the topic of harassment in the workplace, after observing its effects on several of her friends and colleagues. Seeing her friends transformed, becoming insecure, anxious, stressed, and full of self-doubt, led her to pursue a doctorate in education in order to research this phenomenon, make it known, and search for viable solutions.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} More on Grace’s thesis process can be found in the following locations:
1. Further in this chapter, in the section, Professionals Learning To Write as Academics: Some Problems/Disjunctures, p. 167
2. In Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Developing a conference session, presenting it, and its aftereffects for a presenter, p. 234

\textsuperscript{57} More on Joyce’s thesis work can be found in Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Student-initiated and -facilitated study group, p. 294

\textsuperscript{58} More about Marian’s thesis process is found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Developing a thesis topic: Interview with a student beginning her thesis proposal, p. 188
Beth, a professional with a position in a corporate practice, returned to graduate school to address problems encountered by women in her profession with children who were being pushed out of their positions, which deeply and personally affected her, employing a feminist antiracist standpoint. During the course of her research and studies, she decided to make a career change to a government position with more regular hours that would allow her more time to be with her family.59

Lynne worked at a medical research facility. She was fascinated by the connections between the different professionals, and between the different disciplines within her facility, and decided to exercise her intellectual curiosity by engaging in doctoral research that would allow her to explore these connections and add to knowledge in this area, as well as augment her credentials.60

Vanessa was a teacher who was concerned that her students weren’t getting enough physical activity, so she decided to pursue a doctorate to have the opportunity to investigate, in the milieu of a graduate education program, the amount of physical activity that children in a

59 More about Beth’s thesis process can be found:
1. Later in this chapter, section, From Disjuncture to Problematic: Beth’s Thesis Topic Development, p. 144
2. Also later in this chapter, section, Professionals'/Students'/Mothers’ Special Challenges, p. 156
3. In Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Writing the Thesis, Role of the Supervisor, p. 212

60 Lynne’s work is found:
1. Earlier in this chapter, in the section, Profiles of the Professionals/Graduate Students, p. 131
2. Later in this chapter, in the section, Professional and Academic Writing and Text Production, p. 163
3. In Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Students discussing their experiences of presenting conference papers, p. 233
4. In Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Interdisciplinary Communication of Professional and Academic Texts, p. 240
specific age group were obtaining, to add to knowledge about physical education for children, and to highlight its importance for children’s development.61

Karen was a teacher who worked in a government position in her Asian country. She was concerned about the lack of information about the history of education in her country, and decided to come to Canada to study this area in a doctorate education program to add to knowledge about her country, and to increase people’s awareness and pride in their country’s history.62

Professionals who want to research the transition experiences of immigrants.

Ellie, a health care professional, was very interested in exploring a part of her family’s history: how a member of her family who was also a health care professional had been recruited from her home country to fill a shortage of health care workers in that profession in Canada, where she had settled. She interviewed her relative and her relative’s friends who were also recruited, as well as others she located, and decided to do a doctorate on the immigration of members of that profession from her family’s home country to Canada during a period of high immigration of that group. Her research was conducted through interviews in Canada and archival research in Canada and in the US, and will contribute to knowledge about this wave of immigration and its impact on Canada and on the home country, as well as knowledge of immigrants from her home country, and on the health care profession.63

Sarah, an educational instructor who was a woman of colour who had immigrated to Canada, wished to study women from the same geographic area who had also immigrated to

61 More about Vanessa’s graduate education program journey can be found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Writing the thesis: Role of the supervisor, p. 212

62 More about Karen’s thesis process can be found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Writing the thesis: Role of the supervisor, p. 217

63 More on Ellie’s thesis process may be found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Casual arrangements between students for mutual writing support, p. 310
Canada and were presently in positions as faculty at Canadian universities. Her interviews with the women revealed the difficulties they had faced, and how they dealt with those difficulties. Her study draws attention to this group, and stresses the importance of further studies of diverse groups in faculty positions in Canadian universities, as well as ways of assisting them to have a stronger voice.64

**Those who wished to explore problems in the community.**

*Andrew*, a teacher who had a strong interest in organic farming, returned to graduate school for a master’s degree in education to study policies on organic farming in Ontario. His goal was to find a way to assist this field of agriculture by promoting the development of better legislation and policies to protect and promote this area of the food industry.65

*Henry*, a teacher who worked in a low-income neighbourhood where most people lived in high-rise apartment buildings, was concerned about access to healthy food by people living in poverty. He wanted to examine this group’s ability to locate places to grow their own food in an urban setting. He enrolled in a master’s program in education to carry out his study.66

*Denise*, who had worked as an educator, observed the problems encountered by a disadvantaged segment of the population, and decided to research a sample of this group and

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64 More on Sarah’s thesis process can be found in Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Mock thesis defense held within an ongoing study group: Sarah’s mock defense, p. 315

65 Andrew’s thesis process can be found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Thesis proposal development between students and supervisors in study groups, p. 196

66 More about Henry’s research process can be found in Chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, section, Thesis proposal development between students and supervisors in study groups, p. 196
their access to community services in a doctoral program, so that she could better understand their difficulties, and explore what they needed to improve their situations.67

**Helen**, who had worked as a youth worker and as a teacher, observed that some of her students were troubled and were struggling with a lot of issues that were affecting their ability to perform at school. She created a place outside of school where adolescents could voice their concerns and talk to each other and a trained professional in a drop-in casual setting as part of her research for her PhD.68

**Lorraine**, a health care professional, became interested in environmental pollution and its links to illness. She became involved with groups who shared her concerns. On the suggestion of a friend, she returned to graduate school for a master’s and then a doctorate degree and began to produce media on issues that were of great interest to her. Through this process, Lorraine decided to change her profession to align her work with her passions, and became a part-time university instructor on the environment.

**From Activism to Graduate School: Lorraine’ Story**

Lorraine’s story offers insights into the process of exploration and discovery that led her in new directions: to obtain graduate degrees, change her profession and her life.

I trained and worked as a health care professional in the Canadian city where I grew up. My concerns about the health of my patients and others led to concerns about the environment and peace, and I joined several organizations which were working in these areas. Through my work with one organization, I was asked to research and write about hydroelectric dams that were being proposed on aboriginal lands in my province. That project led to writing that appeared in the local papers, and in a book on the dam project. The new research and writing skills I had developed led to a position

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67 More about Denise’s thesis process can be found in Chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, section, Denise’s developing work in six presentations to Prof. Bell’s study group, p. 280 (The development of her thesis over a three-year period)

68 More about Helen’s graduate education process can be found in Chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, section, Conference Paper Development and Presentation, p. 227.
researching and distributing films on environmental topics. A visiting professor of environmental science that I met suggested that I consider returning to university because of what I could bring to the program and what I would gain by taking it. I began by commuting to take courses as a special student, because my professional degree was not the undergraduate degree required for graduate environmental science.

Later, I moved to the city where I was taking the courses to enroll in and complete a Master of Environmental Science program. When I finished, a good friend of mine suggested that I “go and get your doctoral degree” as she had done, so I followed my friend’s footsteps into a PhD program in education, working on a film about environmental links to disease while I was completing my course work and thesis in that area.

After I graduated, I created and taught a graduate course related to my thesis work, at the same time continuing my involvement in several organizations and community groups, and publishing and producing media related to my topic of the relationship between environmental health and people’s health and illness. Since that time, I have taught the course quite a few times as a sessional teacher, helping students to learn to write about environmental issues and to relate the topics covered in the course to their own research interests. Many of my students were also health professionals concerned about the effects of environmental pollution on the health of their patients, and on everyone else. Just as I was mentored to do graduate work, I have mentored others, acting like a bridge connecting students who take my courses to healthy practices in their own lives, as well as in their professional work. I’ve also brought other professionals and community activists into doing graduate degrees to address problems that impassioned them.

Lorraine’s story brings to light how a professional observes a problem area that is related to her profession, in her case, health care, and is moved to direct her time and effort towards greater understanding and proactive engagement in research and writing about that problem. Armed with advanced degrees, professionals can re-enter their professions or other areas to work on specific issues of interest and concern with specialized capacities and increased authority.

In the process of expressing her concerns about problems related to her profession, and engagement in activist work, Lorraine came into contact with professionals who encouraged her to obtain further education, because they knew she could address those disjunctures in a graduate program. From Lorraine, “One-on-one interactions were instrumental to the path I
took.” Lorraine’s volunteer work researching the hydroelectric dam project sharpened her research and writing skills; later, she applied those skills as a special student, and then as a master’s and doctoral student. Lorraine’s volunteer work led to a job researching and distributing films, which opened her eyes to the impact of film as a media for change; during her doctoral work, her research was not confined to the piece of knowledge she was studying, she also produced a film about environmental links to disease, along with others involved in the project. Thus, her activism informed her research/scholarship, and her research informed her activism.

Lorraine was astute about making important issues into media events, which requires both personal and networking capabilities. By producing a film during her doctoral studies, she extended her research to media products that reach beyond the university to the public forum. Producing a film has the potential of reaching different and larger audiences in many localities, near and far, and having a greater impact than the academic audience reached by a thesis or an academic paper.

Lorraine can be called a textual activist, as her calling has been to create media and a graduate course that educate and promote a discourse to effect positive change. She has expended many hours towards the creation of texts as a researcher, consultant, and advisor, working collaboratively with others who are engaged in similar activist discourses. The causes to which she has devoted her time, energy, and lived life are better served because of her enormous efforts in attaining accreditation. Acquiring advanced degrees has enabled activists like Lorraine to become spokespersons, lecturers, professors, conference workshop leaders, keynote speakers, authors, film advisors, writers and directors, interviewers and interviewees, promoting the causes to which they devote their lives. Their work is enhanced by the transformative power of discourse that has been honed through engagement in graduate
studies and scholarship. Through acquiring two graduate degrees, Lorraine became an acknowledged expert in the area of environmental health and a voice of authority. Because of her academic accreditation, she was able to change her profession to one where she could put her expertise and skill into practice as a part-time graduate school instructor on the effects of environmental health on people’s health. In this new position, she could educate other professionals.

The type of activism work that Lorraine has engaged in was outside the programs of the university in the past, but over time it has been brought into university curriculums, for example, as woman’s studies, peace studies, and environmental studies, in the form of specialized centres, programs, courses, or topics in course syllabuses.

**From Disjuncture to Problematic: Beth’s Thesis Topic Development**

I first met Beth, the professional mentioned previously, in a course that we were both taking which was critical in nature. The students in the course had opportunities to speak about their own experiences in the class, relating their experiences to the readings and course content. On several occasions, Beth spoke about the stresses she was experiencing as a woman and a mother in her professional practice, which was dominated by men, and the negative affect the stress was having on her health and her family. She was driven to research the problems, or disjunctures she encountered in her profession from within a program in graduate education at the doctoral level. The disjunctures in her professional practice became the problematic in her doctoral research work.

I kept in touch with Beth and had an opportunity to interview her when she was in the fifth year of her program. The interview revealed the difficulties she experienced in trying to balance her life as a full-time professional, part-time graduate student, mother and wife. In this
section, I cover her general comments and her comments about her thesis work. In a later section, I will focus on her stresses as a mother.

I did my master’s degree in education, then went on to do a professional degree. I am interested in using a critical, anti-racist, feminist standpoint in my PhD work to critique my profession. I’m waiting for my ethics approval at the moment.

I have a lot to say in regard to my thesis topic, about the experiences of women in my profession, about the problems they face, real-life examples, not just theory. Real-life experiences. I've seen it, experienced it firsthand. I have all the research in my head. I have to piece it together with the analysis, but I have little time to write, with my full-time job and two small kids. My thesis proposal took one year. I have a demanding practice even with my change of job. When I have a few hours, I throw myself into it. My supervisor says she can tell that I write in spurts. But I will get it done.

I'm going to start with my own experiences in regard to race, class and gender. I am using IE as my method of inquiry, and took Dorothy Smith’s and Susan Turner’s workshops. I'll start with people I know and if necessary I'll look at the directories of people in my profession to find more participants.

I'm doing an antiracist analysis of my profession, looking at women professionals and the women who work as assistants and clerks to support them. I question why there is such a concentration of people in the minorities in the supporting positions.

The senior partners are mostly white males. There are few women dominant players. I want to look at how the hierarchy is similar or different among the assistants. There is also a racial layer. Once I get my ethics approval, I’ll start my research. I can’t wait to get into it. I have so much to say.

Beth had been working in her profession for some time. She was a reflective person; as a woman and a member of a minority group, she was very aware of the dynamics of her professional practice. She could see how women were treated differently than men, especially women with families. Beth also saw that most of the women who worked in lower positions assisting the professionals were from racial minorities. She was very unhappy about the hierarchical power dynamics in her professional practice and the relentless demands on her. Her discomfort was so great that she left her position and moved to another in government where her hours would be more regular and she could better attend to her family and her own needs.
Beth’s personal experiences led her to examine her workplace and its dynamics through a critical lens. She was so impassioned by the inequality and oppression of women in her profession that she was driven to explore it within a doctoral program in education in order to reveal the power dynamics, to bring the inequalities into view and to legitimize the issues through the integrity of academic work in a graduate program in a respected university.

The characterization of graduate programs and departments as unique environments for undertaking substantive projects of knowledge production that are socially and institutionally processed, recognized and made accountable, explains why professionals return to the university to enrol and engage in a project. The process of study within a graduate program makes it possible for professionals/students to address disjunctures in practice as a problematic in the form of a research question within scholarly research and established academic discourses. In their program work, graduate students learn to articulate a problematic and at the same time, bring it up to the level of discourses that are in practice by weaving together the language of those established discourses with their budding problematic. Thus, graduate students’ texts-in-progress assume a dual property: the weaving together of a sharp representation of a specific problem(atic) and the assembling of discourses that render this problem academically visible and salient.

Students have access to many facilities in the academy, such as graduate courses, in which to present ideas, receive feedback and write critical papers on topics related to the problematic; conferences to present work in progress; and journals to publish preliminary findings. In addition, developing a thesis proposal and working with a thesis supervisor and committee enable the practitioner to produce a substantive document in the form of the thesis, which may be published, and establishes her as an expert in her chosen area. Thus armed, she
can return to professional practice equipped to address the disjunctures that inspired her studies.

In the following chapters, Required Work of Graduate Students, Extended Work of Graduate Students, and Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, these processes are elucidated through descriptions and dialogue of the various activities that these professionals/students engage in in order to research their problematics and contribute to knowledge about their topics as well as try to effect change.

Next I look at the different study options available to the graduate education students in my study.

**Professionals’ Graduate Study Options**

Some professionals took a break from their professional work and entered their graduate programs as full-time students with full funding in the form of grants that permitted them to work exclusively on their research, or that required them to work as assistants to professors to earn part of their funding, but most of the students in this study did not fall into this group. Other professionals negotiated leaves of absence from their positions to pursue graduate studies full-time as unfunded students, paying full fees. Typically students from these two groups followed a very carefully planned, tightly focused timetable to complete their graduate work. For example, a college professor allocated three years to complete her PhD; most doctoral students in education require a minimum of four years.69

Other students reduced their workloads to part-time while studying part-time, or

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69 Many go well beyond this; the maximum time allowed is six years, eight years for some flexible-time programs. Beyond this timeframe, students may lapse until they are ready to defend, when they must be reinstated for a partial year fee, or apply for up to two one-year extensions, during which they continue to pay fees, or obtain additional funding for this extended period. These options were modified in 2011.
continued to work full-time while studying part-time, which is the case for the majority of professionals I interviewed. Some students in the last two groups took time off their professional jobs at the end of their programs to complete and defend their theses.

**Flexible-time programs.**

Many of these hard-working professionals are unable to take time off from their demanding full-time positions, and have no choice but to complete their degrees on a part-time basis. In response to the needs of these busy professionals, graduate departments eager to attract them have developed new options for doctoral programs. At the PhD level, “flexible-time” programs have been introduced at some universities.\(^{70}\) Ruth, one of the participants, told me: “Educators, health care professionals, need access to a professional degree, to consider the work they do.” Students are enrolled full-time for the first four years of their programs, and pay full-time tuition fees without eligibility for loans programs or assistantships. In 2009-2010 the yearly tuition at OISE/UT was $7,743 for domestic PhD students, and $20,420 for international PhD students.

In Ontario there was an initiative to double graduate enrollment from 2003 to 2013-14 (COU, 2003). Flexible-time programs were developed allow more PhD students into graduate programs without having to fund them,\(^{71}\) to increase the knowledge economy. As an example of one of the universities offering flexible-time programs, here is the information on the flexible-time PhD program option from the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) of the University of Toronto from their website:\(^{72}\)

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\(^{70}\) The university in this study has offered an EdD degree part-time since the 1960s, designed for teaching professionals.

\(^{71}\) Reductions in funding reduced the number of funded students, although funding was being increased yearly in Ontario (COU, 2009).

\(^{72}\) This information is an amended version that was obtained from the SGS in May 2010 prior to its implementation on their website.
Flexible-time programs are offered in units where there is sufficient demand by practicing professionals for design and delivery of PhD programs that, except for short specified periods of time, permit continued employment in areas related to the fields of research.

Applicants to the flexible-time PhD option are accepted under the same admission requirements as applicants to the full-time PhD option. However, in addition, applicants to the flexible-time PhD should demonstrate that they are active professionals engaged in activities relevant to their proposed program of study.

How were they doing? One department’s inquiry.

In one of the departments at the graduate education school, a task force was established in 2008 to investigate the experiences of flexible-time students and report to the chair of the department. An associate chair took this on as a special project. She organized four group meetings during the 2009-2010 academic year for flexible-time students, where they could voice their concerns and questions, as well as discuss relevant topics, and created a newsletter for them. In response to their concerns, she met with faculty to help implement scheduling of supervision on evenings and weekends to accommodate flexible-time students’ availability.

I encountered this group of students just before their fourth meeting which was a session at a graduate education conference on a Saturday in the spring of 2010. There were about thirty students, many of whom were primary or secondary school teachers; they were eager to talk about their concerns, and to hear about relevant information regarding their program processes. The following section contains some of their concerns and comments, as well as those that I gathered from conversations with other students.

Accommodations Needed for the Special Requirements of the Professionals/Students

Flexible-time professionals/graduate students required timetabling of program activities that would fit into their busy schedules. They asked for availability of courses at times that they can attend: “Many activities, presentations are held during the day. Even if
they start at 4 pm, that’s too early for most full-time working people to get there.”

Many classes were offered during the early evenings, usually from 5 pm to 8 pm, or 5:30 pm to 8:30 pm, since traditionally, many students in graduate education in master’s and EdD programs have been elementary or secondary school teachers; their days usually ended by 4 pm, so most of them had time to travel to and attend classes in these time slots, but some of the professionals struggled to make 5 pm classes, if their work hours extend later in the day or if their work sites were some distance from the school. However, course times at the graduate education school were not restricted to these evening slots; some were offered only during the day, when working students could not attend. Other students complained that courses filled up quickly, and they had to wait until the course was given again, which may be in the following year or in two years’ time, delaying the time required to finish their programs, or forcing them to take courses that were not pertinent to their area of study. A student told me:

Some terms I haven’t been able to take a course, since I wasn’t able to get into one I wanted or needed. These issues have contributed to my now being in my fifth year, but knowing I still won’t finish by the end of the year, therefore I’ll have to pay for another year, which is difficult since we’re a single income family. And since I’m part-time, I don’t qualify for funding.

Some students lived considerable distances from the campus and found it more convenient to participate in online classes from home. One student told me, “I’m a working single mom with two small children, and I live an hour away; I can’t get to classes in person. I need more online courses.” But online courses were still limited in numbers at this school, and the capacity of online courses did not always meet the needs of students who wanted to take them: “I was hoping to complete my program largely online, since we live some distance from the school, and I don’t want to spend significant time away from home and my small children. I have difficulty getting into online courses. They fill up quickly with the online registration

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73 Students’ comments are in quotation marks or in block quotations in this section.
system.” Some online students wanted some face-time as well: “I feel disconnected from the learning community as I am taking online courses while working full-time.”

The summer time slot, with courses offered in two terms, May-June and July-August, was popular with part-time students, some of whom were teachers with July-August holidays. Students wanted more summer courses: “Some of us are teachers; we need some more selection in the summer when we have time;” and more places in summer courses: “Last summer I could not get into any courses that I was interested in, so now I have to take courses for three consecutive terms.” There was also a demand for more online summer courses for those living at a distance from the university, or who continue to work full-time during the summer:

The availability of courses, particularly the online options, has been disappointing. As this is the most flexible time of the year for many part-time students, it seems to be when the fewest courses are available, and in my experience, the courses that are the least applicable to my learning.

Students complained about difficulties setting up meetings with their supervisors, having to wait many weeks for an appointment, and problems setting up evening appointments. One student told me, “My supervisor resents that I want to meet her in the evening, and it takes so long to set up an appointment with her;” another said: “I have a hard time obtaining sufficient time from professors. Typically meeting dates can be anywhere from two weeks to one month from date of request.” From another student: “I have difficult arranging meetings with my supervisor after school hours. In order to meet with my supervisor, I have to call in sick to my teaching position.” These students put added pressures on professors to make adjustments to their own daily schedules and lives to accommodate them and find new ways of connecting with them. Some supervisors I have interviewed found that additional forums for obtaining feedback for their students, such as study groups, can
alleviate the stress on supervisors by providing a place where students can present their work-in-progress for feedback or ask questions about their programs or research, which can benefit all students present, so individual supervision can be scheduled less often and be more focused.

Help with thesis writing was an area of concern for quite a few students; “I still have no idea what a thesis is or how to write it!” From another student: “The biggest challenge is figuring out what a thesis project is, and getting one set up for myself when I’m spending most of my time off-site.” “We need workshops on how to identify gaps in literature, how to write a dissertation proposal, how to write a thesis.” Another student shared this: “Trying to get guidance to complete my thesis is a problem. I have to rely completely on my advisor, who is helpful, but really busy.” Writing is discussed later in this chapter and in the chapter on Required Work of Graduate Students.

Part-time students tend to come to classes and leave, so they miss the socialization opportunities afforded full-time students, such as sitting over coffee discussing their work with others; “I’m missing out on so much that’s happening when I’m not there,” lamented one student. From another student: “I’m not feeling connected to the students or profs due to lack of time to actually spend at my graduate school outside my class times.” And, “I’m not having the same enriching experiences as the other full-time students, like working closely with profs and other students.”

Many complained of feeling disconnected and alone once their course component was completed: “I have difficulty staying connected now that my course work is finished.” Students welcomed opportunities to share their work and experiences, and create community. Some students found that regular meetings with a “study buddy” provided continuity on the long journey of graduate work, made it less isolating, expanded opportunities to discuss work
at each stage of its development and receive valuable feedback that helped move the work along. Study groups or auditing extra courses are examples of more organized forms of meetings that some students found useful. They are discussed at length in the chapter, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students.

Working students were often not able to attend workshops or presentations by students of their work in progress, or mock thesis defenses, because these events were usually held during the day: “Many of the events seem to be scheduled during the time I teach, therefore I can’t be as involved as I would like,” was one student’s complaint; another said: “Getting access to professional development is a problem. The vast majority of talks, discussion groups, are offered at times I can’t attend.” “Most activities, presentations, are offered during the day. Even if they begin at 4, that is still too early for most working people to get there,” was another student’s comment. “If information sessions, etc. were videotaped and put online, I could access them from home at my convenience,” was a suggestion from a student; from another: “I find that many of the events or discussions seem to be scheduled during the time that I teach, therefore, I can’t be as involved in the overall process as I would like.”

Some departments’ workshops on important topics are now being held on Saturdays. These shifts are important indicators that the graduate education school is beginning to respond to the needs and wants of flexible-time and part-time students, but much more is clearly needed. More about workshops is found in the chapter on Supplementary Activities of Graduate Students, in the section on Workshops.

Professionals/students sought information and assistance regarding conferences and publication of their work: “I have difficulty with starting to publish research articles and with participation in research conferences. I don’t really know where to start and would appreciate help with this.” Conference paper development and presentation are important venues for
students to develop skills in the language of the academic area they are engaged in, meeting others in their area, and making important contacts for the future (Moore, 2008). The graduate education school I studied runs a graduate research conference every year in the spring on a Friday evening and Saturday to provide opportunities for students to present their work, often for the first time. Many flexible-time students presented at the conference in 2010, since they could fit the conference into their busy schedules.

Some professors connect closely with some of their students and publish with them, which greatly enriches the students’ engagement in academic writing, provides a learning opportunity, and helps them get into print as soon as possible, important to their establishment as academic writers. Others help students develop their course papers into publishable articles. However, these opportunities are rare and difficult for working students, who spend little time at their graduate schools. One student shared: “I have difficulty starting to publish research articles and participating in research conferences. I really don’t know where to start and would appreciate help with it.” Those students eager to publish needed more help to accomplish this task beyond a how-to workshop on the subject, which may be all they received. More on this topic can be found in the chapter on Extended Activities of Graduate Students, in the sections on Conferences and Publishing.

**Balancing Graduate Studies with Work Responsibilities**

Many students spoke about the pressures of working full-time, and trying to keep up with demanding professional positions while trying to find time for their studies. Here are some of their comments: “The PhD falls by the wayside when I become busy with my day job.” And: “I am taking a full-time course load, and it is difficult balancing full-time studies with a full-time job, and a long commute of two hours from my home to the graduate school.”
“Time is always an issue. It always seems that major assignments coincide with report card season, parent-teacher meetings and exam time.”

Trying to find time for assignments was a frequently-voiced problem: “Some of the courses have a heavier reading requirement than others, and it is sometimes a challenge to keep up.” “There’s just not enough time to complete course work to the standard needed.” “Getting through the readings, four to six a week, is the most challenging task for a part-time student with a full-time job that already demands 24/7 dedication from me.” “Trying to write academic papers, do the readings and hold down a full-time job at the same time is very difficult.”

Students often talked about stress experienced during the duration of their graduate programs. They tended to identify strongly with their academic responsibilities, on staying focused, sticking to their tasks and completing them one after another to get through their programs: “You have to stay with it; if you leave your work to do something else for too long it can become stale, your enthusiasm can wane, and you might not be able to finish.” Students described spent long hours engaged in academic work, often at the expense of some of the other areas of their lives. Time spent in activities that were not directly related to their graduate work was particularly guilt provoking. Finding a balance in their lives was very challenging to the graduate students in my study: “Your [academic] work becomes your identity; it is important to negotiate between your professional and personal selves.” And, “balancing the workload with work; there will be personal interruptions over the years that stop the momentum.” Another student found that being less compulsive, and reaching out to others for support to be crucially important to helping her get through.
I have found my graduate school and department, my professors and other students to be very supportive. The social environment is very important, checking in with others. It depends on what kind of person you are, what fits for you. There is a discernment process, so it is important to have lots of flexibility, to live in the moment, allow it to happen, although the people who come here are big analyzers. It is important to celebrate milestones with fellow students, be involved in support networks.

**Professionals'/Students'/Mothers’ Special Challenges**

Women students who were mothers and working full- or part-time spoke of the pressures of balancing job demands with graduate school demands and child-rearing demands. It’s a tall order, and a recipe for stress, trying to be a dedicated worker, a diligent student, and a devoted mother. When it came to setting priorities, these women were very clear: the children came first, as this mother illustrates: “My child was having a lot of problems at school. I had to drop everything and go to the school to act as an advocate for my child and try to solve those problems, which took precedence over everything else in my impossibly busy life.” Mothers were juggling their own paper deadlines with their children’s school project deadlines, illnesses, car pools, shopping, cooking, sometimes without the help of a spouse: “My son came first; I had to postpone my studies halfway through because I could only manage working, needing to bring in an income as a single mom, and caring for him. As a result, my doctorate has taken ten years.”

My interview with Beth, who was a doctoral student working full-time in her demanding profession, a wife and a mother of two small children, reveals many of the problems facing women in her position. Here is her story:

I am a flex-time student in the fifth year of my program. I work full-time, do my doctoral work part-time. My comprehensive examinations and proposal are done. I switched from a private professional practice which required too many hours of my day to a government job. It's a full-time job but I can work from home sometimes, and my hours are about 9 to 5, though I am still connected by phone in the evening and on the weekends.
My life is very compartmentalized. There are so many components to my day, it’s not just when I have time to do my academic work but when I have a chance to think about it. My thesis work is not foremost on my mind. I suffer from mommy guilt as a working mom. I'm sensitive to the time I set aside for myself. I feel like I'm shortchanging my kids’ time. Some Saturdays my kids are at their grandparents for half a day so I have some time for myself.

It's a juggling act, balancing priorities, I need husband time too. There are too many competing priorities. I have two lists, my key priorities which include my kids, my husband, my work, my thesis work. Then there’s the other list, the stuff that never gets done.

I don't want to short change my other key priorities. Sometimes I take my kids out of daycare to spend some time with them. I have to be so efficient in getting all the work done. I don't have time to sit and reflect.

I suffer from both professional guilt and mommy guilt. My kids asked me, why don't you pick us up after school like other parents do? Instead they go to daycare after school. They ask more challenging questions when they get older. You want to be there for the fun things, to help with their homework, to have dinner with them. I've learned to deal with it. You do what you can. There is only one of me. The support has to be there, people who keep you together, people who help you keep going, that's what working moms need.

Women who have children to care for are under tremendous stress and time constraints, which compromises the time and effort that they can put forth for their graduate work.

I remember the stresses in my own life when I was working on my master’s degree. I was teaching secondary school English and Visual Art full-time while completing my master’s program part-time over a four-year period. At the same time, I was running a household as a single mother with two young teenagers at home. I had to balance getting my work done with being available to them. This is the routine that evolved: In the evenings, after dinner, my girls worked on their homework in their rooms while I worked at the desk in my bedroom, either marking my students’ assignments or working on my graduate course work and later, my thesis work. I always left my door open; if one of them came to me for help, or even just to
talk, I would put my work aside and give that child my full unhurried attention for whatever
time was needed, then I would return to my own work. I felt I had no other choice; looking
after my girls’ needs came first. There were times that I got very little sleep before going to
teach the next day, which made it very difficult for me to do my best work as a teacher;
sometimes my patience was compromised, or my ability to perform well. My thesis-writing
phase was particularly challenging, by necessity completing it in bits and pieces. I had neat
piles of papers lined up on the floor along the walls in my bedroom: my data, my
methodology, my literature, with labels on the top of each pile, and I sat on the floor trying to
make sense of it all. Somehow, I managed to get it done.

When my daughters saw my graduate course papers that I had gotten back with A
grades, they were proud of me, and increasingly sought my help with their school
assignments. I guess something clicked, because their study habits and grades improved
during that time. I believe we forged bonds as a family that values education, hard work, and
sharing ideas with others. They all attended my graduation, and went on to advanced degrees
themselves. Participants/mothers also spoke of the importance of the example they were
setting for their children, and of their children’s pride, especially on their parent’s graduation.

Other women that I spoke to had babies during their graduate programs, taking
maternity leave to care for their infants while trying to continue with their studies to the extent
that they could manage: “I finished my thesis proposal before the baby came, but now I find I
can’t do much else but look after the baby. I don’t know when I’ll be able to get back to it, but
it will happen.” For students with babies and young children, it can be reassuring to have
contact with other students who have been in the same situation and found ways to manage
their studies and look after their children.
A woman presenter at a workshop on grant applications who was visibly pregnant was very receptive to sharing her story with me after the workshop. She had left her job as a high profile, accomplished, published professional to return to university as a doctoral student in education, with plans for a career change. Along with her innovative, dynamic application to the doctoral program she had also applied for a research grant, and was successful in both endeavours. Her plan was to complete the two courses she was taking that term, have her baby, take one term off, and then return to her studies. Her husband would rearrange his work schedule to help care for the baby, and her mother would be a backup. She had acquired many work and life skills in her professional work that she was now applying to enable all these life-altering changes. She had a firm handle on her short- and long-term goals and how to put them in place, piece by piece, without sacrificing having a child, which many women in the past had done in order to achieve their professional or academic ambitions. Many young women today are not willing to forgo children in order to pursue graduate studies or a career. Another graduate student who also had a child in the middle of her studies believed in exercising all her options: “You can have a child and still get your graduate degree and have a professional position. It takes a lot of organization and good resources, but you can do it.” Of course, putting a child into the mix leads to unforeseen challenges, based on my own experiences and those of other mothers in my study.

Working, studying mothers have to be ‘superwomen’ in order to successfully manage this triple workload. They have to be well-organized, good planners, stringent time managers, effective at prioritizing and delegating, and able to keep track of and carry out all the necessary tasks in each area of their lives. These expectations were imposed on me and on other mothers in my situation by our workplaces, our children’s schools, and our graduate

74 See Alison Griffith’s and Dorothy Smith’s book (2005), *Mothering for schooling.*
programs. The need to pay attention all the time to all my roles led to a lot of stress and self-doubt when I failed to meet those impossible expectations. There were times when I was overwhelmed and at the same time disappointed in myself for not being able to manage better. Similar sentiments were related to me by the mothers who told me their stories. In addition to all this, the women mentioned that they needed to be covered for their children’s scheduled and unscheduled activities, putting in place regular and alternative resources for childcare. Their cell phones were always easily accessible and turned on, so they could quickly respond to any emergency involving their children.

The graduate school did make some accommodations for student mothers. There was subsidized childcare on the premises of the school for children of 2 ½ years and up which was a great help to mothers of toddlers too young for school, and can help reduce time to completion for student mothers (Nerad & Cerny, 1999, p. 5), but there were a limited number of spaces; one of the participants had waited months for a space; when a space finally became available, she was not happy with the childcare that was provided to her 3 year-old son, so she hired a babysitter part-time instead. She also had an infant, and there were no provisions for the baby. My university also has a Family Care Office, which offers assistance to all student parents. Special funding and grants are available to help relieve the financial burden. In addition, supervisors were often understanding and accommodating, but the student mothers said that the university did not offer enough support and that it wasn’t baby-friendly. The needs of these students warrant special committees where they can have a voice in improving resources and accommodations available to them (Nerad & Cerny, 1999, p. 5).

Graduate student mothers, and especially graduate student working mothers, take longer to complete their programs (Nerad & Cerny, 1999, p. 3); many women spoke of eight to ten year times to completion, sometimes with leaves of absence for childbearing. Some
were lapsed, not officially enrolled, but still attending academic events or study groups, trying to keep a foot in the door of their academic institutions, and holding on to their aspirations of completing their theses sometime in the future, like Cynthia, who was mentioned earlier in this chapter:

I’ve been working on my EdD for ten years, part-time. I took two years off, had two extensions. Then I thought, why am I paying? I’m lapsed now, but more connected. I found a route back in, I’m in a good spot. I collected my data in 2007, had a baby and took off during 2008 and 2009, but did some work. Now, I’m making more time for my thesis work, and am collating my data. Presenting here today [at a study group meeting] is a chance to articulate my work, share it with others.

The University has a policy on child care,\textsuperscript{75} which states: “The provision of excellent child care programs on the University's campuses will create work, study, teaching and research environments in which all University members can fulfill their potential.” The policy is carried out by a child care advisory committee; the thirteen-member committee only has one student member, from the governing council, who would not necessarily be aware of all the needs of student mothers.

\textbf{Disjunctures between Working Professionals/Students and Their Expectations of Their Programs}

Despite all the stresses of keeping up fully with their jobs and having to compromise the amount of time spent on academic work as well as with family and friends, these busy professionals were committed to completing their degrees through part-time study, their only possible path to coveted master’s and doctoral degrees. Those students who had children had additional challenges and stresses, especially single parents; there were several single mothers in my study.

\textsuperscript{75}Downloaded from \url{http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppjun262003i.pdf} on July 6, 2013.
Because these part-time students had limited time and resources, they required special accommodations, such as those mentioned above, to engage in their program work and receive supervision as well as participate in important activities beyond their program work such as workshops, study groups, and conferences. My research indicates that these professionals who worked to the high criteria demanded by their professions’ standards of practice expected high standards in the delivery of their doctoral programs in return for their high tuition costs, and in keeping with the excellent reputation of their university and graduate school. They also wanted to get through their programs as quickly as possible and resented delays that were not of their making. When their expectations were not met, some became frustrated and anxious, without knowing where to turn for help, and feeling that their grievances wouldn’t be addressed, like this student: “What can I do about the problems I’m having with my program? Who can I complain to, my supervisor? I think she’s fed up with me, making demands on her time outside her regular hours.” Some students told me they felt guilty even complaining, as they felt privileged to be in their programs and to have the opportunity to acquire a PhD while working, like this student: “I’m so lucky to be able to do a part-time doctorate while continuing to work in my profession. I don’t feel I have the right to complain about anything.” Their professors and supervisors were stressed also, and didn’t always offer the solutions the students were seeking.

Part-time master’s and flexible-time PhD programs provided more accessibility for working professionals, as did online graduate courses, but the graduate education departments in my study were not yet truly equitable and accessible to them. Departments were slowly making changes, but many students were frustrated that their smooth passage through their programs had been impeded and their time to completion delayed because these provisions were not in place when they needed them.
Next, I will discuss the transition from professional writing into academic writing and text production that was difficult terrain for the professionals in my study.

**Professional and Academic Writing and Text Production**

Professionals who return to the academy for graduate degrees may be seen as less academic, because of their focus on practice, but their research and contributions through their thesis work can have great impact on improving and advancing their professions. Making the shift from writing in their professions to writing in the academy is a challenge they need to meet and master to get through their programs and complete their degrees.

These professionals brought specialized skills, background knowledges and competences in different types of text production. Their professional writing empowered them. They utilized texts from their professional sites where they had a different circulation than in the academy. Although they had highly developed communication skills in the particular genres of their profession, graduate education programs required different capacity development to produce academically-recognized texts. The professionals had to negotiate new vocabularies, genres, theories and methodologies, as well as different styles of writing. For a medical practitioner, for example, the use of scientific terminology and methodology, which was the norm in her professional practice, had to be explained in simpler terms and adapted to social science methodologies in a graduate education program. Similarly, her academic language and methodologies had to be clarified to her medical colleagues when discussing her graduate education process with them. After a discussion about this challenging task, Lynne, one of the participants who was a professional at a medical research centre, came up with her own solution: “My personal innovation is a toolkit for translating social science language to medical language, taking it from one setting to another.” Grace was another
participant in the health care sciences whose difficulties with this dilemma are explicated in chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, in the section on Conference Papers.

The professionals/students in my study struggled in the academy to breach the gap between practice and theory. Experts in their own sites, where their writing indexed to professional contexts, they were challenged to make sense in an academic context where graduate students were required to become conversant in the literature related to their studies and trained in particular theoretical and methodological approaches to inquiry in their graduate programs, so they could frame their research and carry it out, analyze it and develop their theses, which would contribute substantively to new knowledge production. That transformation, closing the gap, was a crucial task in their graduate education programs.

Professionals may have difficulty translating what they know from a perspective local to a professional institution or setting into a dissertation. As the professionals expended considerable time and effort engaged in the work required to complete the written components of their graduate programs, they engaged with and incorporated the texts and genres of recognized academic scholars in their fields. In this process, their writing skills become more proficient and convincing, so they were better equipped to create documents and texts to effect changes in practice in their fields in order to address the problematics they depicted in their theses.

**Relations Between the University and Professional Practice Sites**

Today, graduate schools and programs are increasingly linked with practice sites and practice organizations. This connection between research and scholarly activity and practice sites has its own ontology. The connection is not simply instantaneous transfer of information and ideas, but rather the result of practitioners, occupying multiple positions and being active
in multiple sites. It is their embodied reading-writing activities and their products of those activities that mediate, circulate and constitute knowing as doing, and doing as knowing.

Anna, the college-based nursing professor mentioned previously in this chapter, wanted to check if the education provided in her program was preparing new nurses for the reality of work in hospitals. She entered PhD studies to address this problematic, taking an educational leave, and interviewed graduates of this type of program in their first year of work. Here she is talking about her research:

As new nurses begin work in hospitals, they attempt to activate the professional discourses they acquired during their education. However, the institutional responses and power relations within the hospitals introduce a different set of expectations, producing disjunctures and tensions for the nurses, as they were not able to practice nursing as they had been taught, in order to be seen as competent and professional. I show how nurses are regulated by the ruling apparatus of industrialized health care, all of which originate extra-locally, yet organize the everyday/every night work of the new nurses.

Through the process of her interviews and research, which included studying the documents and texts that governed nursing practice in hospitals, and through the writing of her dissertation, Anna produced a text that revealed that work in hospitals is regulated by documents and texts that suppress the focus promoted in the nursing education programs. Many issues arose as a result of her research that she is addressing now that she has returned to her college teaching position, including issues around the course content in the nursing program at her local college and other similar college programs, the changing role of nurses in hospitals, and questions about future directions in nursing and health care, both locally and translocally.

This process is illustrated in the following diagram.
HOW THE TEXTS PRODUCED BY A PROFESSIONAL CREATE ACTIONS THAT MOVE HER FROM HER PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE SITE TO GRADUATE SCHOOL AND BACK TO PRACTICE

1. Professional → Included in Application
2. In a Practice: Fault Line/ Becomes Problematic
3. Sees a Problem in Thesis Proposal
4. To Doctoral Thesis Question & Thesis Research
5. & Thesis Research Recom - mendations

Practitioner Returns to Practice in Same or Another Position or Site To Address the Disjuncture

1. The example is Anna, the college nursing instructor. The problem that initiated her return to the academy for doctoral studies was: “Are we preparing our nursing students in our program for the realities of working as nurses in hospitals?”
2. She included this question in her application to the PhD program.
3. The problem was viewed as a disjuncture, or fault line, in her professional practice, and was rephrased to become her thesis question.
4. It became the problematic in her thesis proposal, and informed all the questions she asked her participants, nurses who had recently graduated from similar college nursing programs and were now employed in hospitals.
5. In her thesis, using institutional ethnography, she discussed the responses to her questions and her research analyzing the documents and texts that governed nursing practices in hospitals. Her thesis included these findings and her recommendations.
6. She has now returned to her teaching practice with this new knowledge, with the goal of implementing changes at her college, and, by extension, to other colleges with similar programs.

Figure 4: How The Texts Produced By A Professional Create Actions That Move Her From Her Professional Practice Site To Graduate School And Back To Practice
Professionals Learning To Write as Academics: Some Problems/Disjunctures

One of the problems that the professionals encountered in their graduate programs in education was the difficulty of making the transition into the writing style that is required for an academic conference paper. A student who was struggling to write her first conference paper since entering her graduate education program told me, “I know how to write a paper for a conference in my profession, the language to use, the references, the style, but I don’t know how to write an academic paper that is suitable for a conference in education or sociology.” This represents a disjuncture for the graduate student. Course papers may not present the same difficulties, since these professional/academic students usually begin writing papers for their courses using material that they can relate to that they find in the course materials, using language they learn from the course readings and discussions. However, presenting a paper at an academic conference presents greater challenges; students worry about their presentations, they are not sure if they can fit into this different setting. In a conference session, the presentations and papers of professionals in or from graduate education programs may cover a wide range of topics. How can these students all engage and interest the same audience? C. Wright Mills (1959) addressed these same concerns: “The skill of writing is to get the reader’s circle of meaning to coincide exactly with yours, to write in such a way that both of you stand in the same circle of controlled meaning” (p. 14).

The professional may incorporate some of her professional language in her academic writing, but she is required to make her presentation clear to those outside her profession in the academic setting. Using a theoretical perspective and particular methodology were additional requirements that were challenging to these professional/graduate students when writing academic papers and texts; a lot of effortful work in small increments was required to
accomplish this task, while at the same time using language that was comprehensible to others outside their academic discipline.

In an article on writing sociology, Dorothy Smith (2008) addressed this problem:

Sociology must have a specialized, even technical, language. At the same time, sociologists can and should find ways of writing that are responsive both to its subject-matter and to those outside the discipline who may want to be informed by what sociologists learn … True, the research may be technical and at the research stage may not be readily translatable to others, but what has been learned can be made readily accessible to non-sociologists. (pp. 417 & 421)

Grace, one of the participants in the study, spoke about her work:

I’ve been a [health care professional] since the 1980s when I was registered. As an educator of future [health care professionals] in the clinical component of their training, or as an instructor in one of the accredited programs, I have been involved in the training and education of [health care professionals] for nearly twenty years.

Grace learned the language of her profession in her own training and continued to acquire new up-to-date knowledge through taking courses and upgrading. As an instructor of health care students, she used that language in her course material and in discussions with her students, thus passing that knowledge on to them.

She also employed that specialized language when writing and presenting conference papers to others in her profession, and writing journal articles for her professional group. In the papers Grace wrote in her graduate education program, she continued to use the language of her profession when writing about her professional work, but by necessity, simplified and explained it for this different audience. In addition, she incorporated the language of the readings from each course she took in writing course papers.

Grace wanted to use institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry for her research, but wasn’t sure how to put this to practice in her writing. Grace had an opportunity to present her work to an audience of academics and graduate students in a session at a sociology conference. This was a big challenge to her, but through her tenacity and perseverance, and
help from other students, she incorporated the IE method of inquiry into her writing for the first time. Grace’s experience is described in chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, in the section, Developing a Conference Session, Presenting it, and Its Aftereffects for a Presenter.

My research supports opening up spaces, events, and activities that provide forums for students to work their ideas into papers and present them to receptive, interactive audiences, as well as receiving feedback and suggestions from knowledgeable discussants in conference sessions. These presentations can turn conundrums into solutions through piecemeal work that helps students complete their theses, as will be explicated in the following three chapters.

Conclusion

The professionals in my study had different reasons for engaging in graduate education studies; I divided them into four groups: 1) students who wanted to explore their professions, to add to knowledge about and recognition of their professions; 2) students who wished to research and address specific problems or disjunctures they had encountered in their professional practices; 3) those who wished to study the transition experiences of immigrants to Canada; and 4) students who desired to explore a community problem in order to contribute to research in that area.

The professionals/students shared concerns related to completing their program in a timely fashion, concerns about availability of courses on campus and online, and of availability of workshops and meetings with their supervisors to fit into their busy timetables. They were also challenged with thesis writing. Student mothers had particular challenges, and wanted more help from their schools. A major problem for some of the participants was the transition from writing as professionals to writing as academics.
Further details about the professionals/students involvements in activities that assisted the production of the written work that was required for the completion of their programs is found in chapter 5, Autoethnography, my own story; chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, where I discuss the requisite program work; chapter 8, Extended Work of Graduate Students, where I discuss the work that is an extension of their required work, such as conference papers; and chapter 9, Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, where I discuss the activities students engaged in to enhance their required and extended work.
CHAPTER 7

REQUIRED WORK OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

“You need energy to see it through to fruition. Doing a thesis is like entering a maze: you’re vulnerable, you have tentative thoughts, it’s hard making sense of it, but you figure out your route along the way just by doing it, step by step.” Quote from a student.

Introduction

In this section I present an overview of this chapter and the next two chapters, which cover graduate students’ work in their graduate education thesis degree programs, the requisite work and the extra work that augments it. I divide this work into three categories which I call the ‘required work’ (discussed in this chapter), ‘extended work’ (described in chapter 8), and ‘supplementary work’ of graduate students (described in chapter 9). I define and provide examples from my research and analysis for each of these categories below. The required work of graduate students is the topic of the remainder of this chapter.

Definitions and Descriptions of Required, Extended and Supplementary Work of Graduate Students

The terms I have designated for graduate students’ reading-writing activity/work for their thesis projects, which I have divided into ‘required,’ ‘extended,’ and ‘supplementary’ work, are based on my own experiences in graduate school which I explicated in my autoethnography and in my ethnographies of other graduate students in their graduate school programs and other activities, and my interviews and conversations with them, their professors and supervisors. In this process, my thesis question was always in the forefront, as I explored how the social organization of the graduate students’ and my programs were supporting our reading-writing activities and text production, always attentive to anything that was negatively affecting our work as well.
‘Required work’ is the mandatory program work, as specified in the handbooks of the graduate department, and includes all the documents and texts that graduate students must produce in order to obtain the degree they are pursuing, from applications through course work and papers, comprehensive exams, ethics protocols and thesis proposals, perhaps also grant/scholarship applications and assistantship applications, culminating with the thesis. The knowledge production of graduate students materializes through socially organized, individually realized reading-writing work in the frame of units of program work, a circumscribed form of sequential activities from their applications until they receive their degrees. These are the units that I refer to as “required work of graduate students.”

‘Extended work’ is an extension of the required work. Extended work of graduate students conveys texts created as part of the required work and related writing into new sites beyond the graduate program, after they have been edited to align with the requirements of the new sites. Extended work includes conference papers and publications and additional activities involved in their production. In some cases it is required as part of a graduate program; at other times, it is suggested or recommended. Conference paper production and presentation are discussed in this thesis.

‘Supplementary work’ is extra, additional activities voluntarily engaged in by students to fill in the gaps or disjunctures left by their programs, and add to the social dimensions of their graduate school experiences. In the context of this thesis, supplementary work included: auditing extra courses; attending workshops; participating in study, thesis or writing groups; engaging in and attending thesis proposal presentations and mock thesis defense presentations.

Required Work: Introduction

A PhD must have traditional research skills. These skills include in-depth knowledge of one field; knowing how to develop conceptual frameworks and research design; knowing of and applying appropriate research methods, writing and publishing one’s
findings; critical thinking; analysing and synthesising skills, as well as learning to conduct research with integrity in an ethical manner. (Nerad, 2012, p. 205)

The question I ask in this section is, how do graduate students acquire all these skills and manage the task of writing-up the problematic they are planning to research, carry out their research, and write their theses? This question is often asked without any sociological perspective on the dynamics of graduate program practices. The question may take the form of asking: what steps should graduate students take to write their theses? Or: what can be done at the program level to help students write their theses? What is missing in these approaches is a clear account of students’ lived experiences of developing their theses. IE provides a research approach to explore the thesis journey ontologically, in the reality of graduate students’ day-to-day experiences, rather than conceptually.

Using IE as a method of inquiry and the standpoint of graduate students to study the social organization of professionals/graduate students’ reading-writing activities and text production has led me to view a thesis as a prolonged multiple texts production process that involves specific forms of social relations and substantive work of both PhD students and others such as professors, supervisors, thesis committee members, and at times, peers, mentors, and conference session and workshop organizers. As well, the texts that eventually comprise the theses are given forms that are socially recognizable and accountable.

Through the dialogical discovery process (graduate students’ standpoint in action) that IE provides, I mapped out the locations and events within which graduate students articulate, research and write about the problematics they are developing. In writing their required texts, students must adhere to the specific requirements and expectations of their graduate programs and universities, which are communicated in the handbooks and policy documents. Students also articulate their texts within the specific genres in which they are working, and to larger
academic communities in the course of their developing research work and its communication. Some of the difficulties graduate students experience in their thesis production process are the result of coordination and cooperation issues required by this multi-phase process of thesis production. The following figure illustrates the stages of a doctoral education program, as explicated in a handbook, and the documents and texts that must be completed to move to the next stage.

**PROGRESS BY A GRADUATE STUDENT THROUGH THE STAGES OF A DOCTORAL PROGRAM BY COMPLETING THE REQUIRED DOCUMENTS FOR EACH STAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXTS I</th>
<th>TEXTS II</th>
<th>TEXTS III</th>
<th>TEXT IV</th>
<th>TEXT V</th>
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Applications for grants, research assistantships, teaching assistantships, etc. may also be required

ABD Status (all but dissertation)

Each arrow represents an action of movement to the next stage of the doctoral program activated by the completion of the required text(s) by the graduate student, which initiates an action of a faculty member or a staff member to complete a form to allow the student to proceed to the next step, as set out in the handbooks and policy documents of the department, graduate school, and university. This example is the requirements for a doctoral program in the Higher Education Group of the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at OISE/UT in 2012-2013. Other programs may have different requirements.

*Figure 6:* Progress by a graduate student through the stages of a graduate program by completing the required documents for each stage

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The Thesis as a Prolonged Multiple Text Production Process

The thesis is a prolonged multiple text production process, as enrolled students must produce a sequence of required texts (referred to as the “check list”) to complete their mandatory program work, as illustrated in the preceding figure.

I. The first texts are the application to the program, where students must prove that they have the required prerequisites, have an area of interest that fits in with their chosen department’s mandate and with the interests of one or more prospective supervisors, and that they have the capacity to generate original research designs and theses.

There are other texts/applications that are not part of the required program work, but that may be mandatory as a stipulation for funding, including grant/scholarship proposals, applications for assistantships, and loans applications that must be completed at the time of the applications to the programs.77

II. Once institutionally evaluated, admitted and enrolled, students begin the process of choosing their courses, as delineated by their handbooks78 or in consultation with their advisors; they then complete the required course work and write course papers to fulfill the course requirements.

III. Next are the comprehensive requirements/examinations, which can take different forms in different programs.

IV. Thesis proposals follow the comprehensives.

V. Then the ethical review protocols must be completed for students conducting research on human subjects. Once these are completed, students achieve candidacy, or ABD status (All But Dissertation).

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77 These applications are usually submitted at the same time as the application to the program, but they may be submitted later, depending on the protocol.
78 This list is adapted from the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education Student Handbook 2012-2013, p. 10, Graduate Life Cycle. Other programs may have different requirements.
VI. Next students embark on their research, collecting data and analyzing it. Writing is an integral part of this process of discovery (Richardson, 1994; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

VII. The next step is transforming their results into the chapters of their theses, developing ideas through the process of writing, editing, and rewriting while adhering to the protocols of their departments and supervisors, and fulfilling the thesis approval and defense requirements that students must complete to qualify for their degrees.

All of the above required work is delineated in the handbooks of the specific departments of the university. These handbooks are texts that act as institutional coordinators between the student and the ruling relations of the university and students must align their required reading-writing work with them, seeking clarification if necessary. Peer groups at different stages of their programs can provide guidance to each other in this regard.

Throughout this progression, students are building their reading-writing capacities and broadening their ranges of knowledge, while also augmenting their expertise in their areas of interest, growing their lists of books and articles for their literature reviews, as well as expanding their networks of fellow students and scholars. At the same time, students are progressively focusing in on their topics, from their broad areas of interest at the beginning of their programs, gradually narrowing their topics, as they begin their research and write their theses, the culmination of all their efforts, their unique contributions to knowledge.

In the next section I discuss some of the components of the required work of graduate students in graduate education programs, in which I continue to use the example of my program, the Higher Education Program of the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education.

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79 In the examples given here, it is the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education Student Handbook 2012-2013 of OISE/UT, www.oise.utoronto.ca/lhae. In the past there was a separate handbook for the School of Graduate Studies of the University of Toronto, but their website is now the source of information, www.utoronto.ca/sgs. Requirements may be different in different departments, and different universities.
Education of OISE/UT. I have divided this section into three parts, beginning with A) course work and course papers, then B) thesis proposal development, and C) thesis development.

A) Course Work and Course Papers

Introduction.

I begin this section with my experience of choosing to enroll in a course, engaging in the course components, and writing the final paper for that course.

I wanted to know more about Foucault and his concepts, as he is one of the scholars whose work is important for writing and discourse studies, in order to decide if I would incorporate Foucault in my thesis work. After reading a number of books by Foucault, as well as books about his work, I was struggling to grasp the concepts, so I enrolled in a course on Foucault, “Foucault and Research in Education: Discourse, Power and the Subject.” In the Foucault course, I was a reader of course readings, and a writer of responses on them. I attended weekly class meetings, spoke and listened to other students and the professor, and took notes. I wrote a proposal for my final paper, and received comments on it from the professor. Next, I wrote the final paper, which was a major undertaking for me, described below. A component of the course was a group presentation. My presentation with two other students required several meetings of the three of us, lots of discussion, and a lot of reading, rereading, note taking, and sense-making of the text we were to present, on “governmentality.” When the course ended, I understood the concept of governmentality and its applications, and other aspects of Foucault’s work. I was now a trained reader of Foucault. I was also a reader/writer, and a reader/writer/speaker about Foucault, beyond what I could glean from reading books on my own.
Autoethnography of writing a final paper for a course.

While working on my final paper, titled “Exploring the specific character of the activities of graduate students” for the course “Foucault and Research in Education: Discourse, Power and the Subject,” I wrote the following notes, which I included in the beginning of the paper. I have maintained the present tense in order to bring the reader into my process at the time. I was trying to capture my struggle to create a paper that would satisfy the requirements for the final paper as delineated in the course syllabus, incorporating the readings and the concepts that had been discussed in class, as well as the suggestions that the course instructor had written on my outline for the paper that I had submitted to her. At the same time, I wanted to use the paper to develop ideas on graduate students’ work that would be productive toward my thesis project. I was actively engaged in the very process that was the subject of my paper. Here is what I wrote:

Notes on writing a course paper.

In working on my final intense performance, the course paper, I alienate myself from everything else; I am immersed in reading, writing, thinking, rethinking, rewriting many times. I write the equivalent of about three papers, abandoning whole chunks of effort, beginning again. My outline of the final paper is returned to me with many comments, which leads me to a more penetrating investigation of the program-specific activities of graduate students. I confine myself to work within the immediate discursive environment of graduate students. Discovering the work a graduate student does becomes even more difficult. A focus on the pain, toil, agony, sleepless nights, being overwhelmed by certain texts, does not help to capture the work character of graduate program activities. I give myself to certain lengthy, dense readings, without being able to incorporate anything from that text in my writing. Instead, I take on another task, which is related, which prepares me better for my task of writing the FINAL, final paper: I listen to on-line lectures by Foucault, hoping to find another entry to help solve my puzzle. I begin rereading my course readings, going deeper, mapping out concepts, vocabulary, finding connections, finding discontinuities, wondering what I need to do to pull this off. But I don’t have an answer. Something is not working. I am not capturing the activities of a graduate student. I return to the course readings again, and reread passages from articles, books. I come across an article in a future class reading, the first chapter of the book Dangerous Encounters: Genealogy and Ethnography, titled “The Top of Their Class? On the Subject of ‘Education’ Doctorates” (Middleton, 2003). I immediately feel that I have found
something, something that my own searches resonate with, something that I can work with. Maybe I can pull this off after all …

When the final paper was returned to me, the first comment that my course instructor wrote on the back of the paper was: “I like the way that you open this paper, how you tell the story of the way you came to rethink your task.” All the little steps, and all the little agonies that students go through in order to produce a paper are not usually shared with the course instructor, or with anyone else. Writing a paper can be difficult; it can be a process that is filled with self-doubt and frustration. It is not an easy task to produce a piece of academic writing that will hold up to the standards that are expected at the graduate school level. As my example illustrates, student’s course papers are their negotiated response to the readings, the topic area of the course, and perhaps to suggested topics for the papers from the professor, through the lens of the student’s own background and study area/interests, within the social relations of the class. When students present their proposed topics for their papers during a class meeting, or to the professor, the suggestions about other readings, other angles, and variations of approach help shape and refine the work; the student responds to this feedback when writing the paper. In fact, during each session of the course, each student’s reading-writing work is motivated and shaped by the joint contributions of others. In this way, the collected course papers will form a cohesive whole, a body of responses of a particular class to the course syllabus.

**Preliminary research of a course: background.**

I had taken a course in 2004 on anti-racism and when the same course was offered again in July and August of 2005 with the same instructor, I approached her and asked if I could do ethnographic research in the class. I thought it would be a good start for my research, to examine the process of the running of a course, since I had just completed the required
course work for my own program I also thought that I would be more aware of the dynamics of the interactions between the course instructor, the students and the syllabus since I was already familiar with the contents of the course and with the instructor’s style of teaching. I was very pleased when she agreed, and I applied for ethical approval for this preliminary study. Here is my Ethics Review Protocol from my application:

**Basic Research Question (for this preliminary study):**
How does a graduate course organization enable graduate students to produce institutionally recognizable knowledge-work?

**Research Objective:**
My focus in this preliminary research is on graduate students’ work, the actual process – the temporal, spatial and social organization of course activities – making it visible within the unit of a graduate course. I want to identify challenges in realizing a course and the way students respond to a course, and search for connections between the course work and the students’ program work.

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this preliminary research is to observe how students enrolled in a graduate course go about producing the written work upon which they obtain credits, and also contribute to academic discourses. The work of graduate students, for the most part, takes the form of documents and texts. In doing this work, graduate students expend long hours of reading and writing activity that occur concurrently, which I refer to as reading/writing-activity, drawing on the work of Dorothy Smith. I want to capture graduate students’ program activities, in this case, course activities, through this notion of reading/writing-activity, with an emphasis on its work aspect.

**Objectives:**
In this preliminary study, I hope to collect data that will reveal the actual work that graduate students do in producing their article and book reviews, presentations, outlines of their final papers, and the final papers themselves, to reveal the nature of this work. I want to make the work aspect of their program activities visible, and thereby contribute to the process of its valorization and adequate recognition.

**Research Methodology:**
This research is a preliminary study in my doctoral dissertation research that will later be expanded to a fuller study of graduate student program work.

I will be a participant observer in the class. I was enrolled in and completed this course last summer with the same instructor, therefore I am familiar with the course material and the way the course is run.
For my study, I will do ethnography of classroom activities, for example, the
distribution of discursive tasks, identification of theoretical and empirical readings,
student presentations and discussions, in an effort to trace and identify the forms of
reading/writing-activity engaged in by students.

My focus is strictly limited to activities and performances that display forms of
discourse. My purpose is not evaluative, but focuses on identifying and capturing
actual traces of discourse through the methods of participant observation and
ethnography.

My application required a lot of work, but I remained within the recommended format
for an expedited review, and it was approved quickly, just before the class began.

**Description of the class.**

There were eight students in the class. The students were all professionals and included
a public health nurse, two college administrators, two college instructors, a medical
professional, and two teachers.

It was fascinating to be there as an observer/researcher, and an occasional participant
in class discussions, rather than as an enrolled student or auditor, although my original intent
was to not take part in discussions. The professor asked for my comments from time to time,
so it happened naturally that I would sometimes add to the conversation. The students were
very accepting of my role as a researcher into graduate student writing, and several of them
talked to me about their writing problems after the classes. I was learning about some of the
difficulties graduate students struggle with, beyond my own experiences. Several of the
students took part in a study group where I was also a member after the ending of the course,
and became ongoing participants in my study.

I asked to do an interview with the course instructor as part of my research and she
agreed. The interview and my comments provide a lot of information on the dynamics of the
running of the course. A segment of my ethnographic research of the course follows the
interview. The interview took place the day after the last class. I had prepared some questions,
but I was trying to employ IE traditions for interviews, allowing the interview to flow like a conversation. This was my first interview, and my first piece of research; reading it now, my style seems somewhat stiff. My interview style improved with more experience, and I allowed the interviewees more leeway to tell their stories in later interviews. I have included the parts of the interview that are most relevant to the themes of my thesis and have grouped the sections by theme.

**Interview with the professor.**

**Topic: Course outline/syllabus.**

Interviewer: What were your priorities in setting up this course and the readings?

Instructor: In a course outline, you can only do so much. The way I've gone about preparing a course outline is thinking about what I know, what I think is important, and what achieves the goal I have set for myself in this particular course. … All you can do is help the students to develop a particular outlook, so they will learn to look for things themselves.

The instructor is describing the process of designing a course to explore new issues and themes that the students may not have encountered before, and how she chose the readings not only to fit with the theme of the course, but also to fire up the students’ interest in further exploration of that author’s body of work.

Interviewer: Your own writing, did it influence your course design, and the particular readings that you chose?

Instructor: My own journey, of my own intellectual development, has influenced the way I put together the course outline. … Mainly what I'm looking for is whether they understood my arguments.

This dialogue reveals the symbiosis between the instructor’s own research and writing and her course design. As she discovers new authors to cite in her own papers and publications, she is also viewing them with an eye to whether they would fit into any of the
courses that she teaches. Also, by including her own writing in the readings of a course, she is providing the students with clarification of her standpoint and scholarship in her field.

**Topic: Reading-Writing activity.**

**Interviewer:** Where do you put the weight, what issues do you prioritize in the running of the course in order to achieve your objectives?

**Instructor:** Making sure they are familiar with the frameworks, the new frameworks, that is my first priority. … I want them to really understand it and look at it critically, see how it works and whether it works, and so on.

I assigned readings to the students for each class and I insisted that they … write a … critique. By doing that you learn to reflect on it and make the knowledge your own. My whole idea is that they … are familiar with the issues that we will be discussing in class. So … when they write their papers, they will be able to integrate the ideas that they have become familiar with through the course of the readings.

Another thing that I expect from these exercises is that they learn to integrate the readings with the course objectives and also reflect on them in relation to what they already know, which means that they are continuously growing intellectually. I see it happening in the class actually.

The instructor is socializing, enculturating the students into the particular genre of reading/writing that is the focus of the course through the readings and the students’ written summaries of them. Through this process, the students can integrate these concepts into their discourse when speaking about the readings in class, and when writing their final papers.

**Topic: Learning a new discourse.**

**Interviewer:** The students are introduced into a new genre, a discourse, in this course, a new way of speaking of which you are an exemplary user. How do you transfer this competence to the students?

**Instructor:** By sort of encouraging them to participate in discussions and directing them in a particular path and also making sure they don't veer away from that path, and so on. You keep trying, and you hope it works.

When I look at the way they are writing the critique of the readings, I could tell. You can just look at the first ones, to the latest ones, the way they are writing has changed.
As I said earlier, you cannot really impart a whole huge body of knowledge in any course. All you can do is help the students to learn how to critically think, how to critically evaluate, how to read properly, how to retain the major arguments, that is the idea.

The instructor is commenting on the gradual process of learning a new discourse, a new framework, as evidenced in the changes evident in their writing as the course progresses. By the time the students write their final papers, hopefully they will be fluent writers in that discourse.

**Topic: Class discussions.**

Interviewer: You said that you were exhausted after every class. What do you think it was that made you so tired?

Instructor: Because I become very intense. That’s probably what it is. I’m listening to everything people are saying and how they are saying it, trying to understand why they’re saying what they are saying. Each student’s comments, I really am trying to understand where they are coming from. That takes a lot out of you, in terms of involvement. The day of class, I usually work all day, preparing for the class. Doing some extra reading, thinking about what are some of the things I should be saying in this particular class.

Interviewer: Do you do any writing as well, in preparation?

Instructor: I make some rough notes. I don’t write in detail. I like to speak rather than read. I make a few notes, and also questions. I go through each report [that students have written on that day’s readings] for each class, and some of them pose questions. I wanted to make sure I dealt with all the questions.

Interviewer: How do you keep a balance between how much the students are talking and how much you are talking?

Instructor: The way I've done it in this particular class, is, as long as they are on track, I don't interfere too much. But, when I feel they're not on track, that's when I feel I should make an intervention, and bring them on track. And also, if there are some questions that need answering, I feel I should do that. I don't want to do too much talking, because I want them to talk, but at the same time, I don't want them to say things that aren't relevant, so sometimes I have to direct them.

The instructor is demonstrating great sensitivity towards her students. She is listening intently to the discussion, and is prepared to intervene to keep the discussions on topic.
**Topic: Final paper.**

Interviewer: Regarding the final paper, you have a certain standard of expectations for the final paper. How do you convey this to the students?

Instructor: I have already conveyed that it has to be relevant to the course content and that it should reflect scholarship and should refer to the articles and so on. It should maintain a scholarly standard, they know that and also they know that it has to be relevant for antiracism and I repeated that whenever they made a presentation about their proposals. I made comments about it, saying why don't you bring in ideas on racism, and so on.

In this bit of dialogue, the value of presenting ideas to a group for feedback is illustrated, to improve the quality and content of the proposal and the final paper.

The interview reveals a lot about the style of running a course of this professor, how she guided the students into the course content and into discussions about the readings, keeping them on topic, and encouraging them to be critical. In order to provide a richer description of the course, I have also included some of my ethnography of the course meetings, below.

**Ethnography of the course meetings.**

By attending all the classes and taking ethnographic notes in them, I observed that although the students’ course work was shaped by, and was responsive to the highly situated practices of this particular course, students brought a lot of their present lives and backgrounds, difficulties, misconceptions as well as their research and scholarship to the course discussions, their presentations, and their papers.

There were lengthy discussions in the class about personal experiences of the students or questions they had around racism, as well as concerns about world issues and disputes revolving around racism. Often they were sparked by the readings. The instructor provided commentary during the discussions that clarified situations and provided an overview from her
perspective as an anti-racism scholar. One particular class stands out. A particular reading led to an important discussion on critical scholarship.

During a class discussion of an article by Charles Taylor entitled, “The Politics of Recognition,” the instructor mentioned that Taylor was being “condescending, because people of colour want justice, respect, equality of opportunity, not just recognition. Granting them recognition to keep them happy and avoid unrest in, for example, England and France, is patronizing.” One of the students said, “I’m not getting this. I resonated with this article.” It was clear that some students didn’t believe Taylor was being demeaning by saying let’s just recognize cultures, their existence, and accept the identity of different peoples. The instructor remarked, “Whites are taught their culture is superior, that they must civilize others, that others should be grateful for being in Canada.”

During my interview with her, she had commented on that exchange.

[During the class discussions], that is where you find out where the students are, whether some of them are on the same wavelength or not. That is why I keep talking about the political frameworks and if something doesn’t make sense, then you have to speak up. I notice it sometimes, for example, in the idea of the Politics of Recognition, in the article by Charles Taylor, I was a little bit surprised that some of the students thought it was a great idea. I tried to show they had a superficial understanding.

And also another thing I did, if you remember, it's kind of an improvement over asking people to assimilate, like the aboriginal issue, forcing aboriginal people to give up their culture and completely assimilate, definitely politics of recognition is better than that, one has to admit, but, that's not the ideal. We want to move beyond that also. That is why people of colour have been accused of asking for more and more and more. But it is not a question of asking for more and more and more, it is a question of where is justice and where is equality? How do we share power, how do we share privilege? That is the issue. Keeping that in mind, we have to keep looking at what to do.

Clearly the instructor is passionate about teaching about racism and how to educate students about it. Her goal is to encourage students to be critical of what they read, and not to just take it at face value, but to question, to look for hidden motives, and to advocate for change.
At that same class, after further discussion generated by the Taylor article, the instructor shared ideas on how to read critically by beginning with her personal experience on how she learned to be a critical scholar.

When I went to graduate school, I was taught how to read in a particular way, how to read critically. [To ask] “What does this mean?” “How does it fit in with what I know on this topic?” I was taught to compare it to similar articles and books. If I was in doubt, I would read it again. I was taught to write out my reactions to what I read.

We read so much, looking for keywords, phrases, ideas. That is why I asked you to write a summary of the articles you read for the course. I want you to zoom in on a skill you can develop, a litmus test, so it becomes your own, part of your repertoire.

A student interrupted with, “It doesn’t all sink in.” The instructor responded to her.

Don’t worry about the details. The main arguments, the framework are important. You can fill in the details later. Graduate students need to read so much. Fit in arguments with what you already know. Don’t just accept what is said; be critical!

This example illustrates the dynamics in the class, how engaged the students were with the course readings and the topics of each class, the openness in the classroom, the comfort level of the students to speak freely and not be afraid of being knocked down. Also, how the instructor skillfully directed the conversations in a way that taught the students to read between the lines of everything they read and make connections.

My preliminary research was very rewarding for me, as it got me into the process of researching my topic. It was a process that continued, as I observed and took notes continually after that. I later amended my ethics protocol to include my other areas of research, and submitted annual reports, and a Study Completion Report in July, 2013. Next, I turn to thesis proposals.
B) Thesis Proposal Development

Developing a thesis topic: Interview with a student beginning her thesis proposal.

I interviewed Marian just before she began her thesis proposal. We talked about many aspects of her experiences working out her ideas, which reveal the process of her development of her research topic. I have removed my questions so that her story will have an uninterrupted natural flow. I didn’t have prepared questions, and Marian was very comfortable talking to me about her work, so I just wrote notes and then transcribed them. I will include comments along the way as she tells her story. Marian covers many of the topics of my thesis, but rather than cut up the interview and put into the appropriate chapter and section, I have left it in its original form, as it very succinctly describes how a graduate student works, how the student picks up information and ideas from different sources and puts everything together, gradually working out how to tackle the research, what is the most appropriate methodology to use from the possibilities that are relevant to the topic, what is of the greatest interest to herself about the topic, what would be most valuable as a contribution to a solution to the problem being researched.

Note that I am using the word “harassment” in these descriptions as a replacement for the word that Marian used, to protect her identity. Marian told me she came to the topic of workplace harassment because several of her friends had been harassed, and she had first-hand experience of seeing how it had affected them in a very negative way. As an educator involved in organizational learning, she felt she was in a position to understand the kind of atmosphere in which her friends worked, the kind of pressures they were under, and the kind of attitudes that would be present in their workplaces. Here is the interview.

My work is on workplace harassment. I’m working on my thesis proposal. I presented to my supervisor’s study group, and my supervisor told me to narrow my focus even
more. She told me not to read any more, but to think about it. It was an interesting process, as it forced me to step back. I questioned everything. I asked, “What is important to me?” I remember that day; I sat on the porch with my clipboard and wrote it out, 1, 2, 3, 4. It set in place an unbelievable process. It led to my framework for what is important for me to get at, how I see workplace harassment and what we can do about it.

Marian enjoyed talking about her work; she sought out spaces to discuss it, and receive feedback from others. In presenting to her supervisor’s study group, she obtained valuable advice about how to proceed, from the suggestions from the students in the group and her supervisor. She became very reflective, and turned to writing to help her focus in on what were the most salient aspects of her topic, what she was most passionate about. Writing by hand is a very different process than working at the computer; similarly, drawing a sketch, a “mind map” or a diagram can help a person work out an idea, as Marian discovers below.

I presented again to my supervisor’s study group and said, “I’ll just talk and see what’s in my head.” I also recorded the session. My written work is not always clear. Writing helps me think but writing like an academic can be limiting. Speaking lets me step back. I also went to the blackboard and mapped out my ideas, and said, “That’s it!” My supervisor said, “You have the first few chapters there.”

Here we see the value of speaking out loud as a method for formulating ideas and expanding on topics. Marian is also using the blackboard to draw a diagram to help her develop her thoughts further. She is very expressive and comfortable trying different ways of working out her ideas.

There is a methodological gap; my method is IE informed, using textual analysis of Dorothy Smith, [and another method]. I am working out my theory. My framework is critical feminist. At the first level, I am figuring out how to apply it, how to measure it, in a qualitative way. I am developing a framework of how I see workplace harassment. I want to use texts.

80 A mind map is a diagram that is used to connect ideas and grow them in new directions. Starting with a word, making lines or circles for other things that are related or an offshoot of that idea. Interestingly, there is now software to create mind maps, but the original concept was a hand-drawn diagram
Many students struggle with methodology, what type to use, how to combine methodologies, how to use it to carry out their research. Marian has found two different methods that she wishes to utilize. We can see the process of her working through this difficulty here.

I see two phases to my research. First phase: how has workplace harassment been constructed as an individual phenomenon? It is psychological, rather than sociological. What are the instruments typically used to measure and understand it? What is included and excluded? Gender is excluded.

Second phase: Workplace harassment is constructed as individual phenomena. How does that influence the strategies around it? Little is written about this. The focus is intervention, not prevention. The individual victim is targeted. This led me to create a framework. … It helps to talk about it. A suggestion from my thesis group was to find an organization that’s doing it right. But that hasn’t worked. I can’t find an organization that’s doing it right.

Marian has enough information to see some of the main issues around the topic of workplace harassment, and to provide her with some areas to research further. It seems that she could develop some good interview questions from this as well, but she is having difficulty finding a suitable organization to carry out her research.

Two good friends helped me understand workplace harassment. One worked in a hospital, the other, in the academy. I knew them both before, during and after the [harassment] they experienced. The literature shows how the targets are reduced to a fraction of the woman she was. This process influences all areas of their lives, their careers, family life, everything. Stepping back, asking what important to you, how do you see the world, it’s an intertwined process. Feminist research is not detached. We have hunches, that makes you open to receiving knowledge from your participants with an open mind and heart, you truly listen. Your standpoint is a way in, a door or window into understanding.

I’m informally doing exploratory interviews. These are the most inspiring conversations I’ve ever had. There are three different groups that I could interview … I can gain a finer understanding from multiple sources. My friends’ experiences of reporting incidents … are pathetic, but some organizations are trying to do it better.

Marian is describing how she has gathered information about people who have experienced workplace harassment. Some of those people are very close to her. It is clear that
she has been very touched by their stories, and that she is passionate about the cause. That kind of passion is what drives students to tackle problems in the venue of a graduate program, and what keeps them engaged to uncover the information they are seeking, to complete their theses, and to make recommendations to help make positive changes to help rectify those problems.

Should I do interviews or focus groups? Should I do only those who experienced harassment? Some organizations do … training, but both victims and non-victims told me they found it useless. They use minimal training to cover their butts, to show they’re adhering to legislation about workplace training.

Here we see Marian’s struggle with finding the best way of getting the information she is seeking, figuring out what would be the best data collection method.

In my first preliminary interview, I told her what I planned and asked, what you think of this? This is in line with the exploratory nature of IE. I also did a textual analysis … It was a wonderful process because I saw things through IE that I didn’t see in my preliminary reading … I connected it to my framework for my study and recently submitted it to a journal. I also geared each of my course papers to an aspect of my thesis work. I reworked some of my course papers into conference papers, changing them [to fit in with the conference and session themes]. In each one I explored something I was trying to understand to add to the puzzle.

Marian is a very proactive student. She is not afraid to try new things, and to get her emerging work out there. She engages in a dialogue in her first interview, described above, and asks advice about her study, to get some feedback from someone who is experiencing the problem, thus empowering the interviewee to help find a solution. She is also willing to try a new tool, in this case, using IE methods for textual analysis. As well, Marian is willing to put her nascent ideas in writing and produce course papers and conference papers that explicate her on-going process of developing her thesis, which have also served to help her clarify her ideas and develop her writing skills while writing about her topic, as well as utilizing her chosen methodologies.
I formed a support group. We are six people who meet once a month in each other’s homes. A group has to gel, and trust each other. We share parts of our work, dilemmas, anything. The more that is shared, the more trust is built. I noticed the moment we clicked as a group. When you share your writing, you want feedback, but you’re afraid, will they treat you with respect? All of us are PhD students, and in the same department. I facilitated the first meeting. Ours is a collaborative participatory process. At the first meeting, we had a go-around where everyone said what they want from the group and what they don’t want. We had different ideas, but there were underlying similarities. Each person has the option to opt out at any time. We take turns facilitating the group. At first we met at the graduate school, but we needed a private space, so we decided to meet in each other’s homes, which contributes to the feeling of trust and safety.

Marian is part of a study group in which I also participated, and she mentioned that she is part of her supervisor’s study group, but she wanted more connection with other students and support than that group was providing, so again in her proactive mode, she formed her own group, a combination study and writing group, which is student-facilitated with the students taking turns running the meetings.

It was very difficult for me to find a suitable supervisor. It was hell trying to figure out all the rumors about different supervisors. I knew I wanted equal power relations for a start. In my first meeting with my present supervisor, I asked, what is important to you in a supervisor/student relationship? The way you work it out is important. Not “please be my supervisor,” but the choice should be my choice and your choice. I expect respect from my supervisor.

Choosing a supervisor is a very difficult process for most students. It is so important to find the right fit, of someone who can work with you, who is familiar with your methodology, has some understanding of your area of study, and is keen to form this important and long-lasting relationship with you. Again, Marian knows what she wants from the start, an equal relationship, not a hierarchical one. Many of the professionals who return for graduate degrees in education have a lot of experience in their professions, and many have had positions with a lot of autonomy and authority. At this stage of their lives, they are not willing to be in a subservient position to a supervisor. They see themselves on equal footing with their supervisors, as both are experienced and respected professionals.
I need reinforcement, validation about how to proceed with my work. During course work we have support, but when the course work is finished, we lose opportunities to discuss our work in progress. We need to create opportunities to talk about our work. The thesis is a window looking on a large scene, framing our small piece of the picture.

This is a plea I have heard from many students. They really enjoy the camaraderie they experience during course work, as well as the chance to talk about their work to others and get feedback, and the stimulation of hearing about other students’ research areas. Marian was fortunate to find the study group in which we both participated, as well as her supervisor’s group and her own support group that she started to fill this void. My research supports the value of study groups and other venues for students to get together to discuss their work, with or without a supervisor present. Marian’s metaphor of the window framing her study from a wide panorama of topics and discourses is very apt.

Our lives and the thesis process are intertwined. When you are reflecting deeply on issues of concern to you, you grow with your study and your study grows with you. How you approach your work is critical; don’t fight it, you need to be open, to “go with the flow.” When I read a key piece, I say, “Yes! This is an anchor piece for my work.”

Marian is being reflective again, and showing how passionate she is about her work. She is also addressing me, but is also addressing other students, although there is no one else present.

You have to know what to let go of. I have a box for “things to do in the future, after I finish my thesis work.” I also have an ongoing list of connections of my work to other areas which I will put at the end of my thesis. I’ve tried to remember that the thesis is just a piece of my work, it’s not the whole thing.

Letting go of a part of the research or writing is very difficult. Students must have a lot of trust in their supervisors to accept their advice about omitting something that has been worked on for some time, that the student has taken ownership of. Marian has a good idea here about putting other information and ideas in a separate box or file for future consideration, and focusing on completing her research at present.
When writing, I try to remember to bring the reader back to my work. It’s like a road trip to Niagara, we’ll take a side road and go to get wine now, then we go back on the main road. Now we take another detour to get cheese, then back to the main route to our destination. When I was writing my course papers and my proposal, if my readers didn’t get it, it’s me, I needed to do more work and say it in a different way to make it clearer.

Like many students I have encountered, Marian likes to use metaphors when discussing her thesis work.81 I like her metaphor about the road trip. It’s very sensate, you feel you’re on the trip with her; it really gets her point across. And her message about clarity in writing is a very important one.

We’re boxed in by the rules, gradually you learn how to get around them through suggestions from others, by chance, by osmosis. I was a mentor for new students this year, and said to them, you won’t find this written anywhere, but this the way it is … I would like to start a blog for students where they can ask questions like “I’m lost! What can I do about this …?” and get responses from other students who have something positive to offer in terms of solutions and advice.

Being a mentor to new graduate students is an important role for a student who is further along in their program. Explaining the ropes to new student allows mentors to pass on information that they have learned, and allows the new students to form relationships that can be helpful when they run into problems. In addition, the mentor reinforces for themselves the ideas that are shared. Marian’s suggestion of a blog for students to respond to each other’s queries is an excellent one.

It’s important to be true to yourself when you’re writing. Do what you deem necessary, but explain why very well. Through writing, you’re getting to know what you want, where you want to go, and where you’re not going. My supervisor told me, find people in your field, talk, meet, network.

Marian reinforces of the value of developing ideas through writing them down and seeing where it goes. Also, that students should write in the style that is most comfortable, most natural for them. Marian is already following her supervisor’s advice, as she is a very

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81 I have a section about metaphors further in this chapter.
active student, seeking out good informants, and networking with her fellow students in the
groups in which she is involved. She has made a good start in developing her research, and
was ready to proceed with her thesis proposal at this point. Next, I discuss negotiations around
thesis proposals.

**Thesis proposal negotiations.**

It is not an easy task to write a thesis proposal. Based on my own experiences and
those of some of the participants in my study, navigating through the thesis proposal process
(Kilbourn, 2006; Locke et al, 2000; Lundell & Beach, 2003) requires both a good knowledge
of institutional regulations along with artful writing skills on the part of the graduate student.
This is the first time the student’s proposed research plans come under serious review and
assessment by a number of people, perhaps from different departments, in drafting this
important contract between the graduate student, on one side, and her thesis advisor,
committee, graduate department and university, on the other.

The advisor and committee read a thesis proposal with trained eyes. They can see holes
in the arguments, omissions, and weaknesses. In those sections of the proposal in which the
student engages with other authors’ work, what comes under scrutiny is how well the proposal
text communicates with other texts of the discourses in which the research is being conducted,
how well the ideas and arguments of these other texts are used as backdrop and foundation for
the specific articulations and the arguments advanced in the proposal text. The thesis proposal
is reviewed and assessed according to how well it will communicate as a text to different
readers.

The thesis proposal is usually seen as a bridge or mediating step toward research and
thesis text production, negotiated between students and their supervisors and committees.
However, some students engage in extended work by further developing and presenting their
thesis proposals as papers at graduate students’ and other conferences, and even publishing them, regarding their thesis proposals as something that can be shared outside of their supervisory group. After all, many theses are reworked and published as books; an example is Paul Prior’s thesis, which became *Writing/Disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy* (1998); the book includes his thesis proposal.

**Thesis proposal development between students and supervisors in study groups.**

“The thesis proposal is your license to go ahead. It gets you into the material,” from a student. Thesis proposals are developed with the supervisor’s input in the form of written comments and editing during several draft stages. Some students find it productive to present their thesis proposal ideas first to an on-going study group, where they can get feedback from other students and perhaps a thesis supervisor, their own or another supervisor.

Other students in a study group may also be working on their thesis proposals and can pick up suggestions for their own work, while some of the other students who are past the proposal stage can contribute their own experiences. The goal is to help the students narrow their work to a researchable topic that can be researched and completed in a reasonable timeframe.

I observed this process many times in study groups: most students’ topics were too large at the beginning to be manageable. As one thesis supervisor put it: “The guiding question for your research should be something that is capable of being answered by the research and by the researcher in a reasonable time frame. And thesis proposals should be clear, focused and doable.” I admired the skills of the thesis supervisors, most of whom were not the supervisors of the particular students they were addressing, in honing in on the most salient points of the thesis topics for that student, and redirecting them to a manageable task.
At one such meeting, of a study group of students who were all using institutional ethnography as their method of inquiry, I listened as Master’s student Andrew presented his preliminary ideas on his thesis topic of policies on organic farming, using IE as his method of inquiry. Andrew had put a lot of effort into the construction of this plan, based on his interests, experiences and preliminary research on his topic, which was a great passion of his. He had spoken about the many difficulties encountered by organic farmers, and how he wanted to make a difference for producers of organic produce which he believed were beneficial to land use and to the health of the people who ate organic food. He had chosen to do his research within a graduate program and present his findings in the form of a thesis, which could be disseminated as well through conference presentations and publications, in order to be an advocate for change. Through his research and recommendations, he could support organic farmers and help propose legislation that would provide government support, legally and financially. Here is Andrew’s preliminary plan:

Andrew: I'm using IE to look at policies around organic agriculture. I see my work as progressing in three phases:

1. Gaining a working knowledge and gathering responses; recording my own experiences, interviews, identifying problematic interactions.

2. Investigating the actors and texts, ruling relations, laws, policies, constraints. Textual analysis is integral to my work.

3. The last phase is returning the results to the people, to create solidarity, so they can lobby for policy change.

Andrew’s preliminary plan was too general in its present form, too large for a Master’s thesis. Andrew needed help in honing in on the topic, reducing it to a size that would be doable in a reasonable amount of time. I joined the other students and the supervisor, Professor Bell, who facilitated the group, in asking questions and making suggestions to support and help direct Andrew through this challenging process. Members of the group
pitched ideas on different approaches that Andrew could employ for this project such as: interviewing farmers, NGOs, people in relevant government departments; doing participant observation at conferences or meetings; doing archival research into historical policies and textual analysis of contemporary documents; also that his research could lead to recommendations regarding advocacy in organic farming.

After this discussion, Professor Bell engaged directly with Andrew. Here is a piece of dialogue between Andrew and the supervisor. Note how she draws him out, asking very specific questions, and based on his replies, gives him advice about how to refine his initial explorations and information-gathering into a doable study for a Master’s-level thesis:

Prof. Bell: What exactly are you doing? In a thesis proposal you have a question, a problematic, which prompts the investigation.

Andrew: My study is about the social organization of organic farming.

Prof. Bell: How do you investigate it? How are you learning about it?

Andrew: By attending workshops and also working at organic farms in the summer, and doing participant observation.

Prof. Bell: Who is organizing the workshops? I suggest you do a pilot study. Go to a workshop as a participant and keep a journal of the experience. You can use a journal as data. That way when you do your proposal, you will already know your topic.

Andrew: I can attend workshops [from two different groups]. There are also kitchen table talks, and internships on ecological farms. The government uses green logos to indicate organic; there may be information regarding contacts for information about this.

Prof. Bell: The website would articulate to government ruling relations. Start mapping textually the workshops etc., that you attend. Go to kitchen table meetings, collect documents there and get information on their websites to analyze. Conduct interviews at the workshops; these people can be your informants.

Work it out in diagrams before you start the text.
The next time Andrew presented, he had a firm plan laid out with a map of how he would proceed, and was writing a paper for a conference on his work-in-progress. He began by presenting a summary of his research and writing.

Andrew: In the process of learning about organic farming, my schooling has been both formal and informal. I narrowed my topic to fit with my department.

[The student stated his new title for his study]

National organic farming standards are to be made mandatory. There is a division among organic farmers on standards...I made a map of the origins of standards. My standpoint is that of farmers, small to medium farmers producing food for profit. There is a crisis because of translocal ruling relations. In the textual mediation of organic farming, who do the standards benefit? It is a commodification of organic food.

I'm looking at how organic farming is accomplished, the processes that impede or benefit organic farming...

There are ruling texts on certification. There are three documents. One is a conversion plan to convert farms to organic farming. This one seems like a good place to start. Logos have to meet standards. There is a lot of textual mediation. There is a need to bridge the gap in trust from consultations that took place in the past.

[He provided background information on organic food in Canada and in Ontario.] I am looking at the social relations...The government treats all farmers as equal, which is detrimental to organic farmers. [He provided statistics on the growth of organic food production in Canada and increased imports from the US.]

Prof. Bell: What is the relationship between certification, the government, and the logos?

This is a critical piece, what's behind the law, what is your gut feeling?

Take the standpoint of organic farmers. Look at the purpose of three things, the list, the law, and the application form [you mentioned]. You have the focus of the three documents.

Frame the inquiry to make these documents center stage and then analyze it. You need to focus in. The number of [available] documents is always overwhelming. Look at these three documents, and how they link, the processes. Look at the form, the application for switching to organic farming.
Backtrack and do the thesis proposal, do it quickly so you can get on with the analysis. You have the beginning of the data and the analysis. Find a focus and run with it.

During the student’s presentation, the supervisor listened intently, and made notes. When he had finished, she honed right in on the pieces in his talk that she deemed most critical to his further study and writing. She asked him for his “gut feeling,” guiding him on how to go about doing this process himself, on how to develop an intuition for what is most important to continue to explore, and what to leave aside. She also instructed him on the need to ‘box in’ the contents of his study, to define its scope and limits: “Frame the inquiry to make these documents center stage and then analyze it. You need to focus in.” At the end of her remarks, she sums up what she has said, and gives him encouragement to get on with it: “You have the beginning of the data and the analysis. Find a focus and run with it.”

Another student presented her initial ideas for her thesis proposal on a problem that she had observed in her professional work, and how she planned to carry out her research in several locations to better understand the problem and how it played out in different settings.

Prof. Bell: You need a set of interview questions and justification for who you want to interview. Are interviews the best way to gather your data? What about participant observation? What feels right to you? Have a discussion with your supervisor.

This student was at the beginning of her thesis proposal process. Professor Bell provided her with a way to begin, by choosing the best method of data collection for her particular study according to the type of information she wished to collect, as well as what was feasible for her to carry out, in terms of access and ethical review protocols. She also directed the student to consult with her own supervisor, encouraging her to establish a good rapport for this critical relationship.
Professor Bell provided advice that is applicable not only to the inquiring student, but to all other students present as well as they listen to the dialogue, for example, this remark made at the end of the discussion with this student: “Pick a topic that is like eating your favorite dessert.” And: “You develop a line of inquiry over time. It's not like a journalist going after a hot topic.”

Another Master’s student who presented to the same study group is Henry. He gave an overview of his topic, then divided his research into two phases, with four goals for the second phase. After his presentation, Professor Bell responded, getting right to the point:

Prof. Bell: When do you want to get done? That shapes what you can pick up and do for a Master’s [degree]. Four goals are too much. For your MA focus on one. Ask, “What is my emphasis?” Regarding the texts, these bylaws are huge; you need to take what you need [from them]; focus on two bylaws [that are most relevant], that would be doable.

There’s a lot of pieces – you want to do it all! For an M.A. thesis focus on a piece of it and be very focused. Write it up as a thesis proposal to harness yourself and stick to it. Be practical. Break off a piece you can do.

Professor Bell gets right to the point: Don’t bite off more than you can chew. Again, she is guiding the student to hone in on the part of his topic that is most interesting, most relevant to him, most like ‘dessert,’ and to discard the rest for the moment. She is skilfully helping him “crop” the proposal to a size that can be accomplished realistically in accordance with the requirements for a M.A. thesis.

Henry presented again a year later. He was still working on his proposal. During the discussion afterward, the students and Professor Bell questioned him on specific areas of his presentation. Professor Bell was succinct in focusing in on what he needed to clarify and expand on.
Prof. Bell: There are issues around access here. Relate them back to your problematic … What is central is class relations. Make it explicit.

Henry: I need to do more general work.

Prof. Bell: You need to situate your study. “It’s on this group, but there are others.”

Henry: I need more description [of what I’m studying], more about NGOs, relationships.

Prof. Bell: It’s not just tacit knowledge. [You need] background leading to your analysis, where these examples come from…

Go back to your problematic, or you wander. What are the keywords that focus your writing? In your analysis, focus, don’t go off on tangents. Write out in one sentence what your focus is. Build on what is in the focus.

When Henry made a statement in response to what Professor Bell had said to him, he was not responding to what she has just said. Rather, he was being critical of his own process, of its inadequacies. When Professor Bell said, “You need to be more explicit,” he replied with “I need to do more general work,” but Professor Bell brought him back on track with what she was trying to explain to him with “You need to situate your study.” She managed to clarify the direction in which she was guiding him without criticising what he had done, but rather showing him how he now needs to refine his work so it can move forward.

Henry presented again after he had completed two chapters of his thesis. He began by saying, “I’m not fitting together the bits and pieces of my analysis [it’s not working], and I’m hoping for feedback and help.” He described his problematic, his research and the contents of the two chapters. When he had finished, Professor Bell said: “What do you want us to respond to?” to clarify the focus of our discussion on his work. Henry responded with a general statement: “I feel my analysis doesn’t flow well. I’m asking how to structure the flow better.” Instead of asking him to be more specific, Professor Bell summarized his thesis in a few short sentences, to assist Henry in explicating his difficulties. He responded by stating his problem more clearly, but she said she didn’t see it as a problem, and alleviated his concerns, stating:
“You have the data and a solid argument for your thesis…end the thesis on a larger theoretical question. That’s enough, don’t make it too complicated.”

Henry was looking for reassurance. Once again, he was feeling unsure about his work, not having had the experience of writing a thesis before. Professor Bell was able to assist him by summarizing and rewording what he had said to clarify it for him and for the other students in the study group so he could also reword what his difficulties were, moving from his general statements of concern to the specifics. Professor Bell then showed him that these concerns should be put aside, and gave him practical information on how to end the thesis, so he could complete it as quickly as possible. At the end of the discussion, Henry said: “This is quite helpful, things I can get on to for sure,” indicating that he had obtained what he needed from the group and from Professor Bell.

Professor Bell was always finding ways of helping students keep on track, of preventing them from going off on non-productive tangents that would divert from the essential direction of the research and the thesis. I have observed this supervisor over a period of six years. She is very skilled in picking out the essential core of a student’s initial presentation of a thesis idea, sensing what is of greatest interest to the particular student and what is doable for that student so the task of creating a viable thesis proposal can be accomplished.

The process of presenting to a group reinforces the value of putting one’s ideas in a written form, and also to presenting it orally, with or without the addition of visual materials in the form of diagrams, maps, photographs, or a Power Point presentation, and receiving feedback from other students and a supervisor, if present, in order to clarify, refine, and reinforce ideas to move students forward in their thesis processes.
After students complete their research and begin to write the thesis, many difficulties can arise. The supervisor is the main support and advisor of students in the writing of the thesis, but often students need other supports in place to help get through this arduous task. Thesis/study support groups can be a valuable resource at this time.

C) Thesis Research and Writing

Metaphors about the thesis journey.

The participants were often very passionate when describing their progress, or lack of progress, through their thesis work. My field notes reveal that students frequently used metaphors\(^\text{82}\) to describe their thesis process,\(^\text{83}\) as a way to tell their own stories as well as to offer advice to other students, to warn them of pitfalls, and help guide them through their struggles. These types of metaphors are a form of folk wisdom that is found in all cultures world-wide. They are a well-known vehicle for providing advice to people before they embark on new ventures, or to assuage their failures. Examples abound, such as: don’t count your chickens before they hatch; don’t cry over spilt milk. These metaphors can provide comfort to students, making the thesis process less scary, and providing a short-cut to explaining how they feel and how they are experiencing their programs.

Carpenter (2008) offers some insights into the uses of metaphors in qualitative research:

Metaphors can serve as a powerful strategy to portray complex realities (Miles & Huberman, 1994), illuminating aspects of phenomena not previously noticed (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and adding depth of meaning to understanding (Kangas, Warren, & Byrne, 1998). Applying known characteristics of familiar concepts to other less familiar phenomena helps to clarify and broaden understandings of the less familiar

\(^{82}\) A poetic comparison without “like” or “as”, a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two very different things, in which qualities of the first object are illuminated by identifying it with qualities of the second object. When “like” or “as” are used, it is referred to as a simile.

\(^{83}\) Comments from students who were writing, or who had completed their theses within the past three years, collected during study group meetings, conversations, workshops and other academic milieus.
Metaphors can exemplify behaviors and processes by simplifying concepts, emphasizing some properties over others (Lakoff & Johnson). (p. 274)

Comparing the thesis program to following a map, path, road or journey was a common theme of the participants. One student related a story that used the metaphor of a treasure map, with research discoveries compared to hidden treasures.

I’ve seen a treasure map used to explicate the thesis terrain. You have a starting point, and a destination. Then there are buried treasures. Some are unfound treasures. Others you can ignore or explore later; you can mention them, but not get into them. You can’t use them all; you must let go of some of them, which is very hard. It’s easier if you know where you’re going.

Deciding what to include and what to leave out has come up often in discussions; some students find it excruciatingly difficult to abandon a part of their research on which they have expended considerable time and effort. A student struggled with how to communicate her frustration: “It’s like a maze. It’s difficult to know how to find your way. I feel uncertain about my direction.” Another student extolled the value of going off course, and making serendipitous discoveries: “Remember that the map is not the journey; there is a lot to be learned when you go off course.” The unpredictability of the thesis journey is related by this student’s graphic metaphor: “It is not a linear process; the timeline is rarely adhered to. One step may take a long time; another may take a short time. Remember to “stay calm, be brave, and wait for the signs.”

A particularly tactile and physical metaphor is that of stepping stones.

I received this advice in my masters program: the degree is a stepping-stone to your future work. You can spend a lifetime producing a wonderful dissertation. It’s important to know when to abandon work when it doesn’t serve you well. You may follow different roads in your investigation, but you may have to leave some of that out of the thesis.

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84 This phrase was uttered by Jasper Friendly-Bear, an aboriginal character on a CBC radio comedy show called “Dead Dog Café” at the conclusion of each segment as a sign-off, broadcast during 2006.
This student also iterates the importance of knowing when to let go of something that does not fit well with your study direction, switching to a road metaphor.

The graduate degree becomes a test that the graduate student must pass to acquire a license to do future research in this student’s metaphor, which also brings up the important point that the research doesn’t have to be conclusive: “One of my profs put it well; he said the degree is just your driver’s license to do research. It is common to expect too much of yourself; you can leave it with unanswered questions.”

Another student adopted a thespian approach: “The doctoral process is like attending a play. It is a process of becoming, which is scary.”

Metaphors in spoken and written form were useful devices for graduate students and professors that provided vivid images to drive their messages home and make something unfamiliar more familiar.

**Reading-Writing work in the production of the thesis.**

Students who spoke with me told of confusion about what was expected of them in regard to their required writing at different stages of their thesis programs, reinforcing my own experience. Of all the problems that students related to me the most prevalent was the writing up of the thesis. Students wrestled with how to organize their data, what to include and what to leave out, how to analyze it, how to begin writing, how to organize their thesis chapters so they would form a cohesive whole.

I personally struggled with converting my data into thesis chapters. I didn’t know where to begin. Here are some of my notes from that time:

I am confused about how to divide up my data into topics, how to separate my data. I was told that it is important that the thesis is a cohesive whole, that it all fits together, that it flows from one chapter to another. Therefore you have to pick the pieces in your data that can flow together, logically, to tell your story, to answer your thesis question, and leave everything else out of the thesis.
I am preparing a table of contents for my data chapters, with my chapter headings and subheadings. I’ve been told that an approach to analyze my data to fit more logically and flow would be to follow topics - perhaps: students writing program work, students writing outside-program work, students writing the thesis. That would arrange my thesis into a “story” which I keep hearing is mandatory, to have unity and flow and connectedness.

I created an outline of my thesis, and tried to fill in the details, but it didn’t work; it was too theoretical. For example, for the chapter on program work, which I later called ‘required work,’ I wrote about the process of completing program work, but I didn’t know how to incorporate my data, or what to include. I struggled with this for a long time; I wasn’t able to obtain the help I needed. I didn’t even know what questions to ask.

It was only through continuing to attend study group meetings and observing supervisors who facilitated those groups as they worked with students who were struggling with the same problems as me, and observing other students as they tentatively began to write their thesis chapters, seeing how they tackled this difficult transition, that I was able to understand what I needed to do. I realize now that many students need help with writing issues such as this, but because the graduate education school doesn’t discuss writing difficulties openly, and doesn’t provide specific instruction in the form of a course on program writing or a series of participatory workshops on the different types of writing and text production required of students, students infer that they should know these things, and that they are deficient if they can’t figure them out themselves.

**Organizing the data: What to include, what to leave out.**

In a study group meeting, a student who was about to start to write asked the supervisor facilitating the meeting, “I have a lot of interview data and am not sure how much to use.” This situation is common to many students, trying to sort through their data to find what is the most relevant to their topics. But students are also reluctant to remove anything.
The supervisor can only make suggestions and offer some guidance to help the student make decisions about these kinds of quandaries. It is up to the student to make the choices and decide what to include in the thesis and what to leave out. At the time of editing the first draft, the supervisor may then suggest leaving something out, or editing it, but at this early stage, the student is shaping the thesis, and that is the work of the student, not the supervisor. The supervisor offered this advice to the student:

> What is emerging from your data? Go back to what the storyline is and what can help tell it. It’s a big problem. People want to hold on to everything. It becomes a dog’s breakfast. Your background data could be another dissertation. Focus on the actions of your participants, as told in their texts [interviews].

Another student had the same problem:

> My biggest challenge in writing my thesis was finding the entry point to make sense of the data. I went back to my research questions, the main themes, the headings. The themes became my chapters. I asked myself, “Does this fit here, or there?”

This is a strategy that was used by many of the participants in my study. Another student’s strategy was to start writing while still collecting data: “The analysis comes when you write. Start writing even though you’re still collecting data. Start conceptualizing what the thesis is about.” This method is also discussed in the chapter on Supplementary Work of Graduate Students, in the section, Student-Initiated and -Facilitated Study Group.

A surgeon in a graduate education program described her difficulties: “I put my theory and literature review together. I struggled to remove anything. It’s like losing a limb. It’s so hard to take out something you’ve written.”
Creating flow.

A big problem is that students write in blocks, because of the realities of time restraints and the management of such a large project that needs to be broken down into small sections of writing work. Then the challenge is putting it all together so it “flows” like a story. A student shared her difficulties with me. She had written separate segments, then tried to put them together to form a cohesive whole:

Flow is tricky. It’s hard to have a grasp of the whole thing. I wrote in chapters, but when you put them together, they don’t necessarily flow. I had to write in chunks, as I didn’t have extended space, time to put it together, since I was working full-time at a demanding job. Later, I had to create links.

Other students also spoke about writing in sections: “I write in big chunks. My head is always working on it. I dream about what I will write;” and “I write in chunks. I write, then read what I wrote and write some more, then edit. When I’m done, I just do small edits that make my writing stronger.”

Several students discussed working on their literature reviews:

I’m giving more time to my writing, and I am loving it. My job is in the way. I’m working in layers. I love it [hugging her notebook]. The new literature I found says what I’m saying.

From another student:

I’m working on my literature review. I could read until the end of my life. I’m afraid I will short-change one area. I need a big sign that says, “It is good enough.”

Knowing when to stop collecting data, when to stop working on the literature review, when to stop writing is a problem for many students; feedback from supervisors and others is important to keep students on track.
Writing the thesis: A ‘formula.’

I heard from many students that they were challenged to convert the data collected into a thesis. It is a leap for graduate students to shift from completing their course work, thesis proposal, etc. to entering the uncharted territory of research and thesis writing. Where to begin? How to make it fit with what was expected from the thesis proposal? And what, exactly, is expected? Is there a formula that students can follow, a template that the student can fill in with their material? Many how-to-write-a-thesis books present this idea.

The written thesis usually consists of an introductory chapter, which includes the problematic, one for the literature review, one for methodology, several data and analysis chapters, and a results or conclusions chapter. However, students customize the chapters to fit their particular thesis development. Some write the thesis in the order in which it will be positioned in the final thesis, but many run into difficulties, because the data chapters may uncover aspects of research different from what is presented in the earlier chapters. Students who began at the beginning often had to redo the earlier chapters.

Many talked about writing and rewriting. Ruth told me, “I tend to write and write and my supervisor cuts and cuts.” Her supervisor described this process as important supervisor editing. Ruth spoke to me shortly after she had successfully defended her thesis, and shared this:

The thesis is a particular kind of text. You have to be attentive to thesis writing as sense-making. I began writing in the middle. I spent a lot of time on one chapter, rewriting it. Then I realized I had to write more chapters, then come back and edit them. There can be problems with the thesis as a genre, such as where to fit in the theoretical/analytical piece. In the concluding chapter, was what I decided. You can think of the thesis as a story you are telling. The ending doesn’t have to be happy or resolved. You can just make a point; it could be social justice.

Ruth is revealing some of the difficulties she encountered: being unsure about her writing, feeling that she has to get it right, and to keep editing until it is just so, until she
realized that she needed to let it go, and go on to writing more chapters, leaving the editing until later, perhaps after her supervisor had read the chapters and commented on them.

Many students in my study began this way, writing one chapter and spending a lot of time on it. They found that is not easy to leave something they’ve written when they feel that their writing is not their best effort; they feel that they need to keep improving it until they are satisfied with it. Some students never get past this hurdle and are unable to complete their theses.

This student is also describing logistical problems of where to place certain pieces of the work, and how to manage the ending, and states that you don’t have to tie up all the loose ends, or make profound statements, just “make a point.”

One plan that has worked for a number of students I spoke to is to begin in the middle of the thesis, as Ruth did. Here’s how another student described the order of her thesis chapter writing:

I began with the data/analysis chapters, which form the core of the thesis. First I transcribed my interview and focus group tapes, then I shared the transcripts with my supervisor. We discussed how I would analyze the transcripts. I made a big chart, to help me sort things out, then I started to write the data/analysis chapters. The themes emerge when you’re writing. Next I did my literature review, connecting it to the data/analysis chapters, and likewise with the methods chapter. My introduction, which I did next, contains my autoethnography, background to the study, and my problematic. I wrote the results chapter last.

Several students who had used it told me how this ‘formula’ had worked for them, how serendipitous connections and new threads and insights cropped up while they were writing:

It’s a hell of a task. I had no idea where I was going when I started to write [my data chapters]. The structure emerged through the writing, in the process. I had the first piece of it, but I didn’t realize I’d go into a whole area of my thesis; it emerged from my textual analysis. There was a hint of something; I kept going [probing, investigating], until I could see a picture.
Writing the thesis: Role of the supervisor.

There are many steps involved in processing a thesis chapter. The student writes her thesis chapter, sends it to her supervisor, who does some editorial work on it, puts her feedback on it, then sends it back to the student, who puts the revisions into place, and so on, until the supervisor is satisfied with the complete thesis. In that way, the two of them jointly produce the text.

In many graduate departments, supervisors have more students to supervise now than in the past, due to an increase in student-to-faculty ratios as funding for universities is declining (Acker & Haque, 2010, p. 114). As a result, there are times when students must wait their turn to interact with their supervisor and obtain feedback about their work and editing of their thesis chapters. As Anna told me, “People who have supervisors who don’t get back to them, that’s a real problem. You look to your supervisor that your ideas are good, theoretical enough, sophisticated enough.” I spoke to a supervisor about this situation, about how she chooses which students to work with:

I wait to see what they [my students] will do. My students are people in motion. I join that motion. I look at who’s moving with the most momentum, and work with that student first. Some get sidetracked; some get busy with work or family. It’s up to them, to show me that they’re ready to work with me.

Some supervisors are more nurturing than others. [One supervisor] followed up with all her students until they finished, “nursing” them through their studies. But you can’t help everyone. Feedback from the supervisor doesn’t always work.

I spend so much time editing my students’ writing, editing word by word, changing the order, making sure it flows. Flow can be a problem when students write in blocks. There needs to be a single theme, with subthemes, like telling a story. I read their work as an external would read it.

This supervisor leaves it up to her students to come forward and make a strong case for her attention, mentioning that some were distracted from their thesis work. I know there were
a number of students who were in queue, waiting for their turn to work with her, anxious because tuition-paid time was passing and they wanted to get on with their work.

She mentions another supervisor who had a different style, who kept after her students and gave them support to get them through their programs. That is a different style of supervision that requires a lot of patience, and a lot of time, but it had excellent results. She also talked about problems with students’ writing, that she does a lot of fine-tuning their writing, all by hand, also very time consuming. It is not an easy job to keep track of all the students, what stages they are at in their programs, and what kind of attention they need individually.

Here is a dialogue between Professor Sinclair and a student, Vanessa, who she was supervising, which took place in Dr. Sinclair’s study group. Students who participate in study groups run by supervisors have the opportunity to observe the supervisory process, when the supervisor/facilitator interacts with and advises one of their own students:

Vanessa: I've had three chapters in my bag for months; Dr. Sinclair has two in her bag. It is what you already know, the 20 - 80 factor. With writing you're this close to the last chapter, the last draft, and it moves! The longer you wait, the more you see the little errors.

Dr. Sinclair: I've been looking at one chapter; it's hard when you don't see the whole picture. I'm writing questions like, “Are you coming back to this?”

Vanessa: I need to know the first chapter is okay. The first chapter is the hardest to write. Someone gave me an outline of what should be in your thesis from the Higher Education Group; it's like check lists. I don't agree with some of it.

Dr. Sinclair: If you've got a deadline, you have to make choices quickly.

Vanessa: I'm being proactive; on one side it is exhilarating, but I also have to make cost-risk decisions. It's good, moving along. I need to take some days off to spit out my analysis.

This small conversation reveals a lot of the dynamics and tensions between a student and her supervisor around getting the chapters written and in the hands of the supervisor. The
student wanted feedback on the first chapter, but the supervisor was telling her that she needs to see more of the chapters in order to assess it as a part of the whole story that the thesis explicates.

It also illustrates the stress on the student to get it right. She was so unsure that she sought guidance from others about how to write and what to include. Getting started is a key point in the writing of a thesis, because in order to begin, the student must have an idea about the whole thesis, how it will unfold. Some students take a long time to get to that point. That is why some supervisors advise their students to start in the middle, with the data/analysis chapters, as that will get the student right into the writing, assuming that the thesis proposal will supply the ‘front-end’ of the thesis, to be revised to form the introduction, literature review, and methodology chapters. This method of writing was discussed earlier in this chapter, in the section on, Writing the Thesis: a ‘Formula.’

The supervisor spoke about the problem of timing, of lighting a fire under the student to get her to write, that deadlines are often what students need to get them to act. Another student, Beth, put it succinctly, “To write, I need the crunch time, a hard deadline. Pressure makes me more efficient so I get it down on paper and finish the task.”

Vanessa, who was working full-time while writing her thesis, also spoke of the problem of finding the time to accomplish her writing tasks that many other working professionals have mentioned. She is clearly very motivated and wants to press on. There needs to be the right amount of tension between her and her supervisor to keep her aware of the passing of time and motivated to keep working, while not pushing her to the point where she may feel overwhelmed. A skilled supervisor knows how to manage that tension very well with each individual student, according to their needs.
Each of the supervisors that I observed in their study groups had a distinct way of conducting the supervision of their students, making adjustments for each student’s unique requirements, personality and the particular research the student was undertaking. Supervisors often gave their students advice beyond editing their writing. At a café after an event at the graduate school, sitting with several students at different stages of their thesis processes, Karen, an international student who had recently defended successfully, talked about the advice and guidance she had received from her supervisor. Those present who were still writing their theses could perhaps garner something useful from her story:

[My supervisor] said to follow your body re what time to write. Write during your best time, 3 – 5 hours daily. I’m hoping for a post-doc to turn my thesis into a book. A suggestion – publishers have a strict word limit for books, so I kept that in mind when writing my thesis, and wrote it like a book.

Karen was very proactive while writing her thesis, thinking ahead to its further development as a book while writing, and adapting the thesis form in such a way that it could easily be turned into a book, which was her goal.

My supervisor asked for a 2-page summary of my thesis. After that, I started with a historiography,\textsuperscript{85} next is my main argument, which is the first twenty pages. I discarded the first ten pages. My supervisor said, “Chapter 1 is screwed. Chuck it.” That was the core of my argument! I stewed over it for a week.

She was also describing her process of developing her thesis, how her supervisor got her into the writing by asking for a two-page summary, a very good way to begin, easier than producing a table of contents, which one supervisor in my study requested of students. She worked on her historical review next, which is known as a historiography. The chapters of a thesis can vary a lot, depending on the topic, the methodology used, and the direction that the

\textsuperscript{85} “The writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination. The term historiography also refers to the theory and history of historical writing.” Encyclopaedia Britannica, retrieved from: http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/267436/historiography on Jan. 24, 2013.
student wishes to follow. Because her thesis topic concerns the neglect of the history of education in her home country, a chapter on the history is an important inclusion.

Karen also talked about her struggle to write her main argument, how she discarded part of it, only to have her supervisor tell her to discard the remaining ten pages also. She described her distress and hurt over the direct words from her supervisor. This is a refrain I’ve heard from quite a few students and supervisors. Students are very attached to their writing; they may agonize over it, and when they finally get something down that they feel comfortable sharing with their supervisor, to be told that it is not acceptable can be quite a blow to them. Some supervisors told me that students sometimes stop writing anything for a while, sometimes months, because they are so upset over criticism, which they take very personally.

I wrote 25 pages for each chapter. I changed my entire thesis. I had to rethink the theory and concepts. My supervisor threw me a lifeline, something concrete, like: “I’m not seeing that enough, what you wanted to say.” I spoke to a friend doing work in a different department. He suggested something, which I used. My supervisor said, “Good. Now I want your new Chapter 1. This one is like a senior graduate’s essay.” I felt like a loser.

These short few sentences are summarizing a lot of the time and effort she spent reworking her thesis. The comment from her supervisor sounds much more carefully thought out than the comment Karen spoke about earlier, regarding her first chapter. It is the supervisor’s role to guide the student to produce the high quality of writing that is expected in a graduate education thesis. That is why students are encouraged to look at recent theses in their departments, or on similar topics or methodologies, to see the kind of standards that they must emulate.

If you find a theoretical concept that is useful, use it, whether you actually like it or not, if it’s actable. I got “cultural turn” from one professor.
Here Karen is speaking about the need to relate your work to other work that has already been accepted within the academic community, in terms of theory, methodology and literature.

The institutional performance of the supervisor, which is always an objective performance, is open to new creative configurations and reconfigurations at all times in the process of moving the graduate student through the thesis process. In the best scenario, the supervisor knows how to time the dissertation work, when to be assertive, critical, supportive, when to act like a foreman at a factory.

Paula talked to me about her experiences regarding the role of her supervisor:

A thesis is a long journey. Your supervisor plays a supportive role in it, a role that is critical to your thesis process. It’s an intense relationship; you’re engaged jointly in a project in a kind of temporary marriage. There’s a spectrum of relationships between students and supervisors; some are more collaborative than others. There’s also a power differential, even though your ages, knowledge and backgrounds might be similar, because the supervisor has the power to approve your thesis, and also to write letter of recommendation for you. The supervisor helps you shape up your thesis so it meets the thesis requirements; in the process, you may find yourself crafting the writing to please the supervisor.

The final work of the graduate student has to be recognizable as a thesis; it has to include certain components. It is the job of the supervisor to ensure that it does. The supervisor’s role can be similar to that of a journal reviewer of articles submitted for publication – the reviewer’s comments and criticism can be harsh, many revisions may be required before the article is accepted.

As she edits the student’s writing, the supervisor works the thesis with her own eye and pen, but also as proxy for a collective group that includes the rest of the thesis committee, the university, and the academic community. She has an understanding how these others will view the thesis, due to her experiences with the thesis work of past students. In this work, the thesis supervisor creates a bridge between the graduate student, the rest of the thesis committee and
the outside examiner. The supervisor works with the student to the point that the supervisor is comfortable with the thesis and confident in it, in order to support it and defend it to others. The extent of the collaboration varies. Some students can produce the thesis on their own, but most need varying amounts of help and direction from their supervisor, in a de facto joint production of new knowledge.

Some things broaden the academic scope of the supervisor, for example, innovative aspects the student has brought to the thesis; a supervisor told me that this can be an exciting experience for the supervisor, because the thesis supervision process stretches her own limits as a scholar and editor.

Supervisors can provide additional supports to their students, enriching their thesis experiences. One thesis supervisor told me, “Supervision is a mentorship.” Marjorie DeVault (1999) described some of the interactions she engaged in during her Ph.D. program years in her narrative on how she became a feminist scholar. Here she describes the special relationship she had with her thesis advisor and some of the activities they shared:

My account of Arlene’s mentorship would not be complete without some mention of the person texture of our relationship – the complex and lively breadth of our interaction. … To emphasize this kind of help is not to trivialize Arlene’s intellectual contribution to my work; rather, I mean to emphasize her recognition that intellectual work is best sustained through attention to emotional, as well as intellectual, needs. While I was her student, I ate and shopped with Arlene, as well as joining her at feminist lectures and meetings. She introduced me to her colleagues and “talked up” my work. I watched and learned as she helped to build a feminist world within the discipline [of sociology] and pulled me into that world. (p. 13)

The mentoring function of supervisors varies considerably, as do the types of relationships that are established between students and supervisors, due to many factors, including the culture of the graduate school and department, the personalities of the student and the supervisor, and their comfort levels with each other and their roles. Graduate school years, besides formal academic work, are broadly formative times when graduate students build lasting formal and
informal relationships that play crucial roles in the completion of their program work and subsequent careers.

**Thesis writing processes.**

Students talked to me a lot about their writing processes when they heard that I was studying graduate student writing. Many couched their comments in terms of advice. Students find their own ways of getting into their writing, and carrying out their data analysis and thesis writing.

At a café after a session of a thesis study group, I joined two other students in a casual discussion about our thesis writing processes. One of the topics was how we write.

Terry: For my first draft, I was talking into the recorder. Now, I write, record, speak with friends. I can’t write on the computer, I get stuck. [I’ve been] transcribing my notes, then writing. For my Chapter 4, I wrote the framework from my notes. I think better from longhand. I was writing and not transcribing. You see the connections and complexities when you write by hand.

Paula: I handwrite little. I took notes after reading books, sometimes in longhand, then put them into my computer. Categories emerged, merging files. I have to break away and sketch out different things, clusters of things, themes. Then back to the computer to write them up.

This little piece of the conversation reveals a lot of different methods that students employ in order to produce their written work. Each student finds what works best for them. Clearly, reading and writing activity is central to this process, but there is more involved. There are different forms of writing; handwriting is preferred by many for getting started in writing, or when making notes from books or articles. As Paula mentioned, some students find that doing sketches helps them to formulate their ideas. Drawing, making a diagram of ideas, or a “mind map” have long been promoted as an excellent tools to develop connections and extensions from an initial idea, and were mentioned by several of the participants as tools they used to clarify their ideas. I used them myself regularly in developing this thesis. Students
used diagrams to show the connections between agencies, work positions, and for other cases of multiple interconnections.

All of these steps are preludes to typing out the text on the computer, and producing diagrams in a graphics program on the computer.

In my own writing, I often start with a diagram, putting down ideas and making connections with other ideas that relate to them. Next I may write out notes by hand, followed up by typing those notes on the computer. The next step is printing out the notes and editing them with a pencil, crossing out some words, making arrows to relocate parts of the text, perhaps getting up to find a reference that will fit it with a section, then going back to the computer to retype or edit the text that had been created previously.

Ella, one of the professional/students described in the chapter on Participants, elucidated her writing process to me:

I have finished transcribing and analyzing my data, which consists of individual interviews and focus groups. I am beginning to write my thesis chapters.

I have a blank book; I look at my data and write out my ideas about it by hand in my book. Afterwards I put it on the computer and fill it out. My first notes in my notebook are like the bare branches on a tree. When I fill out my analysis, it's like putting leaves on the tree.

She also has her own method of beginning to write which is a difficult point for many students. Reading over her data and putting it aside to think about it and then write about it is a method that works for her. By putting it into a notebook, all her notes are organized in one place, rather than having them on random bits of paper or in random places on the computer. Here is an example of a student who likes to do her first writing by hand, because she finds that her ideas flow easier when she's writing by hand. Copying her notes on to the computer, then fleshing them out provides another method of processing her thoughts into a written format and putting together her thesis chapters.
In addition to the various aspects of writing, or reading-writing, there are other activities that students told me about that they engage in in order to develop and clarify their ideas. Speaking about an aspect of their work to others, while recording the conversation for further study and/or transcribing it later, is a method that many found useful. Another method described to me was speaking about the work on one’s own and recording it. There are even more subtleties to the process, more activities that are engaged in the process of producing graduate writing; writing truly is “a complex literate activity that includes reading and writing, feeling and thinking, speaking and listening, observing and acting.” (Bazerman and Prior, 2004, p. 7).

**Thesis writing workspaces.**

Having a comfortable workspace location is important for thesis work. Some students told me that they preferred to work at home; others found it too distracting and preferred to work elsewhere. Some had an office space at their graduate school and preferred to keep all their material there and work there. Still others preferred to take their notebook computer to a café to work, surrounded by other people, not bothered by the chatter around them. One student told me that she worked every day at a library table beside another student, without engaging in conversation. Her writing buddy kept her company while she was working. They had a regular schedule of meeting each other five days a week for five hours of work. This was possible because neither of them was working in their profession during their study period.

I did most of my thesis work in my small apartment, where I created four workspaces. I have a small desk at the end of my bedroom near the window with just enough space for my 17” notebook computer and some papers or a book on my left, and a tea cup at the right.

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86 This is also discussed in the chapter on Required Work of Graduate Students, in the section on Course Work.
Sitting in my swivel chair, I can rotate to face a long narrow table at the window, which is covered with open file boxes filled with carefully labeled and organized files. Beside the table is a chair, where I have my six IE books, so I can reach out for them when necessary to check a quote, or find a passage to include. This is where I consult my files, consisting of material for my literature review, notes, and my data; consult the IE books; carry out my internet-based research, type and edit my thesis chapters, and send them off to my supervisor, awaiting his comments.

I also work in the combined living-room dining room. I have created two spaces there, for variety. In the centre of the room on the far wall is my small camel-coloured leather sofa with a glass coffee table in front of it. This is my reading space, where I can rest an arm on the armrest, and put my feet up on the table, finding comfort in the place and in my enjoyment of the text I am reading. At the far end of the room, in front of the patio doors, is my dining room table. The four chairs are placed parallel to the side walls, so they don’t block the light from the patio doors. I sit at the table, in the seat in the upper right corner, with a natural-light floor lamp at my right shoulder. This is my (hand) writing area, and the place I read and notate articles. I like to look out into the open space through the glass patio doors when pausing between sentences, feeling that my thoughts and ideas can move around in that outdoor space and find their way back to me in lucid sentences. In good weather I go outside to my patio to read, or to hand write. This quiet outdoor space provides a different setting, inspired by nature; the tall, Austrian pines just beyond my low patio wall, the green deciduous trees to my right, and the potted flowers that fill my patio space, the quiet broken by the chattering of squirrels, or chirping of birds, or an overhead plane. Sometimes a butterfly or bee distracts me; they are working in this space too. This is a particularly inspiring locale for fresh perspectives on something I am working on.
Organization of data and resources.

Ella commented: “I need to clean up my space or my writing will be difficult. I bought crates so I can organize my readings by theme. Hopefully it will make the writing process easier.” Ella was preparing her work-space so it will be easy for her to access her material, which is essential for access to research data.

Students had different systems for organizing their work-spaces and their files, to facilitate their reading-writing activity. Some students told me they liked to have their files out of sight. Dedicating a file cabinet to files related to the thesis work was a common strategy. I prefer to have my files arranged in the open, in plastic file holders on a long narrow table at the side of my computer desk, so I can swivel around and access them easily when I’m working, as mentioned above. I have a section for each thesis chapter. It took me quite a while to develop my system. Some students told me all their files and notes were on their notebook computers, so they could work anywhere. It didn’t matter what system a student devised, whether it was tidy or disorderly, as long as it helped them organize their thesis material so they could easily add material to it, and access whatever they were looking for at any time.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an overview of the thesis process, viewing all the required program work prior to the thesis as preparatory to the thesis work, which includes course work and papers, thesis proposal, and thesis research, leading up to the writing of the thesis. Figure 6 illustrates the progress of a student through her program through the production of her written work, following the requirements in the handbooks. I described course work and course papers in detail, including my own experience of writing a course paper. Then I presented my interview with a professor right after I had completed an ethnography of her course. I was interested in how she encultured the students into writing within the disciplines
of the course readings, to prepare them to write their course papers. I also included an example of my ethnography of the course around the discussion of one of the readings. Next was my discussion on developing a thesis topic, including an interview with a student. Thesis proposal negotiations within a study group between several students and the supervisors facilitating the groups illuminate the complex negotiations involved in developing a thesis proposal. Metaphors about the thesis journey are a prelude to the reading-writing work in the production of the thesis, deciding what to include and what to discard, creating flow, and a formula for writing a thesis, starting in the middle with the data/analysis chapters. The next section is on the role of the supervisor, with comments from students and supervisors, followed by the thesis writing process, workspace varieties, and data organization systems.

The next chapter is the Extended Work of Graduate Students, which focuses on conference paper development and presentation.
CHAPTER 8
EXTENDED WORK OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

“Presenting at conferences helped me gain confidence, and develop and clarify my ideas.”
Quote from a student.

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the benefits to graduate students of what I refer to as ‘extended work,’ which includes conference presentations and publications. I refer to this reading-writing work and related activities as ‘extended work’ because it is an extension of or adjunct to the required program work of graduate students. I discuss venues for presentation of papers, including graduate school conferences, local, national, or international academic conferences and meetings of associations. Papers may also be submitted to publication venues, including online journals, print journals, book chapters, and books.

Extended work includes work not usually listed as requirements in the handbooks, but that may be suggested or recommended in them to augment the required program work of graduate students. Extended work includes conference papers and abstract writing, and may also include: session and panel organization for conferences, discussant work, graduate conference and external conference organization work. It also includes publication of papers in online or hard copy journals and books, which may also include reading-writing work in the form of peer reviewing and peer editing work, with provision for comments and feedback. Correspondence work is also a component of extended work; correspondence work usually takes the form of emails and other types of communication which introduce students’ work, and mitigate the process of configuring the work to fit the criteria and requirements of the particular venue to which the paper has been submitted for consideration.

87 My example is the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education Handbook 2012-2013 of OISE/UT (utoronto.ca/lhae).
These venues are often the first opportunities for graduate students to look critically at the work of their peers and engage in reading-writing work as equals with conference organizers and editors. Extended work helps students develop important writing, critiquing and editing skills which can be directly applied to the writing of their own thesis drafts. Conference papers and publications are included in a CV, and are relevant for job applications. This chapter focuses on conference paper development processes and presentation.

**Rationale For and Against Extended Work (Conference Papers and Publication)**

There are two distinct academic cultures around how graduate students’ program work should be directed and supervised, which have been described as the “*lone-scholar disciplinary culture*” and the “*collaborative disciplinary culture*.” (Turner, Miller & Mitchell-Kernan, 2002, p. 48). To some scholars, graduate students are seen as needing assistance, through training and supervision. From this perspective, graduate students need to be isolated from other demands so they can focus on their thesis work. Certainly graduate students need a protected period of training in their departments before they can tackle their thesis problematics. Training in methods and theory is demanding and requires a strong program, including a variety of relevant and tested courses and a period of collaborative focus on methodological and theoretical issues.

As well, some students simply don’t have the time for conferences. Students who are working full-time while pursuing their graduate studies are hard-pressed to keep up with both demanding pursuits, along with whatever other responsibilities they have, with their families or other needs. Ruth, the student who is discussed in chapters 5, 7 and 9, was such a student.

The examples further in this chapter indicate that opportunities for paper production beyond the department are important incorporations in graduate programs, including
preparation of papers for conference meetings and publication, since these are regarded as markers of academic achievement for grant applications and job applications after graduation.

**Circulation of Knowledge Through Extended Work**

The production of papers, monographs, conference papers, journal articles, book chapters and books require our special attention as necessary passage points (Latour, 1988) in graduate students’ participation in the extended relations of knowledge production. The production of texts-in-progress helps graduate students articulate their ideas and inquiries. It is also part of the social production of knowledge. Embedded in graduate students’ program work and knowledge products are the worked-up living knowledges of the particular school of research and community of researchers of which they are a part. The focus on formal practices of text production through extended activities and work is important for this connection to their socialization as academics.

Extended activities such as conference paper presentations and publications offer students an opportunity to have their knowledge work enter into circulation in the larger academic community. The current focus on media promotes bringing research knowledge to platforms that make it immediately accessible and available to society. This practice increasingly includes the research work of graduate students, through their engagement in what I call extended work. Taking a drafted paper to a conference brings practical returns to the continuation of the knowledge production of the paper and its dissemination.

**Conference Paper Development and Presentation**

Participation in graduate and association conferences has been very productive in moving my work along. Janice Morse (2008) describes the positive “Side Effects of Conferences”:
Officially – and superficially – conferences provided us with a forum for the dissemination of ongoing and just-completed research and the opportunity to receive a prepublication critique of our work. They provide space for the discussion of various viewpoints on controversial issues, and the formal organizational components that empower those with similar disciplinary interests to form action coalitions or do whatever needs to be done. But it is only by considering the informal, inter-active aspects of conferences that their true worth can be appreciated … [For example,] conferences foster the informal development of emerging ideas … conferences foster the development of research networks … conferences push your research program along … conferences punctuate your research program, and make you “take stock” … conferences provide the opportunity to honor excellence … conferences provide a forum for the mentoring students… gatherings at conferences enable us to “put faces” to those names, those people who are forming our discipline. (pp. 1159-1160)

My own graduate school and academic conference experiences are explicated in chapter 5, Autoethnography, in the sections on: First Graduate Conference Presentation: Getting My Feet Wet; Second Graduate Conference Presentation: Making a Splash; First “Outside” Conference Experience, First “Outside” Conference Panel Organization and Presentation; and Academic Conferences.

Anna, a student who presented at a graduate education conference, was working on the data chapters of her thesis, but she was stuck. Presenting her work at the graduate education conference and getting feedback helped her put her ideas together. She was back on track, writing at breakneck speed, to finish her thesis within her limited time frame and return to her professional practice with her PhD work completed. Here’s how she put it:

You’re going public with something that feels quite private. It’s scary. I needed my supervisor’s support to present at the conference. And having all you guys [other students in the session] as support was great. Talking about the research helps make sense of it and find meaning. When you have some people to talk to who are interested and knowledgeable, it helps a lot. So is the ability to say something out loud.

I can’t oversimplify what got me unstuck. It was not one person or thing. I had to get back to work, I had that [time] pressure on me that I couldn’t give in, I had to keep working until things made sense. What makes us get stuck, I think it’s insecurity. When I think of the kind of things we give our supervisor to read, they’re quite raw sometimes. But it’s better to send chapters [to your supervisor] when it is a work in progress [than to wait]. It will never be perfect. Eventually, you have to just call it.
Immediately after her presentation, Anna had a very productive discussion with her thesis supervisor who had attended the session, which was augmented by several subsequent discussions. Preparing for the presentation, reflecting on her work in the presence of others, and generating the social relations of feedback helped her get “unblocked” and back to productive writing. She also gave herself permission to write in draft form, and to share that preliminary writing with her supervisor, realizing that getting the job done was the top priority, and that perfection is an elusive objective.

Helen presented a paper at a graduate student conference in the first year of her program. In her paper she discussed her proposed research study, focusing on her methodology. She planned to combine institutional ethnography with a political theorist. After her presentation, the discussant for the session made the following comments about her paper:

IE as a process is not easy to do. You need to unlearn a lot. The most difficult part is grounding your work in other people’s work through using their standpoint. You’re not working with discourse alone. You need to have your feet on the ground. If you’re hanging on to something [and it’s not working, referring to her inclusion of the political theorist], move to another place. Your work keeps shifting. If you lose your ground, you’ll lose your problematic. Look at where the people [your participants] actually are, and what they’re actually engaged in. The actual work of the people is missing.

The discussant’s critique had an influential effect on the student; the next time I heard her present her work, she had dropped the political theorist, whose work was not a good match with her research or with IE, and her work was more focused and had much greater clarity.

A student who had helped organize a graduate student conference told me, “volunteering [to do this] is a benefit, because you have the opportunity to choose the themes and topics for the conference and the sessions.” A student using IE said that conferences “inform other students about using IE for their own studies, and act as bridges between the local and translocal IE communities.” Another student had complained to me about the “lack
of resources for graduate students” in her department, and the “lack of opportunities and venues in which students can present their work and get feedback while contributing to the work of others in various capacities.” Graduate conferences fill that gap at least once a year.

Developing a conference paper abstract.

After I had presented at several graduate student conferences, I submitted an abstract to a conference session for a national conference. My abstract specified that I was using institutional ethnography as my method of inquiry for my research. This was the first time I was actually using the method in a conference paper. The session organizer emailed me, stating that my abstract “does not make use of an institutional ethnographic approach.” But, instead of just refusing me, she added: “Would you like to have another go at the abstract? I can hold a spot for you for a while if you'd like to do that. Let me know!” I spent the next week reviewing my IE books and making a list of IE terminology and methodology. Next I looked at my original abstract, and rewrote it, incorporating more IE terms into it, and resubmitted the revised abstract. I received another email, with the following comments:

I'm happy to accept your abstract. Meantime, there's only one thing I'd like to suggest and that is that you make sure to anchor your exploration in people's everyday experience, perhaps of the work of writing a thesis. Somehow, or so it seems to me, university institutional procedures/processes, simply don't recognize the issues and problems of organizing the work of doing a dissertation.

This process of writing and revising an abstract for a paper was very useful to me in learning how to include IE in my discussion of my own study, and also in validating my research. It was also a learning exercise for future abstract writing. As well, I received good advice about how to proceed with my study, and of the importance of my research.

Kamler and Thomson (2006) have written about the value of writing abstracts:

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88 Grace experienced a similar process, as discussed later in this chapter.
Crafting a thesis argument is not easy. And it doesn't happen all at once. Doctoral researchers need to 'write along the way’ … to learn how to write persuasively about their research. One excellent strategy to assist them is writing abstracts for academic conferences and journals. Writing abstracts creates a pedagogical moment for supervisors to focus on the making of an argument … Abstract writers not only seduce others to buy their wares and/or bid for inclusion in scholarly events, they position themselves, via the abstract, to be seen as legitimate knowers within particular scholarly communities. (p. 85)

I really like the last sentence in the above quote, seeing the abstract as an advertisement, an enticement, of a product that you will deliver as an expert in a particular field of study. In a limited number of words, the graduate student works to convince the session organizer that their paper is worthy of inclusion, and that it will contribute to the theme of the session.

**Developing a conference paper.**

My very first conference paper, which I had adapted from a course paper and presented at a graduate school conference at my school, was a real learning experience on how not to do a conference paper, as I have previously related in the autoethnography section. After that, all my conference papers were on topics related to my ongoing research, with the idea of using parts of them in my thesis. For example, I wrote a paper for the CSSHE (Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education) in 2010 in a session on mature students entitled “Professionals who return to the Academy for graduate degrees in education: Navigating paths to credential acquisition.” This was the first time I wrote about the professionals who participated in my study. I also wrote about the specialized graduate education programs that had been developed for these students. I was able to incorporate much of this paper into my thesis, so the production of the paper served at least four purposes: first, it provided me with an opportunity to present at a professional academic conference to higher education students and academics to familiarize them with my work and obtain valuable feedback from them; second, I heard
what others were saying about the topic of “older” students, third, there is the possibility that
the paper may be included in a publication on “older” students that the session organizers are
planning; fourth, I was able to produce some important writing for my thesis.

All of my subsequent conference papers focused on aspects of my study and my
methodology while also relating to the themes of each conference session. Each time I rewrote
the description of my study and my methodology for the introductions to the papers, I refined
and improved those sections. In that way, I learned to edit and improve my own writing based
on my further developed insights and experience in writing.

**Developing presentation skills.**

At my first conference presentation, I was a keen observer of the other presenters in
my session. I was very curious to discover what techniques they used to make their
presentations, and how successful they were in getting their ideas across to the audience,
including me. I was just as interested in the styles of presentation as in the content. I noted that
some students read their papers, as I had done, while others spoke with brief reference to
notes, or even without any notes. Some used visual aids, such as PowerPoint or overhead
projectors, while others used a blackboard or whiteboard to draw diagrams or make notes that
were relevant to their talk. My impression was that the best presentations were done without
any notes, and with the aid of PowerPoint. I wished that I had the confidence and skills to
present like that. In my experience as a secondary school teacher, I had used the blackboard a
lot, as well as overhead projectors, but didn't feel comfortable writing on a board during a
conference paper presentation. I did later learn how to use PowerPoint. A fellow student was
my instructor, and I utilized this technology for my later paper presentations. However, it was
some time before I was able to present without any notes at all.
Presenting my ongoing work in a study group was a more comfortable experience than presenting at conferences. In the study group, I was presenting in front of people that I knew, so it was not as intimidating as presenting to an academic audience at a conference. When giving a presentation to a study group, sometimes I drew diagrams on the blackboard, other times I had a handout prepared or used PowerPoint as an adjunct to my talk. Often I spoke extemporaneously, being entirely in the moment and expressing naturally where I was in my thesis process and what I was working on at the present time. I found that each time I presented I became more comfortable. I believe that students’ presentations in study groups, whether just an update or a full one- or two-hour presentation, are excellent opportunities to develop skills for future conference paper presentations.

I have observed that students are able to describe and discuss their work with greater clarity as they progress further into writing their theses. I have experienced that myself. The act of writing a thesis makes a student extremely familiar with all their material. Ideally, students are able to describe and discuss any part of their thesis work at any time at a level appropriate to the audience.

Students discussing their experiences of presenting conference papers.

I had an opportunity to speak to several students about their experiences of presenting at conferences at a café after one of them had presented at her mock thesis defense. Here is part of our conversation:

Inga: I was very negative about presenting at conferences, didn’t like the idea, but I was pressed to do it by another student, and I did. I gained confidence, and the chance to develop and clarify my ideas. And I used the conference papers for my thesis, one paper for my lit review, another became two chapters in my thesis.

Lynne: Presenting at conferences has helped me learn to think on my feet, and to field questions.
Claudia: I can run a workshop, explain something, but giving a paper terrifies me. I tried to drink some water before a paper presentation, but my hands were shaking so much, I couldn’t bring the glass to my mouth.

Lynne: I used peer presentation and feedback to help me hone down a presentation to the time limit of ten minutes. I had 40 slides and was preparing a ten-minute presentation for an international conference. I presented to Claudia; she said, “start with that one, don’t use those.” I did whatever she told me and I won an award for best presentation. I go through a lot of anxiety about whether to keep a slide. I learned to trust people, to let someone else judge.

The first time I tried this, for a previous conference presentation, David and Claudia told me what to keep, what to lose, when I presented to them, because my talk was too long. I got it down to ten minutes, but when I got there [to the conference], I thought I had taken out the richness of my talk, and put them back in. My talk was too long, and I used up the ten minutes, and the five minutes allotted for discussion, and still didn’t finish. I learned from that experience to listen to advice from my friends.

This casual conversation exposes the fears many students experience around conference presentation, and the stress of trying to make the presentation have the best impact, while fitting it into the allotted time frame. It also reveals many of the benefits these students have realized through conference presentations, such as gaining confidence in clarifying their ideas and answering questions at the spur of the moment, developing their concepts through working them out in a paper and presenting them orally, and using the material from their papers for their theses. In addition, they learned the value of presenting to peers and getting their suggestions when working out their presentations,

**Developing a conference session, presenting it, and its aftereffects for a presenter.**

I decided to propose a session for a national conference and invited three other students from my graduate school to join me in presenting papers. We were all using IE in our research work, so I titled the proposed session so it would encompass our diverse topics.

Since I needed to submit the abstracts for all the papers in the session, I contacted the three students who had agreed to be in the session and suggested that we look at each other’s
abstracts through email and give each other feedback on them. Through this process, we became knowledgeable about the topics that were being discussed in all our papers, although we were already aware of the subject of each other’s research from being in a study group together, and helped each other improve our abstracts. After I submitted the application and all the abstracts and the session was accepted, I suggested that we do the same thing with our papers, so we emailed our papers to each other, and received feedback in return to clarify and upgrade them. These kinds of editing skills are important components of academic writing; by editing another person’s writing, on a topic that is familiar or not to the person editing, scholarly writing capacities are improved in small increments.

The session was very well attended. All of us presented with PowerPoint, and the presentations went smoothly. Afterward our discussant addressed all the people in attendance, the presenters and the audience, using this opportunity as a teaching moment.

Next she succinctly addressed the individual presentations, asking one presenter who had talked about certain ruling texts, “How do these texts enter into coordinating who and what they are coordinating? From Susan Turner [we see that] texts can coordinate differently.” To another presenter she said, “You can get so much data, but not always clear direction … You need a focus.” To me, she said I should stop looking for more data and start writing my thesis and get it done already, that I could do more research later, after obtaining my degree. Everyone received good advice that was both geared to the individual, but also applicable to others listening to the comments.

One of the presenters was Grace, a health professional and instructor to students learning her profession, who had presented many times to members of her profession, but never before to an academic audience. She was quite concerned about fitting in, because this was the first time she presented outside her professional sphere. She was aware that her paper
needed to be made clear to an audience who did not have a background in her area of health care, in addition to those who did, in case any were present. As well, her paper needed to fit into the methodology she was employing so her paper would resonate with the group in the audience who also employ or are familiar with that methodology. We talked informally after the session. She commented to me on the work of writing and presenting her paper:

Being at a conference like this, I feel like a fish out of water. It feels a bit chilly to me. It is a very different experience to present to people that you know, and who are aware of your professional work, and a group who have no prior knowledge of your profession, who are viewing your work for the first time and are evaluating you on the basis of your methodology, since that is what they have in common with you.

A year later, I had occasion to talk to Grace about her recollections of that conference, and she had many insights on the experience:

In clinical practice, you’re not taught to adapt language to different audiences. Some language sets up barriers. No one in the audience had a background in my field, but many of them knew IE. The discussant said, after my talk, “This is important work; the presentation didn’t give the full background; the topic is way bigger than I thought from reading your paper.”

I asked Grace if it had been helpful exchanging abstracts and papers before the session and getting feedback from other presenters, as well as information on how to put more IE into it, since it had been lacking in her first draft.

Very much so. My paper was radically different than the first draft. I learned how to use IE language; I found two texts by Dorothy Smith to be useful, and incorporated concepts from those texts into my paper. I learned how to integrate IE into my language from a different discipline, my health professional language. I used the paper as the basis for my thesis proposal, my rationale for using IE. I also used the part about why I chose IE for my study in presentations to science groups, and for a publication. I learned that my study area, which problematizes an aspect of my profession, is more likely to be taken up outside my profession, where they’re not uncomfortable with it. Other people think it’s important. I’m looking at other faculties who are doing related studies, like geography.

Lastly, I asked Grace about her experience of presenting with the others in the session. She replied:
The opportunity to see presentations of people who were further along when I was just starting out, seeing where they were at different stages, how they used, interpreted and built with IE was valuable in giving me a picture of where I could be later in my program. I wasn’t sure if I was using the right methodology for my study until that presentation.

From her comments, it is clear that Grace had a number of very positive outcomes from the entire conference paper process. This was quite a challenge for her first paper at an academic conference, but it provided an excellent learning experience for her on integrating the discourses of practice (from her profession) and theory (from the academy). Grace had learned how to utilize and integrate IE into her work, and she overcame her doubts about whether IE was the right methodology for her study. Importantly, she realized that it was better to present her study to those outside her profession which was not accepting of it. In addition, Grace was able to use material from her paper for other presentations, for a publication and for her thesis proposal; it was an entrée into her thesis work.

At a conference, graduate students’ papers are subject to suggestions and critique by reviewers, audience members and discussants who may have different backgrounds and viewpoints than their professors or supervisors. Feedback and suggestions in conferences can therefore play a significant role in reworking and improving papers and helping the students to craft well-written theses. Students also need to be prepared to receive criticism at times, which can be harsh, and to develop resilience, an important trait for survival as a graduate student, professional or academic.

Graduate students’ papers for conferences, or their publications may begin as documents produced as part of the requirements of a graduate program. My first graduate student conference paper was adapted from a course paper. Most of the writing produced by graduate students in their programs in the form of internally-circulating documents can be reworked and submitted to conferences and/or journals, becoming externally circulating texts
Writing that can be reworked in this way includes sections of comprehensive examinations, reference lists and discussion on a specific topic related to thesis work, sections of the thesis proposal, and sections or chapters of the thesis after it has been defended. A student in my study worked her reference list-in-progress into a conference paper during her research phase. Another student reworked a part of her comprehensive examination into a conference paper, and later into a publication. The conference papers I presented were all on aspects of my ongoing research work. Through this process, what is produced as a document internally, that is, within the graduate school program (institution), for internal communication and circulation, can also be reworked into a text to circulate externally, beyond the department that was its disciplinary home. Conference papers are an example of such texts, and the ‘external communication’ of texts to conference sites.

‘External Capture’ of Texts

Texts that jump the wall into the public domain become part of the hard facts of social existence, whereas those that don’t jump, remain private, sink from conscious awareness, and often disappear from the cultural record. (Geisler, 2001, p. 306)

Texts submitted as conference papers or journal/book chapters launch students’ developing ideas onto platforms where those ideas can circulate to a larger academic audience, and become part of the body of literature on a particular topic. The texts are subject to the rules and regulations of those sites that are external to the university, which direct, limit, and restrict the texts so that they fit into the specifications. They direct student applicants, delineating exactly what the author must do in order to submit abstracts and papers to them. I use the term, ‘externally-captured’ texts, because the students’ texts are captured by the conditions which must be complied with in order for them to move from one institution (the
graduate school) to another (an academic or professional conference, a journal publication, or a book publisher). 89

For example, when I decided to submit a session proposal to a meeting of a national association that would include my paper and the papers of three of my fellow students, I chose a title that was general enough to include all our papers, which were united by our use of institutional ethnography as our method of inquiry. Then I chose an association that would be receptive to the topic of my proposed session, because there had been sessions using IE as the method of inquiry in the past, and the IE references in the papers would be familiar to the conference organizers. I checked the dates of the next association meeting, and the deadline for submission of sessions. I carefully studied the web-based requirements for submission of sessions, noting that I was required to submit the abstracts of all the papers in the session with my proposal for the session. In the case of the association I chose, final papers were not required to be submitted before the conference, but other associations at whose meetings I have presented papers required final papers before the conferences.

Based on my experiences, I have compiled the following description of requirements for papers submitted to organizations outside the university by graduate students. 90 The text is geared towards the specific themes, topics, and issues that are designated by the association or organization within which other texts are produced and processed, for example, a conference session, journal, or edited book. There is an expected establishment of communication with other related texts. In this thesis, I ‘communicated’ with or referenced texts of Paul Prior, Dorothy Smith, other IE and writing scholars, and others. The duration of text production is scheduled, calendared, and there are deadlines. There are requirements for submission of texts,

89 Dorothy Smith uses the term “capture” in a similar way, for example, in her term “institutional capture,” which is referenced several times in this thesis. In this case, it is not the language that is appropriated, or “captured,” but the content, context and terms of use of the text, such as: topic, length, date of submission, etc.

90 They also apply to graduates, as well as to other scholarly, professional, and organizational text production.
in the form of abstracts, and often, the completed paper(s). The length of the text that is being produced may be specified, but the text is not standardized like a form. It is determined in approximation to standards developed in journal article publishing.

Benefits of Extended Work/External Communication of Graduate Students’ Texts

From my own experiences presenting at conferences, what has been described to me by other students, and what I have observed, conference paper presentation and publication offers many benefits to students. One benefit is capacity building, because each text the graduate student produces for presentation or publication augments and improves the writing skills of the student, building up her reading-writing capacities in her transition from student to academic writer. Another benefit is CV building: an accumulation of papers from conferences, journal articles, book reviews and edited book chapters boosts the graduate student’s CV. An additional benefit is power building; delineating and augmenting the writer’s position as a spokesperson for a specific specialized knowledge creates a niche within a broader area of expertise.

Interdisciplinary Communication of Professional and Academic Texts

The professional/graduate students in my study moved between the production of many different types of reading-writing work, in the form of documents and texts in their graduate programs and in their professional practices. Their textual communication took many forms, some within their required program work, that I call ‘internal document production,’ that is, between students and administrators, professors, and supervisors, such as application to graduate school, grant/scholarship proposals, course papers, comprehensive requirements, thesis proposals, applications for ethical protocol approval for thesis research, grade appeals, petitions to rectify a situation that is disputed, such as approval to take courses outside the designated courses for a program, and theses.
In addition, they also produced texts outside program requirements, as ‘extended work’ in a process that I call ‘external text production,’ such as: abstracts for conferences, conference papers, session proposals for conferences, journal articles, book reviews, book chapters, books. As well, the graduate students with professional backgrounds who made up the participants often continued to work in their professions, full- or part-time, while in the academic program, and some produced texts that circulated in their own professions, whether it was teaching, nursing, medicine, law, or another profession, in the form of conference or association papers, professional journal articles, or books.

Engaging in the external communication process brings graduate students into a complex of possibilities of connecting their professional texts with their academic texts in inter-genre relationships. For example, Anna, the professional/graduate education student who was a college nursing professor, had written a paper for a graduate education conference on her thesis work when she was in the midst of writing her thesis and was stuck. Writing the paper and the subsequent feedback she received had helped her move on and finish her thesis. She took the conference paper and reworked it to fit the requirements, or regulations of a professional journal, and submitted it. It was accepted and was published, adding to her professional publication record. While a student, Anna also coauthored a book chapter for an academic book in the area of sociology with her supervisor; therefore, her publications were both interdisciplinary and inter-genre.

Lynne, a professional/graduate education student who worked at a medical research facility, co-presented with her supervisor at an academic conference. She also presented several times at conferences related to her professional work. In addition, she contributed a chapter to a book on sociology. Her publications were also interdisciplinary and inter-genre.
Denise, an educator who researched a disadvantaged group and their accessibility to community services, had presented her work at a number of academic conferences. Later, she found that her type of research was included in several health journals. She submitted two articles which she had developed from her thesis to different journals and was accepted in both. Her work crossed into a new professional discipline and its publications.

The following figure and explanation describes the complex interconnections between professional and academic research, writing and text production.
INTERDISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION
BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL & ACADEMIC TEXTS
& EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION/CAPTURE OF PAPERS & BOOKS OF
PROFESSIONALS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

(arrows=textual communication)

Interdisciplinary, Inter-genre
Communication between
Professional & Academic Texts

External Communication/
Capture to Other Sites

KNOWING Academic Theory
& Genres

(Pure Texts)

↑ ↓

Academic Conference Papers

→ Academic Journal Articles

→ Academic Edited Book Chapters

→ Academic Books

DOING Professional Practice
& Genres

(Applied Texts)

→ Professional Conference Papers

→ Professional Journal Articles

→ Professional Edited Book Chapters

→ Professional Books

Figure 7: Interdisciplinary communication between professional & academic texts & external communication/capture of papers & books of professionals in graduate education programs
A  Professionals’ Text Production

In addition to their professional practices, professionals may engage in writing papers for professional association meetings and/or professional journals or books. This writing is produced within the particular genre, or genres, of their profession that they were acculturated to during their professional training programs and which is reinforced by the use of particular terms and word usage in their daily practices in their professional work and in the association meetings, journals and books relating to their profession. “Genre” refers to “disciplinary discourse” (Paré et al, 2009) or the “specialized language of disciplines … genre provides a useful way to understand the higher-level literacy demands of different academic disciplines and areas of professional training.” (Bazerman et al, 2009). The texts that professionals produce for presentation at professional association meetings and conferences, and publication in professional journals and books can be categorized as ‘applied’ texts, because they relate to the practices, to the work, or ‘doing’ of professionals. The bottom area of the diagram illustrates the movement of these professionals’ texts, their ‘external communication’ with conference session organizers of their professional associations, and professional journal and book editors, that are external to the professional’s practice sites, and potentially will lead to paper presentations and publication of the texts.

B  Professionals’/Students’ Interdisciplinary/Inter-genre Text Production In their Graduate Programs

When these professionals enter a graduate education program, they begin their writing in the academic setting with course work and course papers. In the course syllabuses they are introduced to readings and other course material in the format of the particular genre of the course, thus they learn to read, write and talk about the course contents using that genre. They

91 “Genre” is discussed in Chapter 2, Literature Review.
also learn about different methodologies and theories related to the course material, and in
courses devoted to methods and theory, covering one or a variety of them.

It is a major task for these professionals to learn to write as academics, since the
academic genres are very different from their professional genres. Each academic genre has
its own special terms and phraseology, scholars, journals and books. Academic texts are
known as pure texts, or theory texts, that are about knowing.

In documents and texts produced in graduate education programs by
professional/academic students, both the ‘doing’ and the ‘knowing’ texts, that is, the ‘applied’
and ‘pure’ texts, are represented and communicate with each other in the development of the
ideas in each piece of writing. In their graduate programs, the professionals/students produce
reading-writing work that combines the two disciplines, their professional discipline and their
newly-acquired academic discipline, thus their program work is interdisciplinary. Their work
also combines the two genres, that of their profession and those of the academy (often they are
working in more than one genre in their academic programs), thus their work is inter-genre.
Often they are looking at their professional practice through an academic lens, utilizing
theories and methods from their graduate courses, or from their research, to view problem
areas or aspects of their profession in a different perspective, perhaps a critical one, that will
reveal new information, new solutions, to add to knowledge about their profession and
perhaps result in changed or new practices.

Some of the early writings of the professionals/students in my study were pieces that
translated their experiences, or ‘doing’ into narrative forms. Reflections on their professional

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92 For more on the topic of professionals learning to write as academics, see Chapter 4, Professional Participants and their Programs.
93 See Seymour, K. (2007) for use of “theory” and “practice,” “knowing” and “doing,” “pure” and “applied.”
94 In this thesis, I am working in three different genres, that of institutional ethnography, a branch of sociology, which is my primary genre; of writing studies, specifically, of graduate writing studies, a relatively new genre; and of higher education studies, as it relates to graduate student writing.
practice, or other experiences, such as disjunctures or fault lines\textsuperscript{95} in their profession that brought them to the academy were written into course papers, a form of internal communication of their writing, where they incorporated the material from a course syllabus with their writing about their professions. Using a course paper to explore or elucidate a problematic is productive to the development of material for the thesis, as well as creating a unique style of writing about the topic being explored. Reworking a course paper and presenting it at a conference, and/or submitting it for publication moves the writing forward so it can become new knowledge.\textsuperscript{96}

C Professionals'/Graduate Students’ Academic Text Production

Professional/graduate students engage in ‘external textual communication’ in the form of academic conference papers, journal articles, edited book chapters, and books. As I have mentioned, any of the components of their required graduate program work can be reworked into a conference paper or publication.\textsuperscript{97} When their texts move externally to other sites, such as conferences, or journal or book publishers, through communication with and acceptance by conference session organizers and journal and book editors, they will be subject to the rules attached to that site, such as those listed in the diagram, Regulations Applying to Externally Captured Texts. Engaging their texts in external communication opens up the possibility of improving the text and moving it forward, because of the feedback such an experience will engender. Once they have completed their graduate programs, the professionals may present and publish in both academic and professional venues, gearing their texts to the regulations of the particular venue.

\textsuperscript{95} These two terms are used in institutional ethnography to denote a tangible discomfort, a problem area in one’s life or work that is causing tensions or difficulties in functioning or other adverse effects on a person or persons.

\textsuperscript{96} An example of a professional who experienced this transition from professional to academic writing is Grace, in the section, Developing a Conference Session, Presenting It, and Its Aftereffects for One of the Presenters.

\textsuperscript{97} See the list earlier in this chapter, in the section, External Communication of Texts.
Conclusion

I began this chapter with a description of extended work and its value to students. My experiences presenting at conferences were included, as well as those of some of my participant students, and its benefits. A conference session I developed with three other students in which we exchanged abstracts and papers for feedback is described, along with the advice we received from the discussant. The experience and value to one of the students of presenting her health profession work to an academic audience for the first time is explicated.

I discussed the external communication of texts, and the external capture of texts, as well as the regulations to which texts submitted to external sites were subject, and the benefits to students of presenting their work and submitting it for publication. A figure on the Interdisciplinary Communication between Professional and Academic Texts, and the External Communication/Capture of Papers and Books of Professionals in Graduate Education Programs, illustrated the connections between the various kinds of writing produced by professionals/graduate students in their programs, connections between knowing and doing, pure and applied. Publication is extremely valuable and important to graduate students’ growth as scholars, but I will leave that topic for another occasion, or for someone else to explore.

In the next chapter, I discuss the extra activities that students and I engaged in in order to enhance our required and extended work, which I refer to as ‘supplementary work.’
CHAPTER 9
SUPPLEMENTARY WORK OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

“The process of talking about one’s work and explaining it to others helps to clarify it for the student; as well, students benefit from hearing about the experiences of others.”
Quote from a supervisor about her study group.

Introduction

In the context of my research, ‘supplementary work’ is the extra, additional activities engaged in by students to fill in the gaps or disjunctures left by their programs. This type of work can increase their skills and knowledge, develop their thesis work, and add to the social dimensions of their graduate school experiences. In the context of my study, supplementary work includes: attending workshops, auditing extra courses, and participating in peer/study/thesis or writing groups. It may also include thesis proposal presentations, and mock thesis defense presentations. Often these activities are voluntary, although they may be required or recommended by thesis supervisors. All of the activities in the above list are explicated in this chapter, with examples of students’ experiences with and growth as scholars through supplementary work.

I chose the term ‘supplementary work’ to describe work that helps to support, add to, enrich, and further develop the ‘required work’ and ‘extended work’ of graduate students. In this chapter, I discuss the enriching activities and experiences that help students become scholars through engagement in many forms of supplementary activities in graduate schools. Many graduate students are involved in unregistered and unaccounted academic and practical activities, such as graduate student associations, unions, department committees, events and activities, and recreational and sports activities. However, my focus here is on the activities that support and nurture the skills required of students so they can learn to write well in their academic genres. Ideally, these activities should help students to work toward the standard of
academic scholars in their disciplines; to speak about and explain their research, employing academic language appropriate to their audiences; and to develop their work productively through its many stages to its fruition in the form of the thesis, under the guidance of their supervisors. According to my research, supplementary work can be important for students’ development as scholars and for identity-building.

**Rationale for Supplementary Work**

Many students locate supplementary venues that are outside their required graduate program work, and are in addition to the extended activities that they may engage in order to augment their knowledge and skills bases, share their developing work and receive important feedback, as a complement to their supervision. My research describes the constructive, productive and craft basis of meetings and events where students present and discuss their work; these meetings and events are not just where intellectual work is presented or displayed, as the dynamics of these meetings provide opportunities for graduate students engaged in them to advance their projects. For some students, these meetings and events constitute the ‘shop-floor’ in which much of their dissertation work is hammered out.

In my research, students described to me disjunctures in their programs and relations with their departments and faculty which challenged each stage in the completion of their graduate work. One of the disjunctures was the lack of sufficient feedback on ongoing program work after the completion of course work, when students found themselves alone, except for occasional meetings with their supervisors, who had limited time available for each student. Students had to deal with comprehensive exams, thesis proposals, ethical review processes, research and thesis writing without the supports of other students and other professors that were available during course meetings.
I found myself in that position, and personally engaged in a variety of supplementary activities. I attended a number of workshops offered by different levels of my school, seeking information related to my program. I also took two workshops that were offered through the Centre for Women’s Studies in Education at OISE/UT with Dorothy Smith and Susan Turner, in order to learn more about institutional ethnography methods and how I could apply them to my work. I also audited several courses after I had completed my required number of courses, which helped me obtain information on topics related to my research area and methodology. A large part of this chapter is devoted to study/peer/thesis and writing groups. I personally took part in four groups, three facilitated by supervisors, and one that I facilitated. These groups were venues for presenting our work and obtaining feedback. Thesis proposal development was an important function of the groups. In addition, they served as venues for presenting thesis proposals and mock thesis defenses (preparation for oral defenses), although these were presented separately in some cases. All of these types of supplementary work are described in detail, with dialogue from the participants and my commentary and analysis below, beginning with workshops.

**Workshops**

**Workshops organized by the graduate education school.**

Workshops were offered at my school, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, or OISE/UT, by departments or programs to cover important topics. Orientation workshops were held at the beginning of the fall term for newly enrolled students, and professional development workshops were held during the fall and winter terms. Specific topics included: preparing grant applications, writing course papers, ethical review protocols, the thesis process, the job market and other professional development areas deemed important for students. Workshops were offered at OISE/UT by four different levels: by my department,
by my group within the department, the Higher Education Group; by my graduate education school, OISE/UT; and by the School for Graduate Studies of the University of Toronto, or SGS, which also offered skills development workshops, called GPS (Graduate Professional Skills). Information about workshops was located in the department handbooks, websites, and email postings. Because attendance was voluntary and not part of the required work of students, attendance varied. As well, writing and research centres offered specialized help to students in groups or individually, with special assistance for students whose first language was not English.

**Department professional development day, winter 2010.**

By attending many workshops over a six-year period, beginning in 2004, I discerned many improvements in the delivery and content of workshops and other presentations for graduate students. I attended an all-day professional development day from my department on February 6, 2010; it was a Saturday, therefore it was accessible to students who were working during the week, and attracted about 60 to 70 masters and doctoral students. It was held in the library of OISE/UT, a large, open space with windows along one side, a raised area for the speakers, and tables arranged in the space in front of the raised area with chairs around them, about four or five per table.

I was curious to see what the format would be, and what they would say about writing, conferences, etc. compared to similar workshops given in previous years, especially the years at the beginning of my program. Here are some of my notes from the workshop:

**Conferences.**

A professor and one of her students talked about the importance of presenting papers at conferences, and of attending them, having opportunities to network with others. There was a stronger emphasis on conferences than what I have seen in the past. Here are some of the pointers from the presenters:
Keep in mind the time limit; if you have 10 to 12 minutes, that’s about five pages double-spaced. Talk about the highlights of your work, the big things, what you are bringing into the conversation. Sometimes you are asked to upload your presentation to the conference system, or to send your paper to the respondent two or three weeks ahead of time.

Prepare a script minute by minute. Know the format of the conference: at AERA, they use a lot of PowerPoint and overheads. At the conference, talk to people you wouldn't otherwise meet. Interactions can inform your work; this is part of the larger networking piece. Stay at the conference hotel for maximum networking opportunities. Get funding from OISE and the GSU, some conferences have their own funding for students as well.

You can put together a panel, or write a paper together with one other person or more. At the conference you can arrange to meet other OISE students at a certain time each day to discuss what you heard that day. You can room together as well. If you know certain authors are at the conference, you can ask around to meet them. Get back to people right away while they remember who you are. Use the ‘elevator approach’ to introducing your work, putting it all in four or five bullet points, so you can summarize it quickly when you speak to someone who is not familiar with it. A conference paper can be used to work out the kinks in a paper you can later publish. At a conference, even a student conference, you can get good feedback.

I really liked this approach, very friendly, conversational in style, with lots of good information for students. Also, it is very positive that conferences were being promoted as an excellent adjunct to program work, which I strongly support, as I did not find this to be the case when I began my program in 2004.

**Course papers.**

This workshop was led by a professor, who began by stating that academic writing in coursework involves modeling writing appropriate to the course. He handed out a sheet on tips for writing course papers which was also on the TPS website, and offered the following comments in response to students’ questions:

The contents and the style of writing are different. How you organize your ideas, your structure, is important. There should be a balance of references and your own ideas. Your own ideas should be linked to the literature. Use your original voice, “given this literature, here's my experience,” or “given this literature, here's my claim.” Evidence should support the discourse. Have a conceptual framework, make key concepts clear, such as “social justice is...” Show where you're coming from. Position your argument in a particular discourse; this could be in the form of a mind map. How much is your

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voice versus other voices? Write what you know, then go back and include citations. When reading or writing a paper, ask yourself, is the conceptual framework clear? Use logical subheadings, turn it back into an outline when you have finished writing. Re the question on the use of the active voice: the use of the first person is not found in journal articles; instead they say, “the findings suggest this…”

Next he asked us to write on a sheet giving three tips for faculty to improve the quality of course papers. He also handed out the U of T policy guidelines on grading. We were arranged in groups of four to six people at a table in two rows. He asked one row to write about a bad experience related to writing and getting graded on a course paper, and the other row to write about a good experience. He also asked what the professor did to create a good or bad experience, so he could give feedback to the professors in our department.

Negative experiences re course papers mentioned by the students and what the professor did to contribute to these negative experience included: frustration, confusion, personalities that didn't click, not knowing how you're doing, what went well, what didn't go well, what you can do to make it better. Formative feedback makes a big difference. After a presentation, students would like to receive individual comments in a short e-mail, as well as class discussion and class comments. Students wanted more direction, more criteria on what is wanted and expected in class work and course papers.

Positive experiences included: good accessibility of the professor, guidance, advice, examples of literature, and ability to forge relationships. Encouraging students to share ideas with another student or group of students, and give feedback to the whole group were positive experiences. Also mentioned as helpful were: using open-ended questions, which encouraged the same from students, using passionate topics. Open discussion was described as forging relationships, making connections with others. Students liked when professors made sure everyone in the class had the chance to say what they thought.

When something is required before the course paper such as a proposal, students wanted concrete feedback, further direction. They also wanted to get feedback throughout the course. Encouraging peer discussion in class and outside class was found to be helpful, as well as the use of Blackboard sites. Sharing bibliographies throughout the course was also helpful. Giving students opportunities to give five-minute presentations on topics of their choice and getting feedback from the class was considered a positive. Also very important is the professor's attitude; students said that professors who love teaching produce good course papers.

Three students at my table, two women and a man, Ann, Barb, and Chaz, discussed a course they really liked that they had taken together, in which there was a lot of open discussion, passionate open discussion, which was not always polite. The professor mediated it, providing philosophical terminology to use in the discourse, and clarified who said what.
Chaz: Ann and I called each other every day when we were writing our papers. I had questions, needed clarification on the expectations. We discussed ideas and shared advice on how to write our papers, mining for resources, putting the paper together so it made sense. We communicated through Facebook also, as a touch point, sometimes as a distraction, or procrastination.

Barb: Or a tool to pull out of distraction!

This activity was prolonged beyond the allotted time; students were very engaged in discussions about how they would like their courses to be run, and took seriously the opportunity to provide feedback. Professors routinely handed out evaluation sheets at the last class of each course with space to make anonymous suggestions for improvements, but this venue was different. It was an opportunity to bring about change; after all, students were being asked for their opinions in this public forum, and their suggestions would be passed on to their professors.

This was the first time I had seen a two-way interchange in a workshop at my school, as if the presenter was saying, “This is our advice to you, but we want your feedback, what is your advice to us?” The positive reactions and full engagement of the students suggested that more opportunities to give feedback to their professors and supervisors and others who make decisions about how their programs are run would be welcomed by the students and would empower them to have a greater voice and role in their graduate education process.

**Supervisors and thesis committees.**

Next was a workshop on supervisors and thesis committees, with two women professors, Professor A and Professor B, speaking alternatively, giving practical advice, followed by a long question period.

Prof. A: Choose someone reliable, compatible, supportive, to guide your research. Look at their track record, how many have completed.

Prof. B: It may take a supervisor three weeks to read something because of the high number of supervisions per supervisor.
Prof. A: When to choose your thesis supervisor? Have ideas before entering your program, take courses with them or audit their courses. The thesis is an organic process, there are all kinds of ways to navigate through the thesis process. You need three people, your thesis supervisor and two more for your internal committee. Negotiate good people for your committee and negotiate the extent of their involvement. Take courses from people you are considering for your committee to get to know them.

Prof. B: You are not restricted to your department or program for your supervisor or your committee. A committee member can sometimes be an adjunct professor. There are different processes in each department and group re comprehensive examinations, thesis proposals. There is an advantage to have a supervisor in your same department and program.

Question: I am a part-time student, not able to take courses with instructors I want because of timetabling problems. Can I email professors, make appointments to meet them?

Prof. B: Yes, say what you are interested in, what the professor has done that interests you.

Question: I keep flip flopping with what I want to do. They want a clear plan.

Prof. A: We have a vested interest in getting people through. We go through all the files of all the students to see where they are.

Prof. B: I talk with students about their interests. You need to find someone who can work with you and guide you.

Question: I've had a lot of hits and misses with trying to find a supervisor. If a supervisor doesn't have the background...

Prof. B: Ideally a supervisor knows something about your area, so you can get the best feedback. The committee members can help also.

Prof. A: I need to know the method, where the student is located in developing their scholarly voice. Higher Education is strong right now in student development.

Question: What are the requirements for an external examiner?

Prof. B: As students you're not involved, technically, in choosing the external. After your advisor, supervisor, and committee members are chosen, when your thesis is near completion and you are thinking about the defense, your supervisor nominates an external. SGS decides. Students can suggest an external, based on reading the external’s recent work to see if it fits with their work.

Question: Can you know the external?
Prof. B: Neither you nor your supervisor should know the person. It should not be a close relationship. Keep in mind that you need 9 to 12 weeks from the signing off of the thesis by the committee of the completed thesis.

Question: What if you have paradigm clashes with your committee?

Prof. B: Negotiate your committee members with your supervisor, choosing people who play well in the same box as you.

Prof. A: Some are more comfortable doing boundary jumping than others.

There was an informal, open camaraderie about the workshop; the presenters had set the tone and students responded in kind.

The last workshop was on the ethical review process, which was more of an information session, imparting information to the students, and handing out examples from actual reviews to guide students in their own applications, encouraging students to copy the formats and even the wording. I found this session to be easier to understand and more straightforward than others I have heard on the topic before which were quite confusing. Sometimes too much material is presented which is more than the students can handle in one sitting.

After the sessions, students lingered and chatted with the presenters and each other for about a half an hour. The large open space was an ideal location for this professional development day. The department provided food and beverages on long tables at the back of the room, for lunch and snacks, so the students were inclined to stay and participate in the workshops and discussions, and interact with each other. I would describe this workshop as very successful, informative, interactive, and engaging. Instead of a lecture format that I had found so problematic in the past, these workshops engaged students informally in groups and individually to discuss the topics and provide feedback to the presenters and to the other students present.

Next I will discuss another type of workshop, one that is outside the regular programmed events of the graduate school, and that requires a fee for attendance. I will
describe two external workshops that I attended to learn more about my chosen methodology and how to apply it to my study.

Specialized fee-based external workshops.

Dorothy Smith’s workshop and ‘intensive.’

I personally experienced a gap between what I could learn in my courses and my reading about institutional ethnography. I needed to learn more about IE to apply the method of inquiry and the sociology of Dorothy Smith to my research and writing. I realised that a gap in the program offerings can manifest itself as gaps in the arguments in graduate students’ writing and texts. So I registered and paid the fees for Dorothy Smith’s summer workshop and ‘intensive’ in August 2007. The workshop took place on a Friday night, all day Saturday and Sunday morning, and took the form of Professor Smith presenting information on the background and main concepts of IE, using PowerPoint slides to augment her presentation, and questions from the participants. About thirty people attended the workshop. Smith included suggestions on how to begin and carry out a study using IE on the second day. Here are some excerpts of her comments, arranged according to topic:

Develop a problematic, a common, shared focus or interest, focus on it and on the people in it; the problematic organizes the direction of your research, your relevant questions. Find out what you care about the most. Fix on something and go after it, or else you’re a mess. It’s an experience of discovery, of seeing where things go. Locate a standpoint, of one individual, yourself, or a group of people. Start with the local, in their everyday experiences, then locate where the actualities are embedded, in the translocal. You are being taught by the person you are interviewing; it’s not a power relationship. You want to know what they are actually doing, which you are ignorant of. Talk to someone as if they were training you for their job. Talk to them about their work as it is relevant to your problematic, what you’re concerned to investigate, what you care about. Your questions depend on what you want to find out, what you want the person to talk about. In an interview, many doors appear, many complexes of relationships; your problematic determines what you select, which doors you go through. You need to find doors, hook ups – look for terms used in an interview that connect to translocal relations and coordinate the local to the extra local.
Tim Diamond, an IE researcher, also spoke on the Saturday, about the concept of ‘work’:

Work consists of people acting, trying to make sense out of the world, accomplish something, put a life together. Learning from people what their work is, getting concrete accounts from them – through talking, you can get people to give good descriptions.

Later, Smith talked at length about texts, including how they “coordinate people’s doings in multiple sites” and that they are “not separable from people’s doings.” The next day, Sunday, Smith discussed Susan Turner’s IE Mapping techniques, and some of the difficulties in conducting an IE study, related to obtaining funding and ethical approval, and the necessity of explaining IE to supervisors and committee members who may not be familiar with it: “think of your readers, what they need to know to make it make sense.” Also, that it is important to obtain information from a range of people, to explicate the “different ways people participate in an institutional process,” and finding ways of gathering information without recording devices, to avoid problems of gaining consent from institutions.

Some of the information that was presented is also explicated in Smith’s books and articles, however it was presented differently, in a conversational style, with graphics for clarification, and new details, asides, or explanations that reinforced the ideas, or offered a different slant on them. Also, Smith’s description of problems that can occur when employing IE for research was presented in a person tone, as advice meant to warn students and avert difficulties. A presentation by Smith herself was much more powerful than anything students could glean from books.

The separate ‘intensive’ began on Sunday afternoon, after the workshop ended, with six registrants and Professor Smith; that first afternoon, we all described our thesis projects in turn. We then met Monday through Thursday the following week for group meetings, which took the form of the participants discussing problems they were struggling with in their work
at different stages of development, and making comments and suggestions to each other.

Professor Smith provided advice freely to the participants. As well, each of us was allotted two one-hour individual meetings with Professor Smith to discuss our work and obtain advice from her.

In my first meeting with Professor Smith, on Monday afternoon, I discussed my planned research. Here are some of my notes from that meeting:

One difficulty encountered by doctoral students is the struggle to learn a different kind of writing. Students are enculturated into the particular genre of their discipline in the process of moving through the various reading-writing activities in their programs. Composition and rhetoric studies discuss this process. Students are learning a new register (language).

I need to be specific about the particular problems encountered by doctoral students in their programs. In choosing their topics for their theses, students may be orienting themselves to obtaining funding, future jobs.

The reading-writing production of the thesis (proposal) (possible title).

***I need to do a detailed autobiographical account of my doctoral experience, including the thesis proposal and all the problems I encountered. Focus on the thesis proposal. Then add the accounts of my student participants in their thesis proposal processes.

Because Professor Smith had an extensive background in writing and discourse literature, she was an ideal person to discuss the writing difficulties of graduate students. Since she had supervised many students, she was also aware of many of the other problems of students as they moved through their programs, so she asked me to be on the lookout for difficulties that I encountered, or that the participants’ discussed with me. Smith also alerted me to investigate the reasons students chose their particular research topics. Professor Smith suggested at this first meeting that I begin with and include my own experience in the institutional process of my graduate school program, so I could draw on my experience as well as those of the participants when writing my thesis.
At my second individual meeting with Smith on Wednesday afternoon of that week, she told me about a book on experiential ethnography, by Sands, and that it might be useful for me to justify my use of my own story. Here are some of my notes from that meeting:

Sands, Experiential Ethnography, 2002, leaves out the institutional dimension, but may be useful in legitimizing my approach. Autoethnography trails an individual’s story; Sands is using her own experience. Focus on myself involved in an institutional process, from within it, how I am present in my experience. Tell people how I went about it. Strategy – draw on my experience as well as that of those I interview. Interview 3 - 4 students. Tell their stories without identifying anyone.


With IE, create the economics of your research, carry it out, analyze it, then write it up.

Writing an abstract for a conference paper – sources, model for the paper, how to put ideas into a compressed form and style. A non-personal way of writing, producing in a genre.

Experiential Ethnography involves writing in a genre, having a dialogue with the genre and what I have to say. Focus on the thesis proposal, my own process. Experiential ethnography of reading-writing a thesis proposal. Add participants’ reading-writing experiences. How I figured out what it should look like, internet, library work. How my reading entered into my writing.

Give my own experience first, then my learning from the experiences of others. Include genre theory, anchored in literature.

At this meeting, Smith was giving me practical advice about how to carry out my research, and what to include. I investigated experiential ethnography, but decided not to engage with that methodology, since I found others that were more appropriate for my particular research. I did follow her advice about focusing on my own experiences in the institutional processes of carrying out a doctoral study, and then telling the stories of other students which I observed or were related to me. I also focused on reading-writing activity, my own and that of my student participants and the writing blocks that we encountered, and how we extricated ourselves from them. I also investigated how students learned to write in
academic genres. I also included information on how I learned to write an abstract for a conference session in my thesis, another topic on graduate student writing that we discussed. The thesis proposal was going to be central to my research, and it did figure largely in my thesis, but other aspects of graduate student writing also assumed importance as I carried out my research.

This “intensive” helped me to improve my understanding of IE terms and methods, to see how other students were using it, and get a sense of the range of studies using IE. As well, I had the opportunity to connect with students from my own and other universities who were using IE, and the opportunity to present my work to Dorothy Smith and benefit from her critique and suggestions to close gaps in my own thesis work. The advice that Smith proffered had a strong influence on my ensuing research, but like all IE studies, it unfolded in ways that were not anticipated or predictable.

Other students there commented on their need for the workshop and intensive to obtain information that was not available in their programs. Like them, I chose to undertake this focused training at my own time and expense, all of which have contributed to my scholarship but are not required, recognized, funded, or recorded by supervisors or program administrators at my graduate school. This very positive experience made me aware of the importance and productivity of outside workshops. Next is my description of a workshop on IE Mapping with Susan Turner.
Susan Turner’s workshop on IE mapping techniques: Mapping for change.

I wanted to use Susan Turner’s mapping techniques, which are based on and integral to institutional ethnography and the sociology of Dorothy Smith, to make diagrams to illustrate how texts generate actions on the part of people who interact with them, but found it difficult to understand the concepts she had developed from perusing her thesis and other work by her.

IE maps are quite different from diagrams or mind maps, because they illustrate the connections between texts and the actions of people. They serve as a visual adjunct to a text in explaining the complex steps and actions in an institution which may lead to consequences that are not anticipated, not desired or detrimental to a particular group who is interacting with that institution. For the researcher, IE maps also clarify what is missing in their research, help pinpoint where problems are occurring, and act as an aid in directing the research in productive directions.

When I heard that a workshop with Professor Susan Turner was being offered by the CWSE at OISE/UT, I signed up for it. The workshop began on a Friday evening with a go-around, in which each person talked about their research, starting with Professor Turner. Most of the sixteen people attending were from the Toronto area, several came in from Hamilton, about a one-hour drive from Toronto, but others had travelled considerable distances to attend, one from Alberta, another from northern Ontario, and one from upper New York state. This workshop was our opportunity to learn about mapping from the person who created the unique type of mapping used in conjunction with the IE method of inquiry. After the go-around, Professor Turner talked about questions that would be answered the next day, during the workshop, which would run from 9 am to 6 pm:

What is most useful to map?
How do you talk about it?
Who is your audience?
What will it be used for?

We were asked to bring any maps we had already made, as well as information about the texts that were pertinent to our research.

The next day, Professor Turner talked about using mapping as a way of understanding institutional practices through investigating the texts that govern those practices and the actions carried out by people generated by the texts. Professor Turner spoke at length about her work related to land use planning and agricultural policy development, which have been major undertakings for her, and how she used mapping to gain an understanding of the processes governing projects in those two areas. Throughout her talk Professor Turner shared information and suggestions that could be related to any research undertaking, so it would be applicable to all the students attending the workshop. Along the way, students asked questions pertaining to their own research, and the maps they had made.

After the break, we met in groups to discuss our work and how mapping could be used in our research. My group consisted of me, another student at my graduate school who I already knew, and Olive, a student from upper New York State. We each created a small map related to our research. We were then to choose one small piece of one person’s research and work together to develop a work – text – work sequence map for it, looking at who and what is involved, on a large piece of paper. Next each group presented their large map to the whole group, after tacking it up on the wall. After each presentation, there were questions from the group, and questions and comments from Professor Turner.

My group chose to draw a map of Olive’s PhD research, because she had indicated that she was stuck, unsure what direction to take her work, and we thought the IE mapping process might help her. Her research was a study of a grassroots charity foundation’s project on disease prevention for a targeted group of young people. She had attended the pilot for this
project, five meetings with volunteers who were not from the targeted group. She identified herself as a researcher, took ethnographic notes, and interviewed the coordinator and facilitator as well as the volunteer participants. She also had studied the handbooks and brochures for the program.

We made a map on a piece of paper, starting with Olive’s contacts with the group, indicating meetings and texts in a linear fashion, from left to right on the page, writing down the information as she spoke of it, and asking questions to clarify what should be drawn on the map, with arrows indicating the sequence. Later, we drew it on a larger piece of paper, and pinned it to the wall. Olive explained the map to the group when it was our turn, and people asked her questions. I wrote additional information on the map related to the questions and Olive’s responses. Professor Turner also made salient remarks about the contents of the map:

Regarding the handbook, it would serve as standardized regulations for the project. Who gets it? Handbooks are often in the form of lists, what is in it? What are the key points? The priorities? What doesn’t appear? Where is it from? Whose concerns are represented?

She also commented on the pilot project:

The pilot project serves as a laboratory, to test out the project so it can be standardized. Who decides on the information? The content? How is it vetted? What is emphasized in the pilot project? What gets taken up in a similar form elsewhere?

Professor Turner asked Olive, “What did you object to in the pilot project, and why?”

After the presentations I had a chance to talk to Olive, and asked her what she got from the map and the comments. She replied that it helped a lot to clarify her project, and what she needed to follow up on. She also said that she had a new tool to use in her thesis work. She was quite enthusiastic and eager to return to her university and get to work on moving her research forward.
To sum up, a student may seek out a supplementary activity in the form of a specialized workshop or seminar in order to fill in gaps in the offerings of the graduate departments and graduate school. In a specialized workshop, students can learn about a particular methodology, genre, or the work of a particular scholar in a setting where they have opportunities to apply their new knowledge in reading-writing activities that are further refined, guided and supervised. Such workshops may involve a participation fee, to cover the costs of running the workshop, including payment to the person running the workshop who is often a well-known scholar. The workshop may be offered locally or may require travel to another city or country. I was a participant in the first offerings of the above workshops by Dorothy Smith and Susan Turner at my graduate education school, OISE/UT. The workshops were offered subsequently separately and jointly, and several of my student participants took part in one or both of them, sharing with me that they found them very helpful in understanding and applying institutional ethnography methods of inquiry to their research work. Next I will discuss another supplementary activity: auditing extra courses.

**Auditing Extra Courses (Beyond Required Courses)**

A practice that some graduate students engage in is auditing courses from within and outside their departments, typically after they have completed their course work. At my school, graduate students could request or be invited to audit a course. Permission from the professor was required to attend as an auditor. Auditing students were expected to participate in all class work, including the readings, discussions, and other assignments except the final paper, and were not graded. These students were not accounted for anywhere, as they were not officially recorded like enrolled students.
Value of having auditing students to the professor.

A professor related his experiences with auditors to me:

I have a different relationship with the auditors in my classes, versus the registered students. For one thing, registered students usually register for the course without contacting me, while auditing students must approach me to obtain permission, and so I can establish what they’re there for, what their role will be. One auditor was another faculty member. The power relations are different, because with students, our roles are defined; I am the instructor, they are the student, but with auditors, the relations are negotiated, which can be awkward. The auditors are very quiet at first, feeling they don’t have the right to be involved in discussions, but I made it clear that they were welcome to contribute the same as the registered students, and they did. They are there in another role, providing an outside view, a different voice.

It is clear that this professor regards auditors differently than enrolled students in his courses, as auditors’ roles in the course are negotiated, and their contributions to the course are those of someone with a different perspective, perhaps providing a fresh outlook or a critical opinion.

Value of auditing for the auditing students in the course.

In my research, I found that auditing courses served many purposes for students; one was providing a venue for students to engage in ongoing discussions about their work after their required course work was completed. Another purpose was to be part of a community of other students doing similar work, as described by a student:

You lose community after finishing your course component. You stop interacting with other students and the course instructor. I audited courses to keep in the community.

Auditing students may also choose to audit a course because they want to gain new information from the course materials and readings that are relevant to their study. I audited a course on Academic Capitalism in order to learn more about the relationships between universities and corporations, an area of interest to me that emerged during my research work.

Students may audit courses in order to learn new methodologies relevant to their studies.
From a student:

There is linearity to the running of a thesis program; after course work is completed, you’re on your own to tackle your thesis work. But I found that my methodology was lacking, and I missed the opportunities to discuss my writing with other students and a professor that I had during my courses, so I audited a course on Foucault to learn more about his work and how I could incorporate it into my thesis, and to take part in discussions.

From my own experience and that related to me by my professional/student participants, I have found that auditing courses can contribute to graduate students’ knowledge and methodology base through their strategic use of an already organized and productive reading-writing program that is present in a course, but the benefits don’t have to stop at the end of the course. Like a course taken for credit, an audited course can lead to new connections with other students and professors, study groups and/or conference attendance, conference papers and sessions, and publications.

In addition to the required six course credits for my PhD program, I audited additional courses from within and outside my department. One of the courses was a methodology course that included institutional ethnography, run by Professor Bell.\(^99\) I wanted to learn more about institutional ethnography and how I could apply it to my study. Auditing this course afforded me the opportunity to read some of Dorothy Smith’s books and articles and discuss them with Dr. Bell and the others in the class. I learned how to use the various research tools in IE, including how to interpret documents and texts from an institutional setting in order to understand how the texts organized the actions of the people who engaged with them. The focus was on providing information on different methodologies that were relevant to the students’ different areas of research, so it was extremely useful to me as I could immediately apply the information to my own study.

\(^{99}\) This is a pseudonym.
I did all the course work, including preparing and presenting a paper on my own study, and actively engaged in the discussions and assignments, with the exception of the final paper. This course was not running at the time I did my required course work, so I could not access it at that time. I chose to be an auditor rather than a registered student because I already had completed my requisite number of courses, so I could immediately apply my new knowledge from the course to my study, instead of spending time writing a course paper.

After the course finished, another student and I wanted to continue the discussion, so we asked Professor Bell if she would be willing to facilitate a study group. As a result, we started the IE study group in 2006 which was still active at the time of the writing of this thesis in 2013 and will be discussed below, along with my experiences with other study groups and the experiences of others that were related to me, with examples of different types of study groups.

**Study/Peer/Thesis Groups**

**Introduction.**

My research revealed that study/peer/thesis and writing groups were important additional supplements to their programs for many students. Such groups were offered by some supervisors or departments; some were organized and run by students themselves. Many students in my study met at their school in groups of up to sixteen students; others met at nearby cafés, or at each other’s homes in pairs or small groups. Some groups in my study were venues for thesis proposal development and/or presentation, for reporting on work to date, and for mock thesis defense presentations, which prepared students for their actual oral defenses; in some departments, thesis proposals and mock thesis defense presentations were organized as separate meetings to which others were invited for their input and feedback.
Throughout my research, I have found that graduate students want to learn to write and construct their theses step by step, so it is not so daunting and overwhelming. Thesis groups can be referred to as “textual communities”: “[T]he formation of groups oriented to a text or texts and sharing practices of reading and interpretation” (Stock, 1990, quoted by Smith & Schryer, 2007, p. 114).

Study groups begin in order to fulfill a need, and end when the participants no longer require them. Students may drop out, and others join on a continuous basis. Some groups extend beyond their original mandates to generate workshops, panels, conference papers and sessions, and publications. Some students who have already completed their degrees may continue to attend the meetings because they feel connected to the group, and want to continue to offer their input and feedback to the other group members, to follow up on the progress of the others, to join the interesting discussions, and find out about opportunities for joint conference presentations at national and international conferences.

Study groups take many different forms. Those that are run by supervisors can act as a form of extended supervision, of their own and sometimes other students as well, alleviating the time-constraints of individual supervision of graduate students on faculty, who are dealing with their own increased pressures of requirements to supervise more students. “Writing up” the thesis is a challenge for most students. Regular meetings with the supervisor are most important during the writing phase, but some students encountered difficulties connecting with their supervisors: “My supervisor is often away, so I rely on others to give me feedback about my writing, other professors and students,” was a comment I heard from a student who attended a study group led by a supervisor who was not her own thesis supervisor.

During the thesis proposal stage at my graduate school, I found that consulting with students who were also in this stage or who had already completed it was very helpful; often
this consultation was in study groups. As part of my research, I was involved with four different study groups, three of which usually devoted some of the meeting time to individual presentations of thesis proposals in process; each of these was facilitated by a faculty member who was an experienced supervisor of graduate students. I will discuss the groups in which I participated, as well as several others that I learned about from students who attended them or professors who ran them.

**Supervisors’ study groups.**

Professors who also act as thesis supervisors may run study groups of their own students. Some are open to other students who wish to attend as well, because their own supervisor doesn’t run a study group, or because they want additional time in a study group, or an additional venue for working out difficulties. I interacted with three supervisors who were running thesis groups at my school, and I heard of several others, but I also met supervisors who did not run study groups. Information about which supervisors run groups was not listed anywhere; it was a matter of hearing about them from other students or other supervisors. I don’t know what proportion of supervisors at my school run study groups, as it is not required. This topic was not part of my research, but would be an interesting investigation in the future.

Next I will discuss my ethnographies and analysis of three graduate education study groups of three different supervisors in three different departments.

**Professor Graham’s study group.**

The first group, Professor Graham’s study group, was the first study group that I attended when I was in the second year of my program. This group was run by a supervisor who invited her own students, as well as any others from her department or other departments who wanted to join. The students, men and women, were at different stages of the thesis...
process, drafting their thesis proposals, collecting data, or writing up their theses. Professor Graham stated in her email before the first fall meeting that the purpose of the group was to provide support for the students that she was supervising, because they had common needs and concerns that could better be addressed in a group than individually. Also, they could benefit from each other’s experiences and advice. To this end, she also accepted other students who had different supervisors but who could benefit from and contribute to the group.

Some of the students attended regularly while others dropped in and out of the group, so the numbers fluctuated. Usually there were about ten students attending the meetings, which were held monthly in one of the classrooms of the school. After about eight months; the study group was discontinued by the supervisor due to time constraints.

Professor Graham encouraged students to bring up topics that were of interest, as well as report on outside events that were relevant to other students’ topics and professional development. Professor Graham encouraged and nurtured a sense of community among all the students that she gathered together with the goal of everyone helping each other move along in their graduate degree processes.

Professor Graham planned the meetings beforehand, informing the students who had indicated an interest in the group of upcoming meetings via e-mail, including the topics to be discussed. It is clear that she kept in mind the students who attended as well as the various stages of their work and their needs. For example, in one email she asked students to bring their grant/scholarship proposal materials, and reminded them of an upcoming department workshop on grant proposal writing. She also invited three students who had been successful in obtaining grants to present at the meeting and share their insights. In addition, she invited three other students to present about their thesis organization techniques, so they could advise students that were at the stage of organizing their data and preparing to write their theses. As
well, she asked that students who had completed their thesis proposals share their processes and recommendations in order to assist students who were at the thesis proposal writing stage. Lastly, she requested that students bring conference calls and upcoming events of interest that they had heard of, as well as information on new books relevant to the areas of interest of the attending students.

Both men and women attended the meetings. Students came from a variety of backgrounds and countries, and were employing a variety of different methodologies, though most were critical methods. Everyone seemed comfortable speaking and contributing. Although there was considerable variation in the meetings, there was a general format. The meeting began with a ‘go-around’ the table, when each student briefly discussed their work and its progress, some handing out outlines, summaries or “maps.” Each student received feedback from the others and from Dr. Graham, such as suggested texts and articles or how to proceed with their work. After the go-around, one or two students discussed their work or a topic of interest at length.

One such topic was on how to publish in journals and books, presented by a student who had successfully published a number of articles. The student explained why he was so eager to publish while working on his thesis: “Publishing validates my knowledge. It is part of my activism, because it validates the subjugated knowledges that I am researching and writing about.” He advised students to pick a “simple topic that is specific, significant, supportable, convincing, original, and playful, like a work of art.” The student also listed journals that were relevant to graduate education students who wish to publish, and spoke about how to find the right journals: “Who are you citing? Are they on any journal editorial boards? Who is your audience? Which journals do you like? Who are the editors?” He also listed relevant book publishers. And he suggested that, “a lead article in a journal can become a chapter in a book.”
Just make sure you get permission to do this from the journal, put it into your contract.” He
told students not to get discouraged if they received rejection slips: “Take your defeats and use
them to improve your writing skills.” Professor Graham added information about a session on
publishing at a conference where citation was stressed. As well, she suggested that once they
had completed their theses, students could use their data chapters, split them up, pick journals
and apply to them for publication.

The student’s presentation was very thorough; he was eager to share his experiences
and advice, all he had learned through trial and error, trying to create an easier path for his
fellow students. His advice was very practical and very current, and was especially relevant to
the other students because it was delivered by one of their own.

Other presentations included: writing a good scholarships/fellowships/grants
application, which was presented by four successful grant recipients. Another was a review of
the process of the completion of the thesis, its acceptance and defense. Each meeting had
goals, and accomplished something. Formal aspects of the graduate program were more
clearly defined as a result of the revelations that emerged during the students’ presentations
and the discussions that ensued. Students obtained information that they could apply
immediately to their work, as well as information they could save for future reference.

It took me a while to become oriented to this study group, the first one I attended. I
took notes at each meeting, and continued conversations with the students after the meetings.
Attending meetings of this study group was beneficial to me beyond the value of the material
that was presented because I got to know the students who were in my department and other
departments of my school, the range of their topics, and the different methodologies they were
employing. The methodology courses I had taken on Qualitative Methods and Foucault were
brought to life as I saw how students were employing different methods in their theses. I also
obtained detailed information on future stages of my own process, such as applying for specialized doctoral examinations, forming a thesis committee, writing a thesis proposal, finding conferences of interest, publishing, and the thesis defense directly from students who had completed those stages, including difficulties they had overcome.

In summary, this group served four main purposes:

1. It was a forum for students to present their on-going work in its different stages to the others, and also to solicit feedback and suggestions. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Extended Work of Graduate Students, opportunities to talk about their work, as well as write about it, helps students to clarify it, and develop their own language to describe their work.

2. Students could experience a variety of theories and methods that were being employed by different students, as well as a variety of topics of research.

3. This group provided information to the students attending about important practical matters and strategies for dealing with the various components of their programs, as well as information about opportunities to present and publish their work, through the presentations of students on work that they had completed successfully and were able to demonstrate to the group.

4. It served as an information exchange where students could report on and receive information on upcoming workshops, conferences, books, and other items of interest.

Professor Graham’s students presented their thesis proposals and mock thesis defenses separately from the group, at meetings that were announced and open to anyone to attend. Several of her students mock thesis defenses are presented later in this chapter. Next I will
discuss another study group in which I participated, also run by a supervisor, Professor Sinclair’s group.

**Professor Sinclair’s study group.**

Professor Sinclair’s study group was made up of students she was supervising and other students in her department and other departments of the graduate school who had heard about the group and asked to join. The group met irregularly, about once a month, in a seminar room in her department with everyone seated around a long table; it continued for many years, with students joining and leaving at different times, and remaining for varying lengths of time. The meetings were announced via emails to the group. The students who attended were all women, employing a variety of methodologies. Professor Sinclair was very relaxed, welcoming and friendly with all the students who came to the group, and offered them very succinct practical advice. She encouraged students to get together on their own so they could work together for their mutual benefit: “Meet with Joan, you're both at the same stage. You can help each other.” I was part of this group for four years so I got to see a lot of different students present their work at different stages of its development.

The meetings began similarly to Dr. Graham’s study group meetings, with a go-around the table, when each student provided a short update on their work. At times, other students or Dr. Sinclair would make a comment or a suggestion, but not always. In addition, one student would present their work at length, in order to obtain feedback about how to solve a problem or deal with an impasse, or to present their thesis proposal or mock thesis defense. The students spoke openly about any personal problems they were encountering, such as dealing with working full-time and trying to balance that with studying. I had not encountered that type of discussion in the previous study group. A number of the students were mothers;
several had babies during their thesis work, and these topics came up, which made me aware of the special difficulties encountered by students who were mothers. I discuss this topic at length in chapter 6, Professional Participants and their Programs, in the section, Professionals'/Students'/Mothers’ Special Challenges.

This group was less formal than Dr. Graham’s group, and less structured. Topics relating to students’ different stages were discussed as they came up, rather than being preplanned, as was the case in Dr. Graham’s group. Professor Sinclair provided a lot of empathy to the students, along with her suggestions. At one meeting, Yvette spoke about her frustration:

I'm in the sixth year of my PhD on education in an African country. My funding has expired so I've been doing consultation work to support myself. I have to get back to my thesis but I'm finding that difficult and I'm panicking. I'm struggling with my supervisor who doesn't seem to be excited about my work. My supervisor wants me to produce a draft for her before sharing it with my committee. I've written three drafts of my thesis. My supervisor says it is improving. After the second draft, my supervisor asked me to refocus my conceptual work, to simplify it, focus it, dumb it down. She said I tried to do too much and that my work has no overreaching arch.

Professor Sinclair gave her direct, practical advice: “You need to negotiate with your supervisor, be more assertive. Tell her you want to finish it, how can you get there? Segregate out bits you can take out and use elsewhere. This is your dissertation, not your life!”

At another meeting, a student lamented: “The thesis proposal seems like a huge hurdle.” Professor Sinclair, a thesis supervisor with many years of experience working with students on their theses, answered pointedly: “Proposals are a sticking point, don’t get stuck.” Another student spoke of her frustrations around trying to complete her thesis proposal while working full-time and struggling with her methodology. Her sense of guilt of not getting her proposal completed is apparent in her remarks. In this case, the student provided her own good
advice about how to proceed. Perhaps the act of voicing her story and her concerns helped clarify it for her, as I heard this from several students:

I came out of hiding in November when I met my supervisor and got feedback on my proposal. I am a full-time teacher. I know I have to do it but I can't get my hands on it. I'm using Bourdieu, but he is so complex, others who write about him are better, such as Grenfell. This needs to get done, I need to shorten my proposal and incorporate new readings.

Other students talked about their struggles around their thesis proposals. Here are some examples:

I find that I am constantly dissatisfied with my writing; I want to keep rewriting it. I’ve rewritten it five times. I know how I’ll do my research, my methodology has been established, but I’m not sure how I will analyze it. The thesis question and sub-questions are of primary importance. I’ve revamped mine and narrowed it down to a tighter focus.

Professor Sinclair told her that she needed strict deadlines to curtail all the rewriting.

Another student talked about her struggles with her proposal:

My proposal was 38 pages long, and I had 10 versions saved. It grows and grows; I’m still updating and changing it. My supervisor pushed me to be specific on my questions in order to make it researchable. Good questions are important; they help you organize your data in order to answer the questions.

Professor Sinclair addressed everyone on the topic of thesis proposals. She said she had read a variety of books, and that she had found an excellent resource on guidelines for thesis writers online. She gave out a handout entitled, “Developing the Thesis Proposal,” and summarized it: “The thesis proposal should be brief, concrete, and focused. The literature review should cover main areas, and main sources.”

Professor Sinclair’s style was very direct and practical. Her comments were always short and to the point. Her goal was to move students along in their thesis work, to help them prevent getting bogged down and prolonging the process. I observed that her interchanges
with the students that she was supervising were different than those with students who attended the study group, but were not supervised by her. With her own students, she was dealing with specific details of their thesis work, while with the other students, her comments were more general. The above examples are of students who she did not supervise.

Professor Sinclair’s study group was more casual, less structured, and more personal in nature than that of Professor Graham. Students received direct advice that was geared to their particular situations, but there was usually a general aspect to the advice as well, so that other students would also find it relevant. Topics relating to different stages of the thesis process were dealt with when they came up in discussions, and were not prearranged, as was the case in Professor Graham’s group. This group continued over a long period of time.

To sum up, Professor Sinclair’s study group:

1. Provided a forum for quick updates on students’ progress, with an opportunity to receive some brief feedback.
2. Provided a setting where students could present at length a part of their ongoing work that was problematic to receive more lengthy feedback.
3. Provided a setting to present a thesis proposal or mock thesis defence.
4. Provided empathy for personal difficulties related to work-study and to family-study.
5. Provided information on aspects of thesis development on a casual basis, when it came up in discussions.
6. Provided information about books, conferences, etc. on a casual basis.

Professor Sinclair’s students presented their mock thesis defenses within the study group. Cynthia’s mock defense, which took place at a group meeting, is found later in this
chapter, in the section on Mock Thesis Defenses. Next I will discuss a study group that was supervisor-led and methodologically-based.

**Professor Bell’s study group.**

After I audited Professor Bell’s methodology course, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter in the section on auditing courses, another auditing student and I wanted to continue to learn more about IE and how to use it in our research in a group format with other students using IE and with Professor Bell. Professor Bell agreed to facilitate the group. As a result, the IE study group was organized and continued to meet on an irregular schedule. It was still running in 2013. The study group consisted of some of the students who had completed Dr. Bell’s methodology course, plus other students who were using IE in their thesis work and wanted the opportunity to discuss their work in a group setting and asked to join the group after they heard about it. As with the two groups mentioned previously, students entered the group and left at different times; some have remained since its inception. When Dr. Bell’s methodology course was run again, two years after the formation of the group, some of those students joined as well after the course ended. There were usually eight to ten students at each group meeting, made up of current students and graduates, men and women, but more women than men. Some students attended all the meetings, while others attended sporadically. Students were informed about the meetings through emails.

The group followed several different formats, but group meetings always began with a “go-around” where the students introduced themselves and told a bit about their area of study and where they were in their programs, in common with the other two study groups mentioned previously. At times, the meetings centred around readings from one of the texts on institutional ethnography by Dorothy Smith or other IE scholars. At one meeting, there was a
guest presenting, who had completed his theses employing IE as a method of inquiry, along with another method. But the usual format was one or two students presenting some of their work at different stages of its development after the go-around so that the group could hear about it and provide feedback in the form of comments, suggestions, critique, additional research directions that might be followed, people to contact who could provide useful information, theorists whose work might fit in with the area of study, particular books and articles that might be relevant, theses that had been completed on a similar theme, and so on. Most students presented with PowerPoint and/or handouts and diagrams or IE maps. Students who were new to the group usually didn’t make suggestions at first, but after a few meetings, they would join in. Over time, we got to know each other’s work quite well and could see the progress that students made from one presentation to another.

Professor Bell made notes during the discussions and she also commented to the presenting students. She would ask pointed questions that got right to the heart of the matter, and offered practical advice in short assertive sentences, often using metaphors to make a point. Since all of the students were using IE wholly or in part in writing their theses, there were always comments on the salient use of IE for a particular study, but since many of the students were also using other theories or methodologies alongside IE, those were discussed as well, along with how to make them work in concert with IE.

**Denise’s developing work in six presentations to Prof. Bell’s study group.**

Here is an example of the work that took place during the study group meetings, an exchange over a three-year period among Professor Bell, the study group members, and doctoral student Denise, who was studying the access to community resources of a particular disadvantaged group in a large Canadian city. These exchanges could have taken place in supervisory meetings between Denise and Professor Bell who supervised
her, but by carrying out the discussions in the study group, others could take part, making further contributions. Also, in the group setting, all those present could observe the processes of the different stages of graduate thesis work development: designing a research study, creating the thesis proposal, carrying out research, analyzing the research, beginning to write the thesis, editing and refining the thesis from its first draft through further drafts to its final form, observing mock thesis defenses, and celebrating the completion of the thesis process by the student. By observing the whole spectrum of producing a thesis from the presentations in the group, students could anticipate their next stage, as well as gain valuable information about how to navigate the process smoothly, and see that they could present about any aspect of their own thesis process. They also gained a contingent of other students who they could call on for help with their writing problems, or to share the highlights and the downsides of their own processes.

Please note that I have removed a lot of the dialogue in my descriptions of Denise’s presentations because it was too revealing of her research and would make her easy to identify. As well, Professor Bell spoke of other students’ work at times, or went off on tangents; those pieces have also been removed. I have also removed almost all of the comments from the other students present because they were often in the form of asides that distracted from the flow of the conversation, or in the form of references to their own work. As a result, the description sounds like a dialogue between Denise and Professor Bell about Denise’s work, but in fact, it was a discussion among multiple speakers that flowed in and out of context.

*Denise’s first presentation: Thesis proposal draft.*

Denise presented her thesis proposal draft to the group in the fall of 2009, her first presentation. She talked about her proposed study, and how she developed a passion for the
topic. She had come across people in a disadvantaged group and witnessed the difficulties they were experiencing. She spoke to a few of them and realized that there was little information being made available to them about the resources and services that they could access in the community. She decided to enroll in a doctoral program in order to study this problem and its implications for the people, and search for ways to rectify it, in order to make a difference to this group. She also talked about institutional policy, texts and practices and how they affected the everyday lives of people in this group.

Denise: I am taking the standpoint of individuals from [a particular disadvantaged group] who have difficulty receiving community services, the invisible abstract relations between people, places and things, how people interact with service providers, how people are interconnected. … I'm looking at what problems these people have, what policies are in place, how the community services are organized. In institutional policies and practices, people are absent. I'm looking at the everyday lives of these people and the others in community organizations [who work with them]. I am not an activist nor am I connected with any group. I am doing a modest study on the social organization of [community] services and the disconnect between those services and the everyday lives of people in this group.

I am doing three to five interviews and textual analysis to show the [community service] organization's practices. I need a better view of the problems members of the group have accessing the services. Next I plan to interview [community] workers, and professionals who work with them. This is a lateral process; it is not an orderly study.

Questions I have included: what problems do they have? How do they look after their needs? Are they denied services? Do they know how to access services? What are their interactions with [community] workers? Where do they access them? Is it easier or harder than in the past?

My guidelines: I am exploring their everyday lives. The members of the [disadvantaged] group are my expert informants, as are the texts I will access. I will have one-on-one dialogue with them to obtain their stories, and do co-investigation.

Prof. Bell: You have to choose who to work with – heart vs. head vs. career dilemma. [You’re looking at] bureaucratically organized ruling processes, and the move to more standardized ways of organizing people. Technologies take a lot of the budget, take away from the number of workers, a no-win situation.
There wasn’t time for much discussion after Denise’s presentation, because another student was presenting her thesis proposal at the same meeting. It was clear that Denise was in the process of formulating her thesis proposal and that she was working to put together a feasible plan for her research. She had identified her objects of study, members of the disadvantaged group and the community workers and organizations that intersected with them, as well as the documents and texts that organized those institutions and workers. She was beginning to formulate her thesis questions, as well as the problematic, or disjuncture, that she wished to address in her research. Professor Bell provided an overview to help her situate her research.

*Denise’s second presentation: Clarification.*

Denise next presented five months later, in the spring of 2010. This presentation was very brief; she was describing a comment she had received about an aspect of her thesis proposal plan from a member of thesis committee, with whom she had shared it.

Denise: I was told to define my participant group, or look at the institutions that serve them.

Prof. Bell: You’re looking at the intersections between the group and the institutions, the institutional processes, not the institutions. You’re studying their ability to access services, how it doesn’t accommodate their needs; their specific relationship with the system. There’s an article on how to look at an interview and discover the institutional relationships.

Denise: Should I interview 2-3 people from the same demographic?

Amy: It’s a discovery thing.

Prof. Bell: Do three interviews. Find a set of relations to explore further. In IE, the people are not what you’re studying, not your subject of interest [but their relations with the institution]. Start with the people who work with this group [to see what you can learn from them].

Professor Bell provided Denise with clarification so she would know how to address the request for more detailed information from the committee member. As well, Professor Bell
answered Denise’s query about the number of people to interview and what to look for from the initial three interviews. Next, she advised Denise to shift her focus to the support workers to obtain a more complete picture of the relations between the group and the institutions.

There was a discussion about whether Denise should do her ethical review now, or complete her thesis proposal. Professor Bell suggested starting the ethical review. The rest of the meeting was taken up with a discussion of several IE texts.

*Denise’s third presentation: Thesis proposal presentation and discussion.*

Denise presented again in the fall of 2010. She discussed the title of her research and her research questions, as her first step toward writing her thesis proposal. Here is some of the dialogue between Denise and Professor Bell:

Prof. Bell: Let’s look at your title and research questions. In IE, we avoid terms like “role” and “factor,” because these are socially constructed terms; they are morally laden, and indicate power in language and assumptions. So let’s change the title to eliminate those.

Regarding your research questions, instead of “what role” use “how;” avoid any causal notion. So, “How does … figure in, affect, or shape …”

1. How are services socially organized with regard to these individuals’ access to community services?

   Problems that emerge when they are seeking community services. Focus on what affects access to services.

2. “How does … facilitate or mitigate …”

   What organizes their ability to move through organizational processes?

Denise: There are forms, like applications, that people must fill out in order to access community services. They are difficult forms.

Prof. Bell: See if these forms are brought up in interviews. If one form keeps coming up, it will be key.

Put it into your ethics, that people want to tell you things, because they will question whether people will want to talk to you. People love to talk about their lives once you start to talk to them; just listen.
In addition to your textual analysis, you can do some form of ethnographic work.

Interview a variety of community workers to see the different organizational arrangements. [There was a discussion about the number of participant groups Denise should have.]

Do you want two groups then, with a maximum of 25 people in total, up to ten in each group? One group would be the members of the group you are studying, and the other group would be the key informants which include members of the community organizations and other professionals and agencies that intersect with them.

When you talk about the texts, will you discuss how you found them?

Denise: I want to use stories. I want to give them a voice.

Prof. Bell: Continue to clip newspaper stories about how people view this group; use them to highlight how people talk about this group and how your analysis deconstructs that narrative. You might start your thesis with a clip from the newspaper. When people talk about this group, the whole apparatus that produces this narrative obscures, masks, the organization instead of illuminating it. Your work illuminates it.

For your field observation, where you are going to look?

Denise: I’ll visit the community organizations. I’ll look for people from this group. There is a public talk next week, an inquiry into the problems faced by this group.

Prof. Bell: That's in the public domain; you can use it.

Professor Bell made some suggestions regarding the wording and terms that Denise used, so they would fit with her method of inquiry, which was institutional ethnography.

Professor Bell went through all the research questions and made suggestions about rewording them. She also advised Denise about what to focus on in regard to each question and how to connect the questions to her methodology. Denise announced that she would be taking a maternity leave and would return to the group in the spring of 2011.
Denise’s fourth presentation: Research, interviews, and beginning to write.

Here is Denise back at her thesis work, in the middle of her research process, right in the mess of things, in May 2011. She is doing field work, interviewing her participants, and finding that the situation is different than she expected.

Denise: I worked at a community service organization downtown. I finished in the spring. I wrote my first chapter; when do I end my research? Should I do more interviews? I have twenty interviews; they’re a select group from a particular area, and my interviews are representative of them.

Prof. Bell: I thought you’d do interviews with the workers and other people from the community service organizations.

Denise: I’ve run into brick walls there.

Prof. Bell: You’re concerned about access. Map the kind of services they can get, and what they have to do to get services.

Can you map from your interviews how these people look after their needs? Can you make diagrams?

Denise: I show the disjunctures, the problems in getting services.

Prof. Bell: The community organizations are set up for them, but they’re not using them. That’s interesting. Make a map of where they go instead.

You’re not going to find answers to your original questions. That’s institutional ethnography.

A lot of community services are being privatized, or run on volunteer labour, an indication of how the role of the state is diminished as the welfare state is changing.

Denise is not sure how to continue, whether to do more interviews so she will have a larger sample, because what she is hearing is not what she expected. Professor Bell encouraged her to interview people from her second group, the workers in the community organizations, but Denise reported that she wasn’t able to do that. Professor Bell told her to follow her leads, see where they take her and what she uncovers, adapt to the changing
situations that she is uncovering, and make whatever changes were necessary to her research process.

She is also suggesting that she make maps and diagrams that illustrate how these people access services, and what they do if they are able to access them, as drawing diagrams can help a student understand how things work, as well as providing clarification to the readers of their theses.

_Denise’s fifth presentation: Extracting data from the interviews._

One month after her fourth presentation, Denise presented to the group again. She had conducted more interviews and transcribed them, and gotten into her data/analysis writing. She began by reminding people of her work carried out previously, then brought them up to date.

Denise: I spent 10 weeks at a community organization as a volunteer and conducted 20 one hour interviews with people there about their access to services. My interviews highlight the disjunctures in community services access by people from this disadvantaged group.

I used the snowball technique to do network sampling.

I transcribed my interviews, looking for themes. I wrote a chapter about six people that I interviewed as a way into my writing, looking at the culture of the place and the problems these people face.

I looked at the social organization of the community services, as well as the problems people face when they don't have access to services.

My interviews were more wooden at the beginning and better at the end.

There is a lot of life work for these people, a lot of institutional processes to deal with.

Prof. Bell: You remember a lot of details, have you recorded your interviews? Have you made field notes? The setting, your observations of interactions tell you a lot.

You get so captured by the details of the interviews, you can't extricate yourself from them, from the interesting details. Look for the institutional processes in the stories, instead of looking at how services for these people are socially
organized. How do they manage their life work? Put together a picture of services for these people. Flush out the organizational aspects, the circularity of the services for this group. Look at the organization of their problem-solving. Get access to how things get organized. Look at George Smith's\textsuperscript{101} thesis proposal for information on how people get hooked up to the system.

You need to track how the informal system is organized. Look for indications of some kind of system. These are rational things that are hooked into the ruling relations.

You have to ask yourself what you want to go after.

Denise: I had to forget my thesis proposal because my data was not telling me that. This is what really emerged. Different things have become central.

Prof. Bell: You have to work with what comes from your data and ask yourself, do I have enough or do I need more?

You have to step back. The question is, how do you get at the IE aspect from all of these interesting stories? That is the other side of institutional capture.

You want to help these people; that is a natural impulse. How are their problems addressed?

Think about the organization, not just their stories.

Denise presented an overview of the interview process, how her interviews were awkward at first, but how she got better as she did more of them, which many students experience. It’s a new learning experience, and it takes time to get into it. She indicated that she got what she wanted from the interviews, in terms of putting the problems of these people in the forefront. She also revealed how she found more participants, through the snowball technique, by asking someone she had interviewed to suggest other people in the same or similar positions.

\textsuperscript{101} George Smith was a political activist and researcher who worked with Dorothy Smith for many years. His thesis proposal is considered exemplary for IE work, and his writings are included in many books about institutional ethnography, some of which were dedicated to him by Smith.
Denise talked about the process of looking for themes in the interviews, and how she got right into writing about her first six interviews, which got her into producing something that could be used in her thesis, an important beginning to the writing process.

Professor Bell gave her some advice about staying focused on what she was looking for, including institutional processes, which is an IE focus, as well as the organization of people’s doings, how they managed their lives. Denise again mentioned that the interviews provided different data that what she anticipated, and that she had to adjust her research according to what she found, rather than what she expected to find. She was also struggling to apply the IE method of inquiry to her data, as again, it takes practice to apply a method to research data, to be knowledgeable not only of the method, but how to put it into practice, and use it to analyze data so the finished thesis will align with other theses that employ the same method.

Denise’s sixth presentation: Second thesis draft.

The last presentation by Denise to the group that I recorded was one year later, in the summer of 2012. She was working on her second thesis draft.

Denise: [Background information] I am presently working through a second draft of my thesis on the problems of [a particular group of people in need of assistance from social organizations]. I refer to Campbell and Gregor’s Book, *Mapping Social Relations*. I collected data through interviews and texts. My interviews were 45 minutes to one hour in length. I didn’t stick to my questions, but let my participants direct the interviews. My last interviews were better that the early ones. I transcribed the 27 interviews right after I did each one.

In my analysis, I looked for disjunctions. People had so many problems that were institutionally mediated.

Prof. Bell: Be clear about your path. Keep going back to your research questions, don’t diverge. You’re a dog after a bone, following a scent.

Denise: I began with the literature review. The first chapter was the hardest. I had to rewrite it later.

Prof. Bell: You always have to go back to it.
Denise: Next I did the discussion chapters. Campbell says to tell a story, and to relate it to the literature. Between my first and second draft, the discussion changed the most. In the second draft, I made the connection to social organization, Neo-Liberalism, and translocal power relations.

Prof. Bell: Neo-liberalism, what does it mean in the actual work processes, in the activities of real people? Don’t use it as an abstract concept. In Neo-Liberalism there is less state control, more relegating control to the marketplace, along with reduction in the size of the government. Show how the ideology works in concert with Neo-Liberal moves.

Denise: Less money is given to people in need.

Prof. Bell: A key feature of Neo-Liberalism is that it is not just moving things to the marketplace, but also developing new kinds of regulation, which work in concert with Neo-Liberal attempts to reduce funding, a concomitant process. Decisions are nominalized; from Smith, “a decision was made … ”

Denise: Next I did my Methods and Conceptual Framework. I did my Introduction and Results last.

Prof. Bell: Denise was setting up her thesis in a standard way.

Note that in IE, the analysis and results are put together in the Research Findings.

Denise used interesting subtitles. She divided the analysis and results into three chapters for presentation purposes. She used informative titles.

Don’t use the word “Discussion.”

Denise: I used lots of direct quotes. I put a frame around what people said.

Prof. Bell: You’ve mapped out your analysis, now who will you pull in to theorize it? Where will you situate your work? It depends on what external you use. An expert [external] will ask expert questions.

Natalie: You can still bring in theory.

Prof. Bell: But what theory?

Natalie: Something complementary.

Prof. Bell: The data is so rich, don’t pick something that contradicts your data. Weave the theory into your analysis to make your work theoretically informed. Think about what you’re doing. Show how these theories inform your analysis.

Your conclusion must speak back to the data. What would you change, do differently, to improve the system? Follow the data. [You can include] an educational piece, to teach people how to operate, navigate the system.

Denise: The bureaucracy has to change.
Prof. Bell: That’s too general. With IE, you show how to navigate it better.

Denise: [They should] Simplify it, pare it down

Prof. Bell: Tap into funding sources. Look for signals, why is it like this? You can’t let the story speak for itself. You’ve got to frame it to bring the reader to your conclusion. You need to persuade, convince your reader. The story can’t speak for itself. Natalie’s interviews show the institution imbedded in the stories. Things they tell you offhand – it’s all there.

Denise told us that she used the book Mapping Social Relations as a how-to guide to using the method of inquiry of IE. She gave us a quick overview of her interview techniques. Professor Bell reminded her to keep referring to her research questions when writing up her data. I like her little metaphor about the dog and the bone. Professor Bell often used metaphors to help make a point, as a memory aid for her students, and to catch their attention.

Denise talked about her struggles in writing her chapters, and the order in which she wrote them. Students vary in the order and in the particular chapters that they chose to include in their theses. In the section on Required Work of Graduate Students, I talk about the system of beginning in the middle, with the data/analysis chapters, but different students and different supervisors have their own ideas of what will work for a particular study. Denise also revealed that she added material to her second draft, how her discourse became more critical. Professor Bell discussed the concept of Neo-Liberalism and how it affects society. She also made the important point that the theoretical framework should match up with that of the external examiner, that the examiner should be on the same page. She also offered advice about incorporating the theory into the thesis, and writing the Results chapter.

This exchange illustrates the tenor of the interactions between the study group students and Professor Bell. At all times, the presenting student, Denise, and Professor Bell are not only addressing each other, but are also addressing the other students present in the study group meeting. Denise provided a lot of background information at the beginning of each of
her presentations, which was directed to the other students, to remind them and update them on her research, and on the last session when she discussed her work. Professor Bell made comments about Denise’s thesis that hadn’t come up in the conversation so far, directed at the other students. Thus they were inviting the other students to join in and make comments and suggestions, and they did, so the exchange became an information session, about the student’s study, what she has done so far, what she is seeking help with at this time. As well, it became a training session for all the students present on how to proceed with their own studies, how to ask for help when they need it, and how to assist other students.

Dr. Bell’s study group provided more intense interaction and feedback than the other two study groups. Over time, the group’s focus moved in this direction, which was very productive for the students who chose to present their work repeatedly over an extended period of time, whenever they reached a new level in the development of their thesis work and were ready for more feedback on their work and advice on where to take it next. Eight students presented two times or more; Denise presented the most times. Others presented only once, or attended but did not chose to do a focused presentation, preferring to just do updates during the go-around, participate in the discussions, but rely on their own supervisors for more intense feedback.

To sum up, Dr. Bell’s study group:

1. Provided a venue where students could keep in touch with each other’s progress in their thesis work, through the short go-around at the beginning of each meeting, and obtain and provide a few suggestions as well during that portion of the meeting.
2. Provided a venue for students’ presentation of their work-in-progress at different stages of its production in extended presentation/discussion formats with feedback from Professor Bell and the other students.

3. Provided an opportunity for students she was supervising to obtain intensive supervision in a group situation in which other students could contribute as well, and also glean information that they could apply to their own thesis work, especially on the use of IE, and clarification of the different terms and methods of IE.

4. Through sharing of information about conferences and lots of encouragement, several conference papers and conference sessions developed from the study group. Students also got together outside the group meetings to discuss their work and to socialize, as collegial and friendship bonds were nurtured in the group over time.

More examples from this study group can be found in chapter 7, Required Work of Graduate Students, in the section on Thesis Proposals.

Students’ involvements in group activities such as study groups facilitated by supervisors helped students to acquire the skills and competence to critique and advise each other as they observed the supervisors’ skills in these areas. As well, students acquired their own descriptive language as they became more fluent at discussing their work due to the support and feedback of the other study group members and the supervisor.

Next I will discuss a different type of study group, one that is organized and run by students for other students.

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102 Denise shared with me that her individual supervision with Professor Bell was very similar to their interchanges during the study group.
Student-initiated and -facilitated study group.

I facilitated a study group of five doctoral students, including myself, all women who were engaged in different stages of the thesis research and writing process. When we began, I was collecting my data, Rita was analysing her interviews, and Mary was also analysing her interviews, Joyce had transcribed her interviews and analysed them, and was ready to start writing her thesis, and Ruth was writing her thesis. We met four times in 2008, over a period of nine months. The first meeting was held at the graduate education school, but subsequent meetings were held at the home of one of the group members, who prepared soup for each meeting. There wasn’t a prepared agenda; students just spoke up and told about their work, what was going well, what was not, and the others responded with suggestions, and strategies for overcoming problems. The dialogue moved from one topic to another, from one person to another, with no transitions.

At the first meeting in February, Ruth, who was studying international educators, talked about her work:

I’m working full-time; it’s hard to find time for study, hard to connect with other doctoral students. … I’m using Institutional Ethnography (IE) as a method.

In my interviews, I found that many of the interviewees were caught up in the rhetoric, the managerial talk that is referred to in IE as ‘institutional capture.’ They are under threat, under siege, [by the institutions] that you want to critique. You have to be very sensitive [to this] …

I am writing the chapters of my thesis. My deadline is the end of the summer. I am writing chapter by chapter, as [my supervisor] encouraged me to do so, rather than writing the whole thing at once, which was my first inclination. My thesis supervisor encouraged me to write a detailed Table of Contents first to help organize my work. But the methodology I am using, IE, is a continuous story; there is no separation between theory and people’s experiences; they should be interwoven. I started with the most important chapter, introducing my work and the discourses, and am moving from the centre out.

Writing is a very isolating experience. It is very helpful to talk in forums like this. When you get stuck, [people’s] questions can help move you along. I wouldn’t
recommend working full-time and doing a PhD. It’s a compromise, a trade-off. I don’t have time to go to conferences, write papers, or publish because of my work load. I had a period of inactivity in the fall, when I was very busy at work, and emotionally depleted. I meet with my thesis supervisor once a month.

Ruth discussed some difficulties she encountered doing her interviews. She then talked about her research (not included here because it would identify her). She next discussed her thesis writing process, its challenges, and the difficulties she was experiencing working full-time while completing her doctorate. She also talked about the value of having a place to talk about her work and receive feedback.

At the second meeting of the group, Ruth began by talking about the progress of her writing:

Ruth: I am writing the rough draft of my thesis, one chapter a month. By July, I hope for a complete draft, by September at the latest. After that, I expect to spend a full year on revision. Because I am working full-time [as a university administrator], I can only devote 10 hours a week on my graduate work.

The first draft is like the bones of a house. You decorate it later.

Rita: How did you come up with the structure?

Ruth: My supervisor asked me to develop a detailed table of contents. It’s like mapping your work; it creates benchmarks. Your writing can start to creep [go off on tangents, expand more than planned]. When that happens, I shift to a mode of efficiency.

Each thesis journey is unique. Unlike others, I cannot take part in academic communities [writing for journals, attending conferences]. I don’t have the time because of my full-time work. But I try to be true to my participants [when writing about them]. …

The thesis is an institutional product. You’ve got to bind it and box it up. That’s where I’m at. As I wrote my first four chapters, I stopped reading, just my data. Now I’m rereading it.

The order is wrong. I did a literature review. I approach it so differently now. I have to redo my lit review. Interviews should come first, if not, you may steer the interviews to fit your topic. …
I find it’s hard to stick to my story line. I have a lack of confidence. As for the form, I just started writing. Having the chapters set up helped. I wrote from the middle – 70 pages. It wasn’t structured enough. I continued to write in pieces, in the middle, but sticking to my plan more. You don’t write the introduction first. Now the problem is that I want to add more chapters. There’s more I want to put in. …

[From the fourth meeting] [My supervisor] is good with outlines. It is helpful to conceptually map it out. Scan your data chapter once [then map it]. Thesis writing is a [particular] genre. The kind of IE I’m doing is challenging. It’s not typical, because I’m generating theory.

I’m struggling; I had to strip down my data chapters, remove a lot. Readers have assumptions [about people who work in international education]; it is an unknown experience to them. The research review sets the stage.

Ruth provided an update to the members of the group on her writing, and mentioned that she didn’t have time to participate in extended activities. She was very devoted to her project and to producing her chapters monthly. And she provided a metaphor for her thesis process, comparing the first draft to a framework for a house. Ruth also talked about the thesis as a single cohesive unit that adheres to institutional frameworks, and the difficulty in choosing the order in which to write the chapters, as well as the necessity to go back and remove parts, edit and rewrite the chapters so everything fits coherently in the “box.” She also mentions using a diagram to map out the whole picture of a chapter she has written. At the second meeting, Ruth had also spoken about supervision:

The biggest issue is support for the dissertation. My supervisor has too many students. There [are] supports here, with opportunities for peer mentoring, student groups, writing support, but core support from faculty is the most important. Toward the end of your program, supervision is the most important support. Professional development is important, as are student-led groups, but faculty are stretched. The university … provides services and supports, but hiring freezes mean there are not enough faculty to supervise graduate students. …

Ruth acknowledged the importance of supervision, especially when the student is writing her thesis. She is venting her frustration that students must wait for supervision time, because some supervisors have too many students to allot sufficient time to each of them.
Ruth also talked about her interviews later in the second meeting:

Ruth: Regarding using IE for a thesis – my advice is don’t do an IE unless you’ve worked at it, that you’ve at least written a paper using it. I’m not calling my work an IE.

Rita: Dorothy Smith says don’t make it an orthodoxy. Use the language and principles.

Ruth: Interviewing is different [in IE]. You need to be detailed, unpack what people do. I thought I was being specific, but the process is different for different types of jobs [of the people] I interviewed. ... I didn’t ask enough about the processes behind their tasks. Ethnography is important. I should have shadowed each of them for a day. Like Tim Diamond – you need to know what people do.

A challenge was that documents weren’t featured in the work I did. The processes [of my participants] tend to be very local. Dorothy Smith doesn’t want an orthodoxy, but discourse is difficult. Looking for translocal discourses needs more time, another interview. It’s hard to establish trust in 90 minutes. Some specific questions [I asked] puzzled some people. [Now it think it would be best to] first talk to people about what they do. Next, shadow them for a day, or in another interview, ask them more specific questions. IE is hard [to do].

Rita: Focus groups are better [than individual interviews]. I did my second one yesterday. … They get involved in their exchange.

Ruth: It’s a conversation – unlike an interview which is saturated with power relations and formal. [During my interviews] one person brought along two colleagues. There were different power dynamics, people were freer. …

Rita: For my first focus group, I tried for a small number, I wanted four people, but only two came. [I try to] put people together who can speak to each other.

Ruth: How does that work?

Rita: They direct things. I gave them a list of questions, from my ethics review, but they took off. You have to let go of your questions. … I used focus groups of four people for my masters, but it was hard to transcribe. People talk over each other, especially women. The interviewer can focus people.

Ruth: I would have brought a few people together at each location…

Rita: In my first focus group, I was looking for disjunctures. You can look at details of daily life, but IE is not about narrative.

Ruth: You can use that as a window, but there can be other access points. IE looks for overly-articulated moments – but you don’t always get that. So sometimes I
didn’t get details. You see details that aren’t benign. Sometimes I didn’t have those moments.

Rita: There are different ways to get there, like “tell me about your day…”

Ruth: The IE entry point doesn’t matter, it’s where you get to [in the interview]. My best interviews were the last ones. If I had done more interviews …

Rita: When [my supervisor] saw the transcript of my [first focus group], she said there was not enough detail in their talk. ... The details are in the textual follow up [analysis].

Ruth: I did my own textual analysis.

Rita: Dorothy Smith says that people do their day-to-day [practices] without seeing the details.

Ruth: I struggled in my interviews – was I being too controlling? Sometimes people would bring up a topic, I should have asked for more detail [then]. That’s why [several] people are better than one. It’s not a conversation … you get at detail in an organic way. The one three-person interview was better. [With one person] it’s hard to avoid the linear form of an interview. People don’t want to give you more details.

It’s hard to be an insider [when doing interviews]. It’s better to have some distance, to not make assumptions about how things work.

In this interchange, details of their difficulties in conducting interviews are shared between Ruth and Rita. Finding the optimal situation for interviewing participants in order to obtain the type of information that is sought is not easy. First interviews were often awkward, and served as a learning process for many participants. Ruth had finished her interviews, but was saying that she would have done her interviews differently, if she was starting again, as she had a different perspective on the whole process which she obtained through the process of writing her chapters incorporating the interview material.

Rita added her own experiences, saying that she favoured focus groups over individual interviews with participants, and stressing that the interview material shouldn’t be deemed inadequate until the researcher is able to contextualize and analyze it in the process of writing
about it. Rita was in the midst of conducting her interviews, and was developing and refining her interview methods with her focus groups. Both favoured group interviews, or focus groups, over individual interviews for their research, and both mentioned the special challenges in conducting interviews in IE research.

Joyce jumped in to discuss her stresses over connecting with her supervisor:

Joyce: I want to meet with my supervisor. It’s hard to talk on the phone; face to face is much better. I feel very isolated. I am gung-ho, ready and eager to write. But I need advice about where to start, how to put my data together. I have a leave [of absence from my job] till mid-August only. [I have to be done by then.] I wrote 6 pages, completed Chapter 4.

Ruth: I don’t always get comments and feedback on my work. It is important to schedule your first meeting [with your supervisor], then schedule the next meeting with her at the end of the first meeting.

Joyce: In early Jan. I asked her, will I be ready to defend in June? She said, at the end of the summer. I need to get going to get done.

Ruth: Keep sending her your writing, and schedule a meeting with her.

Joyce: I sent my first 6 pages, and got feedback. It was difficult. I feel powerless; all is resting on another person.

Ruth: You’ll have more power when you write and send drafts.

Joyce: It is such lonely work. Anna [a colleague who graduated in the fall] has helped. I have struggled. I spent 3 weeks on Chapter 4 and the Introduction, the Lit review chapter, methodology. I have to elongate Chapter 1.

Ruth: It’s easier when you map it out.

Joyce: My supervisor gave me good advice on my presentation of my data, to put it into the introduction. I have 6 pages written of that.

Ruth: You’re doing well. Once you have a full draft, things move along. You’ve been very productive.

Joyce: [I had difficulty] mapping it out. I had no idea how to set it out. I spent 1 week walking around the house; making notes on scraps of paper … You start writing and get a sense of what you did. All my stuff is from my interviews. It did come together, but I wanted to quit [earlier on].
Ruth: There are good resources on thesis writing. Recently, there was a workshop. I produce a draft of a chapter each month. I did 24 interviews.

Joyce: I work from 9 to 5 each day, but not on the weekends. I treat it like a job. [My supervisor] gets you to the point where you are ready to defend. [I don’t have the money to pay tuition next year. I don’t know what I’ll do].

Ruth: It’s not a good idea to lapse. I think it’s better to ask for an extension, if you need more time.

Joyce: I’m so tired. Mondays are the hardest. It’s hard to make all my writing scholarly. I wrote Chapter 4 in one month, felt good about it, sent it to my friend, then I looked at it again, and thought it was awful and rewrote it.

Ruth: We react to our own work.

In this interchange, Joyce is sharing her stresses, and difficulties around writing, while Ruth is giving her advice and empathy. Joyce’s most pressing concern is getting an appointment with her busy supervisor so she can obtain advice about how to get into her writing, how to work with her data. Ruth gives her concrete advice: “Keep sending your supervisor your writing, and schedule a meeting with her, then schedule the next meeting at the end of the first meeting. You’ll have more power when you write and send drafts.” Joyce took her advice. At our third study group meeting in May, Joyce related her experience with her supervisor:

I found it hard to get supervision when I needed it. I have a limited time frame. I am in debt. I must go back to work in August. I asked [my supervisor] for help. She said, “We’ll just get you through.”

[My supervisor] challenged me on my first chapter; she didn’t like it. And my next chapter, … she was mad at me. She said to me, “I can tell … that you’re not happy.” I said, “You said I [have problems with my writing]. Before you said [you liked my writing].” She said, “This is the thesis. You have to make it clear right away or you’ll lose the reader.” Suddenly I understood. It’s just a process.

[My advice is] don’t argue with [your supervisor], [or defend yourself]. Accept everything she says, and do something with it. But do question her to make sure you understand what she is saying. She has the power to slow me down or speed me up.
Joyce was able to get the help she needed from her supervisor. She also described her process, how she had worked long hours consistently on her writing:

I have finished the draft of my thesis. I just need to finish Chapter 8, but I have half of it done already. I used my work from my thesis proposal and doctoral specialization exam, as my data supported it. I worked for 5-6 days a week, 6-10 hours a day.

Joyce shared more about her writing method:

Writing is a lot of trouble. I go up and down [the stairs]. I wander through the house to get a different perspective. I have days of inspiration, epiphanies. I write during the day; I take my notebook everywhere. The more I read articles, the more I am inspired. I read to discover how people are executing their language to get meaning. I talk myself out of the doldrums. One day I got up and wrote a poem. In January, I was transcribing, I couldn’t sleep. I was restless. I started to draw, circles, arrows.

This little snippet of conversation was a sharing of the stresses that Joyce endured while working on her thesis. Like many students, she underwent periods of depression about whether she could complete her work, as well as difficulties around writing. She described her process very eloquently; she had a creative way of overcoming her blocks. Joyce continued, talking about formatting her thesis, and transcription of her interviews:

I formatted my thesis from the beginning, the title page, the table of contents, the abstract, the acknowledgements. I just finished drafts of chapters one and two. I am waiting to hear back from my advisor if they are done.

I kept a page of recommendations. I didn’t use software, NVivo, which was used by Anna, and am glad I didn’t use it. I used conceptual analysis of my transcriptions of my interviews and my fieldnotes.

Joyce was very methodical about setting up her thesis and seeing it a as finished entity before she began to add in her thesis chapters. This gave her a feeling that it was well on its way; that she would soon be finished when she had included all her material.

It was time consuming to transcribe my interviews. I had a [machine with a] pedal. You edit the quotes anyway. I transcribed the first several, then I omitted the ums and ah's. I indicated the hesitations, feelings and body language in my fieldnotes -- it took me back into the room. I thought one student was angry from the transcript, but when I listened to the tape again, it was more passion [that was being displayed].
Here we have another example of Joyce at work, as she describes the physicality of her transcription method, and the importance of referring back to recordings to check meaning.

[From the fourth meeting] I starting writing [my first data chapter] in January, 2008. I sent four pages [to my supervisor]. I didn’t use any software for my qualitative analysis. I sat at my kitchen table [with the transcripts of my interviews spread out around me]. I looked at what my 17 participants said. Themes started to emerge after the fourth interview. I added to and changed the themes. It’s good to do the transcripts yourself, then it’s in your head. I had someone do four or five transcripts [because I didn’t have the time]. I did listen to them though.

As I read the transcripts, I would stop and write down the themes [and who said something related to it], for example, Jane, p. 1, then I would put in the quote. It was hard to put it in some order. I spent a week drawing circles, trying to make some sense [of it]. I slept with it, woke up with it. [Finally] I wrote four pages. I wrote Chapter 4, and was working on Chapter 3, but still had no feedback. So I wrote to [my supervisor] and she agreed to meet and discuss Chapter 4. At that meeting, I made another appointment for three weeks later to discuss Chapter 3 [which I would complete by that next appointment]. Later, I brought another chapter. [She] suggested revising the order, the names [of my themes], and my four data chapters became five chapters. By April, I had five data chapters based on themes.

Again, we have a visceral example of Joyce working productively at her kitchen table, surrounded by her transcripts, picking up and reading one after another, looking for themes, engaging with her supervisor, and developing her chapters.

For my first data chapter, following [my supervisor’s] suggestion, I made a chart of my participants. She said, what do you want people to know about your participants? I gave them a name, age range, their involvement with [the organization], [and other categories that were pertinent].

My committee loved the chart. They wanted to know how I did it. I did it [according to] who spoke first, second, in order to get the order.

Again, Joyce has created a visual aid, a diagram, to present material about her participants for the clarification of her readers, which was enthusiastically endorsed by her committee.

I’ve learned a lot about myself [through the thesis process]. It was a lovely time. I will never be the same. I don’t look at things the same. It opened me to other possibilities. I see cultural divisions as a tapestry. I didn’t know enough before.
Joyce tells us that she was transformed through the process of researching and writing her thesis. She wrote her thesis in five months, from the time she finished her interviews until the first draft was complete. She would be finished within her restricted time frame and be able to return to her job, a different person than when she started.

To sum up, the students talked about their thesis processes, going into a lot of detail; they talked about the content of their work, described their methods of collecting data, how they conducted their interviews, how they transcribed them and analysed them, how they were going about writing their theses and difficulties they were having around writing. They also discussed how they were managing to find time for their thesis work, what they planned to do next, what they wanted to accomplish. The students were very direct about sharing their experiences and asking each other openly how they went about doing their thesis work. Also, those who were further along made suggestions to the others about how to expedite their work. Since I was just doing my data collection, I picked up a lot of ideas about how to carry out my own research and writing. The support of the students who shared their successes in overcoming obstacles lifted up discouraged or stuck students, put them on track, and keep them engaged in their program work. “Students need to learn to write in a genre. Study groups help,” offered one student. This study group had a short run, four meetings of about three hours each in less than a year, but a lot of ground was covered, and it provided a lot of support to the students who attended.

This group took on a different tone than the others I had attended that were supervisor-led. Since some of the members of this groups were also in Professor Graham’s group previously, I observed that when a supervisor was present, the students were more reticent, more inhibited, but without a supervisor, there was an informality, openness and directness. Students were more apt to speak out, interrupt each other, and speak bluntly. As well, they
asked for what they needed and offered advice without restriction. One of the students expressed it as: “Professor-led or student-led study groups are different. It is a matter of power relations. When you remove the authority figure, it changes the dynamics.”

The other important factor is that these students were all women, women who knew each other from another study group or from attending classes together. They were familiar with each other’s research, but also importantly, each other’s life circumstances. Because of this, there was an immediate camaraderie amongst them, and an ease in discussing any topic in a frank manner. There was no concern about being judged by the others, or of stepping on toes. So each woman could cut to the quick and discuss her triumphs and her struggles with candour. Likewise, advice and criticism were delivered frankly and openly, because everyone knew that we were there to engage with each other, to hear each other’s true situation, to support each other and help each other get through our programs.

So far I have discussed four different study groups, also called peer or thesis study groups, but such groups can have a different focus, such as a writing group that I describe next.

**Student-led writing group.**

Peer writing groups are important, because they “attend to the sociality of writing and locate it in a network of social, institutional and peer relations. … Writing groups explicitly address the questions of knowledge, textual practice and identity in a context of peer relations and can be a valuable part of the postgraduate experience.” (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 266)

I met a group of four students who took part in a writing group when they presented at a conference on graduate education. The group was an off-shoot of a supervisor-led study group. Their presentation was introduced by the supervisor who had led that study group:

“I’ve led many study groups. I was part of an informal study group when I was a student, as well as a study group run by my supervisor. My larger study group which

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103 “postgraduate” refers to “graduate” in the North American context
had 16 students this year covers the nuts and bolts of getting through the program. This writing group is made up of students who participated in one of my study groups, and decided to form their own group for the purpose of working with each other’s writing, to fill in some of the missing pieces. An informal group, it is made up of three PhD students and one MA student.

The four professional women, two of them still students and two graduates, sat facing the audience at a long table; they spoke in turn about their experiences in their writing group. They knew each other from taking courses together and from the supervisor-led study group, so “we knew we were on the same theoretical pages and style from listening to each other in classes.”

One talked about the background behind their writing group:

There is a gap between the institutional version of doing the thesis and the hidden informal tasks. The official journey is found in the handbooks which present a road map for students. But there are gaps and spaces in that definition, which are filled in by informal learning by the students.

When research dead-ends, the unexpected happens. Work-life balance is a problem for graduate students. They expect you to finish in four or five years but stuff happens, like health concerns that are hidden. It’s not easy to find your way, there’s lots of new technology such as digital library systems. You’re trying to tie together your pieces to form a unified story, while also working on your presentation skills, negotiating the bureaucracy of the institution, maintaining momentum, self-directing your project: “I’m treading water as fast as I can!”

Student-led groups can keep people motivated as well as providing writing support. We tried doing readings but that didn’t work. The group breaks isolation.

The picture that the handbooks paint of a smooth passage from one task to another is often interrupted by unexpected life events that interfere with our plans, and our thesis processes. I was interested to hear more about the writing group, because I had not experienced one myself.

We’ve shadowed each other’s labour and learned from the process. We are in overlapping phases of our journeys. Those who are ahead know what went wrong and can prepare the others. We’ve relied on each other’s problem solving and advice when we were not ready to take our writing to someone else, like a supervisor, to evaluate. We rely on each other’s strengths and skills.
We’re developing writing skills and editing skills; these are people I respect as intellectuals. I’ve learned a mountain from reading everyone’s work here. I’m more confident as an editor.

Watching people develop their skills over time and how an idea develops from start to finish is great.

I can see similarities between this writing group and the study groups in which I had participated. The students who were more advanced in their programs helped pave the road for the others who were following behind them. They got to know each other’s work well, and watched it develop, along with their ability to articulate their projects and to become better writers and critics of each other’s work. Further comments centred on the value of their writing group:

It’s an alternative collective learning approach. It interrupts the competitive nature of academic work. We have made investments in each other’s work to build it up and make each other as shining as possible.

Learning to edit each other’s work helps your own work. It helps with organization, structure, story, sticking to the point. We don’t read each other to evaluate.

I was struck by the commitment this group of women had developed toward each other and their common goals of improving each other’s writing, and producing the best possible theses. Also, they had developed valuable skills that would be applicable to their future writing and their future careers, in academia or in related fields. They had honed these skills together, learning through practice and learning from each other, without reliance on an outside expert. They talked about their bond to each other:

It is a major time commitment. One person lives outside the city and had to commute. Our meetings are three hours or more, but compare that to treading water, doing it myself. There is an emotional investment of caring, support, trust, respect, honesty and patience. We’ve read each other’s conference papers and each thesis chapter three times.

Schools don’t value this labour; they don’t see it as important. There is no institutional credibility. There’s no line on a CV for it.
Not every student would be willing to make such an investment in time and effort. Part-time students who are also holding down full- or part-time jobs don’t have the same flexibility in their schedules to manage a group like this, which is a much greater time commitment than the study groups in which I participated. But for these four women, their writing group filled in a gap in their thesis writing processes, providing supports to help move them along: each student had three editors with constantly-improving skills, helping them to improve their writing, and relieving them of some of the self-doubt that many students feel at each stage of their thesis writing.

**Supervisors’ comments about their study groups.**

At the end of the workshop presentation described above, three professors in attendance in the audience talked with me about their experiences running study groups.

I’ve been running a thesis group for 15 years. Supervisory overload is certainly a rationale. It’s another format for help and supervision, keeping students focused, and an antidote to isolation. It helps them get through. It’s good support for me too. There is a hidden benefit as many of my students are doing work that is similar to mine. The downside is, do people stay? Are they committed? Unfortunately, it’s not for credit. [Mention was made of several other professors who ran study groups at that school.]

It was interesting for me to hear that these professors had been running study groups for some time, but hadn’t discussed their groups with other faculty members to find out how they ran their groups. Groups evolve according to the personal style of the professor, a style that is evident in the teaching of their courses and in the way they manage supervision as well, according to my experiences with professors who I have observed in all three roles.

Another supervisor of a study group shared these thoughts with me:

I’ve run a study group for my students for a few years now. We meet once a month. They are at different stages of their work, some are doing thesis proposals, some ethical reviews, others research, or thesis writing. They are great at giving each other suggestions and support; they even carry on with the meetings without me when I’m away, and contact each other outside of the group meetings. For those doing their
ethical reviews, those that have recently done it can give the best advice, better than me. And those starting their research, some are going off to faraway places, the others give them advice and courage. I see a lot of good coming out of it.

Here is yet another style of running a study group. I liked that this supervisor was developing her students’ skills at helping each other so they would not just rely on her expertise, that she had confidence in them, saw them as peers and considered them competent, capable of giving each other good advice and looking after each other. It is evident that she was skilled at developing community among her students, something they could continue long after they graduated and were off in different directions.

When I mentioned to the supervisor of one of the study groups in which I had been a member that I had been part of three such groups and that they were all run differently, she commented:

There could be a meeting of supervisors who run thesis study groups. I don’t know how others do it, it would be interesting to share ideas.

I would have liked to have gathered together the different professors I met who run study groups for a discussion about their groups. I think that would have been a most interesting exchange, based on my observations of the groups I attended and what different professors related to me. I think they would have enjoyed it as much as I would.
Summary of study/peer/thesis groups’ format, purpose and value.

To sum up, the study/peer/thesis groups in my study had a similar structure: going around the table, students in turn presented updates of their work; they could raise questions and receive suggestions from the supervisor and other students during this time. This was often followed by a presentation by one or two of the students, or a discussion on a specific topic or reading(s) that had been distributed prior to the meeting. The groups were supervisor-, department- or methodology-based. Some groups were open to addressing difficulties encountered by graduate students at all stages in their programs, while others were restricted to students working on their thesis research and writing processes. In my research, study groups served as safe venues where students could discuss their thesis work and receive valuable feedback from others, as well as provide advice themselves; share their experiences related to their work, and share the stresses in their lives outside of their graduate work, such as the push-pull of finding time for their graduate work while coping with other demands in their lives, including demands from work and their families.

Students who recognized gaps in their analysis, arguments and presentation of material received valuable suggestions from group members and the supervisor/facilitator, as well as practical advice about managing their graduate programs. Because these groups consisted of continuous meetings over an extended time period, there were many opportunities for meaningful exchanges. The students also got to know each other and each member’s area of research and methodologies, so they became important resources for each other. The communication extended beyond the group meetings as well.
Study groups, as well as writing groups, act as links between the problematics they are working on and current academic and disciplinary methods and theories for graduate students. The productivity of thesis group meetings links to all the other meetings that connect to it, including thesis proposal presentations and mock thesis defenses, which may be presented within study groups or separate from them; each event of meeting draws on and stretches out the achievements of previous events, and makes possible future meetings. Some students find that more informal arrangements for support work best for them. Some examples can be found in the next section.

**Casual arrangements between students for mutual writing support.**

Some students find support for their developing work in a more casual setting than an organized thesis group or writing group. Here is an example of a student who shared with me her own arrangement that worked for her:

When I was writing my Masters’ thesis, I met weekly at a local coffee shop with another student who was a little ahead of me for progress updates. She was very committed, hard slogging, not like me. Although her focus was more theoretical than mine, we shared what we did, acting like soundboards for each other. We shared our files with each other, and pushed each other on. Having someone else who’s there for you in an academic setting is another means of motivation and support.

Quite a few students told me of similar arrangements that they had found useful, getting together with one other student, or sometimes more, on a regular basis, for varying lengths of time. Ellie had told me that she met regularly with another student, and that they worked on their own, beside each other. Just the proximity of another person who is doing similar work was very supportive to her. Students said it was helpful to break the isolation of working alone so much.
Mock Thesis Defense Presentations

I mentioned earlier that mock thesis defenses were presented at the graduate school, to give students a dry run at presenting their work and fielding questions on it shortly before their actual oral defenses took place. Below are several examples of mock thesis defenses, or “mocks” as they are sometimes called, two that were held separate from a study group, and two that were held during study group meetings.

Mock thesis defense held separate from a study group: Ruth’s mock defense.

Professor Graham, the supervisor of the first study group discussed above, arranged separate meetings for thesis proposal presentations and mock thesis defenses, which were open to anyone in the department, or outside the department, to attend. Some of the study group members would attend, as would other students from the department, and some faculty members, and others. They were held in small classrooms, and usually attracted ten to twenty people. The student would present, often using PowerPoint; afterward, questions were invited. These meetings were frequently followed by visits to a nearby café where the discussions continued as a group and one-on-one.

We met in a small classroom for Ruth’s mock thesis defense, which had been advertised in our graduate department through email and posters. We were about fifteen people, including her supervisor, seated on the outside perimeter of tables arranged in a rectangle. Ruth presented her study about a group of professionals in education who were international educators which she was a part of in the past, using PowerPoint. She began by describing her research, her theoretical approaches, the people she interviewed, the themes that she found in the interviews, how these professionals were educated and trained, and what the problem areas were. Next she presented a summary of her key findings, her recommendations and implications for further research.
When she had finished, her supervisor, Professor Graham, spoke.

That was 50 minutes. You are limited to 20 minutes in your actual defense. Let’s go over the details of your presentation. In your real defense, you don’t include so much detail, or your personal location. …

Lois, one of the students attending, added: “It’s easy to follow what you say, but use your PowerPoint slides for headings only, not for information.”

Beth, another student present, added: “Include an overview at the beginning, two or three slides, as an outline, “Five main points I will talk about.” Put your recommendations, key points, at the beginning.” A course director present added: “From the sample size you have, you can’t make generalizations, but you can say, “I speculate that … ” It is important not to make claims you can’t substantiate.”

These suggestions about her presentation were followed by questions from the audience and comments from Ruth related to the details about the thesis, the discourse, the difficulties faced by the people Ruth interviewed, the problems Ruth had encountered while conducting her interviews and writing her thesis.

Ruth knew about half the people who were present, and they asked the majority of the questions, and made the majority of comments. Two of us were from the student-led study group that I had facilitated, which was discussed earlier in this chapter, as was Ruth. We were very familiar with her study, and the difficulties she had struggled with as she wrote her thesis. We were there to support her, and help her through this last meeting before her actual defense, which we later heard, went very well. We all felt proud that she had come through successfully, which was also encouraging to those of us who were looking forward to being in the same position; if she could do it, so could we!
Mock thesis defense held separate from a study group: Anna’s mock defense.

Anna’s thesis topic concerned new graduates of college nursing programs, how they were faring in their positions in hospitals. Her supervisor was also Professor Graham. Her presentation had been announced to her department and there were about ten people present, students from her study group as well as other students, and some professors as well. Her presentation, in which she stood and used PowerPoint, was very teacherly; not only did she present her thesis information, but she did so in a way that was instructional to the other students in the room who would be appearing in the future to present their mock defenses. Her method of inquiry was IE; many of the students present were also using IE alone or in combination with other methodologies. She spoke about her use of IE and her thesis topic.

In IE, you ask, what are the texts, and how do they coordinate people’s doings? The Literature Review sets the context for your thesis. You use interviews to show how people are situated in discourses, and how they are taking them up. Hierarchies are maintained by alliances to ruling discourses. Texts insert the institutional into people’s work; they coordinate the work of people and commit them to agendas not their own. What is given in [institutional] texts is the work of ruling relations.

You need to show, what is unique about my thesis? My work reveals the theory-practice gap in nursing education [which has been written about before by others].

Every time you read over and revise your writing, it brings further clarity. Look at other texts, see where yours fits in.

Anna spoke about her process of gathering her data, and doing her analysis, as well as formatting her results. Afterwards, she invited questions and comments from the audience. One audience member said, “Your work is complicated; you need to translate it to make it easier to understand.” Another said, “I’m unclear of some of your definitions,” and gave some examples. Someone else asked, “How did you select your sample?” When Anna described her method of finding her participants, the same person said, “Have that at the beginning.” A student present mentioned that she found parallels in Anna’s work to her own, and compared the two.
After the questions and comments, Professor Graham spoke:

I have some ideas to enhance your presentation. First of all, your slides are too crowded, with too much detail. Use the 6 x 6 rule: 6 points per slide, no more than 6 words across. Also, you need to define your terms: texts, discourses, hierarchies, and others that may not be familiar to your reader. When you are answering questions at your defense, say, “I have a great example of that,” and find one to talk about. That shows that you understand the question.

Anna’s defense took place a few days later. After she emerged from the room where the defense had taken place, she was all smiles. Her family and some of her student colleagues were there to congratulate her, and witness her place a brass plate with her name on it under the year of her graduation on a wooden plaque of students who had already graduated in that department. We took lots of photos, and then we walked to a nearby restaurant, where a long table had been set up for us. Anna’s husband and children were there, as well as her parents, and her supervisor, Professor Graham. We enjoyed a wonderful meal together, with lots of wine and lots of laughter, a celebration for Anna and for all of us who had supported her through her thesis process.

After she graduated, Anna attended another student’s mock defense. Afterward, when people were chatting, Anna remarked, “I’m back at work now, but as a different person.” She said that she had been transformed by the experience of completing her program, carrying out her research, and writing her thesis. Professor Graham commented, “You’re in a position to make some changes to your nursing programs now,” and Anna answered, “That’s what I’m working on!”

**Further suggestions from Professor Graham on mock and real thesis defenses.**

At another student’s mock thesis defense, Professor Graham made the following comments and suggestions:
When you are in the audience at a mock thesis defense, ask yourself these questions while you are listening to the student’s presentation: What would you like to know about the thesis details, what do you think the presenter should leave out when presenting at the actual defense, and what do you think of the presentation technique, do you have any suggestions to improve it?

In answer to a student’s question on how the presentation at the real defense would differ from the presentation given at a mock defense, Professor Graham gave the following response:

During the real defense, the student has twenty minutes to present. Since the people present will have all read the thesis, you jump to your recommendations and theoretical contributions. A question I’ve heard often is, “What insights do you have now?”

A thesis defense is very formal and complex. There are rules about how it is run, which are read out loud at the beginning. ... I’ve seen different styles of presentation. About half use audio-visual aids, like PowerPoint, which can be sent ahead of time to the external if he or she is not able to be there and is present through teleconferencing. If there are any issues brought up by the external in his or her report, they must be addressed and discussed. The student’s performance and written thesis are both judged.

A recent graduate added, “Be careful you don’t preach during your defense!”

**Mock thesis defense held within an ongoing study group: Sarah’s mock defense.**

Professor Sinclair, the supervisor of the second thesis study group, had students present their thesis proposals and mock thesis defenses in the study group meetings. Sarah’s study was on a group of women faculty of colour at Canadian universities who had immigrated to Canada from the same geographic area as her. Professor Sinclair used this opportunity to speak to the group about the format of the actual defense. In this case, the external examiner would not be present but would speak to the group through a teleconferencing connection.

Professor Sinclair commented on the report from the external examiner, which had been sent to the student and her supervisor before the defense:

This is a great report. Often they are hard to read; sometimes you have to read between the lines. These reports can be written quite critically. By receiving the report two
weeks before the defense, you have time to consider the points the examiner raises.
Don’t be afraid, you’ve been approved already.

Then Professor Sinclair described the routine for thesis defenses at the school.

There will be a neutral chair for the meeting. Their role is to make sure all goes
smoothly. They read the rules aloud, they introduce everyone present, then the
candidate is asked to leave the room. The chair asks everyone if they have read the
thesis. [Then you return.]

You have twenty minutes to talk, then you take questions. Ten minutes is allotted to
each person in the room. After one round of questions, there can be another round.
Then you leave the room and they vote. The thesis is always accepted, with three
options: as it is, or with minor corrections, which is the most common, and which you
have one month to fix, with the supervisor in charge of okaying the corrections, or with
minor modifications, which is more substantial changes, which you have three months
to complete, and which requires your committee’s approval as well.

Everyone listened attentively. This information was meant for the whole group, not just
for Sarah. One of the students, who had recently defended successfully, added some pointers
for Sarah:

I sat and spoke. I didn’t use PowerPoint. I read my presentation that I had timed so it
was exactly 20 minutes. My advice is to settle in, do something that relaxes you, like
taking a few deep breaths. Present in a way that makes you feel comfortable. Tell the
group, you’ve read my thesis, so I’ll limit my presentation to the key points and key
findings.

Professor Sinclair added some further comments:

The whole meeting will be about two hours in length, and you can stand or sit to
present. I’ve seen students put up posters around the room, have handouts, even have
food on the table. Oh, and your supervisor will ask a question, something easy, or
something you didn’t talk about in your thesis.

Next Sarah presented, standing, with a screen behind her, and a computer in front of
her, facing her, at the edge of the table. She used PowerPoint slides to illustrate her talk. She
spent some time describing her methodology, and her conceptual framework, which she had
adapted from another researcher. Sarah talked about her reasons for undertaking the study, to
fill in some of the questions she had about the group of women and how they managed to
navigate the Canadian academic landscape. She also discussed her findings, and how she found the themes from her data, as well as the implications of her study.

After her presentation, questions were invited from the group. One student asked her how she recruited her participants. Sarah answered that she had a lot of difficulty recruiting people. It was through one person connecting her with someone they knew, through following up on suggestions, through contacting people who had published. Sarah reported that she had conducted the interviews in person, on the phone, or by Skype, and that she used a recording device.

After her talk, Sarah mentioned that she would be moving to another country soon, and that she might conduct similar research there. She also mentioned that she could use the same framework to research another group.

Professor Sinclair added another pointer for Sarah before the meeting was ended:

Remember you can ask a question to be repeated if you’re not clear about it, and that you can write down the questions. Also, if the question is in several parts, do the easier part first, and say something like, “I’ll start with the last part of that question.”

Professor Sinclair was always watching out for her students, giving them assurance that their work was important, and helping them through each stage. In the case of the Mock Thesis Defenses, she was trying to prime the students about the procedures, to ease their concerns and help them feel prepared for the task.

Mock thesis defense held within an ongoing study group: Cynthia’s mock defense.

Cynthia presented her mock thesis defense to Professor Sinclair’s study group as well. Her study was on a group of educational developers, of which she was a member, looking at how they were socialized into the profession, their norms and values, and the registration
process. Obtaining a PhD on this topic would garner more credibility, would validate the profession. When the presentation was finished, Professor Sinclair commented on it:

You were 32 minutes, and you have to get it down to 20 minutes. You gave too much detail at the beginning. Write it out, time it. What’s the heart of what you want to say? Start with that.

Cynthia asked her, “What do they want to hear?” Professor Sinclair answered: “Your story, how you got here, your findings. Use an exact quote, talk about one person.”

Next the students in the study group asked questions, and Cynthia answered them. Professor Sinclair mentioned that a questioner at the actual defense can preamble before asking a question, and/or include several questions at a time, to prepare her for that possibility, as Professor Sinclair had seen that occur in some of the many other defenses she had attended.

After her successful defense, Cynthia sent an email to all the members of the study group:

Hi Everyone, Just wanted to let you know that I had a great defense experience on Tuesday. I got my presentation down to 20 minutes (lots of practice there) and handled a range of questions that were challenging yet engaging. It was a good experience. Once you get past the first few minutes of the presentation, the butterflies in your stomach go away and you are half-way between auto pilot and just going with the flow. It really does become obvious to you in the process that you are the expert on your topic. It feels good!

Thanks to those who were able to attend my mock defense. I really appreciated your feedback and encouragement. And, thanks to all of you along the way. This group has made all the difference in my finishing my degree.

Cheers
Cynthia

This example illustrates the dynamics in a study group between the students and between the students and the supervisor. Presenting in a study group where the student already knows all the people attending and has achieved a level of comfort with them and with the
supervisor is different that presenting before an open audience. The comments on the part of the supervisor can be quite pointed and direct, while at the same time act as useful information for the other students in preparation for their thesis defenses. The value of the mock is apparent in the comments in Cynthia’s email to the group. It was not only the questions that they asked, but also the support that they extended to her at the mock, but also throughout the study group sessions that she attended that helped her get through her program successfully.

**Summary of mock thesis defenses format, purpose and value.**

To sum up, mock thesis defenses were a rehearsal for the real oral defenses. They were opportunities for the presenters to practice their presentations before an audience and receive feedback on the style of presentation as well as the content. They afforded presenters the chance to make improvements in their presentations before the real defenses, including adjusting their talks so that they were the requisite length, which was twenty minutes for the students in my study, and provided the students with some experience at fielding questions on a variety of topics related to their thesis. They provided support to students from their fellow students and the faculty members who attended, and also served to foster interdisciplinarity and camaraderie among the students, creating a community of scholars and friends.

The mock thesis defense is meant to be preparation for the real defense, but in fact its structure is quite different. A part of the mock defense is spent describing the study to the audience, because they haven’t read it and need that background information. In the real defense, everyone asking questions will have read the thesis and be familiar with its contents, so the student gets right to the heart of the matter and talks about the highlights, the significance of the study, the results, perhaps adding some items that were not included in the study. The responses of the students in my study to their mock defenses which were related to
me after they had successfully defended were that they alleviated a lot of their anxieties, and made them feel more prepared for their defenses, and that they felt that they were not alone, that other students and faculty were behind them and supporting them through to the completion of their thesis processes.

Conclusion

The additional efforts of graduate students that take the form of active participation in supplementary activities are an addendum to their required and extended work. I described the supplementary activities that were part of my research, beginning with the workshops organized by the graduate education school, in my case, OISE/UT, which included orientation workshops at the beginning of September for new students, and professional development workshops, held in the fall and winter terms. I described the changes in the way workshops were presented over time, toward a more student-friendly and engaging format. Next I discussed two fee-based, external workshops that I attended, one conducted by Dorothy Smith, on using IE in research, and the other by Susan Turner, on IE mapping techniques that she developed. Then I discussed auditing extra courses as a way to acquire more information, and to learn more about methodologies. My next topic was study/peer/thesis groups, which comprises a major component of this chapter. I described four different thesis groups in which I participated, three facilitated by supervisors, and one that was student-led, by me. I included the differences between the four groups with dialogue between students and supervisors illustrating how students worked out problems in their research and writing, and received feedback and support from the groups. I also included a student-led writing group, and supervisors’ comments about their study groups. Then I discussed other arrangements by students for writing support. Mock thesis defenses were the final topic of this chapter. I described four mock thesis defenses, two that were held in a study group, and two that were
held in separate meetings, and the value of the feedback and suggestions students received in them, as well as supervisors’ suggestions about how to conduct the real oral defenses.

My research reveals the capacity of the supplementary activities described in this chapter to support the reading-writing activities and text production of the professionals/graduate students in my study. These extra activities helped to address and remedy some of the disjunctures or fault lines in graduate education experienced by the graduate students by providing opportunities for students to fill in the missing pieces of information they required, and suggestions about how to facilitate the navigation of their programs. As well, supplementary activities provided opportunities for students to further develop their ideas, research, speaking and writing skills necessary to present their work to others, and complete their theses.

My own experiences with the supplementary activities in which I participated, as well as those that I facilitated, indicate that they can help transform professionals/graduate students into academic scholars and text producers who can write academic texts, work well collaboratively, and seek out and accept, as well as offer, criticism and suggestions for improvement. My research also supports links between these supplementary activities and graduate students’ completion of their research and thesis work.

The next chapter is the Conclusion of the thesis.
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

“I can’t believe I got it done! And I owe so much to you guys!”
A student’s comment to her study group members after her successful thesis defense.

Framing the Study

This thesis elucidates the experiences and challenges of a group of professionals in graduate education programs requiring a thesis at a large urban university in Canada, focusing on their writing and text production activities. While pursuing their degrees, most of the participants were engaged in some aspect of education or health, and all could be described as “mature” students who had worked in their professions for some time before entering their graduate education programs. Most of the participants were women, and some were mothers of young children. A few of them gave birth during their programs. Many pursued their studies on a part-time basis in Flexible-Time programs, designed for professionals who wished to pursue doctoral degrees while continuing to work full- or part-time.

This is a group rarely addressed in higher education scholarship and often ignored in policies that govern graduate programs and thesis supervision in particular. The literature that I located that was related to my study did not discuss the experiences and problems of working professionals who pursue graduate studies, or in particular, of women who are also mothers. I refer to these participants as professionals/graduate students. Interviews and discussions with them revealed their professional backgrounds, their reasons for entering graduate studies in education, their unique challenges, how they learned to write as academics, and their contributions to their professions through their suggestions for solutions to problems they had encountered in their professional practices, which they investigated in their research. They also articulated the accommodations they wished for that would have facilitated their journeys.
Because I gathered together several methods to conduct the study, I refer to myself as a bricoleur. The research was informed by traditions of ethnography, institutional ethnography (IE), autoethnography, and Laurel Richardson’s Writing as a Method of Inquiry. The graduate students standpoint that was employed is based on an IE concept of standpoint that refers to the study of institutional relations from the perspective of persons imbedded in them, and active in their relations with others (Smith, 1999a, p. 109), in this case, students in a graduate education school. The always-moving, always-shifting standpoint was revealed through interviews and conversations with students about their unique experiences, as well as ethnographies of their activities in the graduate school and at conferences outside the school, along with my standpoint, revealed in my autoethnography, located in a separate chapter as well as throughout the thesis. Standpoints of professors and supervisors are also included but to a much lesser degree, mostly in discussions about study groups that they facilitated.

Focusing on writing activities and text production, the study examined the experiences, strategies, and struggles of the student participants as they and I progressed through our graduate programs. Studying governing texts is an important component in IE, as researchers seek to reveal how such texts direct the activities of persons within an institution, seeking out practices that may have a negative impact on those persons. The research highlights how the writing and text production of the professional/graduate student participants were directed and regulated by the institutional texts and policies of the graduate education school, the School of Graduate Studies, and the university that governed them, through requirements and rules explicated in their handbooks and websites, and indirectly regulated through their governing bodies. These regulations ensure that the theses of the graduate students comply with the norms and standards of the institution and further-reaching regulators, and they are therefore a form of local and translocal governance. I was not able to locate any literature on this subject,
therefore this thesis contributes new information on the regulation of graduate students’
writing. I argue that students who are directly affected by policies, both explicit and implicit,
are important judges of the effectiveness of those policies and how they affect their
experiences in, and completion of, their programs. Using IE and the standpoint of graduate
students revealed that the regulations and policies did not always take into account the special
needs of professionals/graduate students, which is evident in the participants’ and my own
descriptions of our experiences in our graduate education programs. The research brings some
of these problematic areas to the forefront. I have included recommendations to alleviate some
of them further in this concluding chapter.

While I draw on scholarship on graduate student writing, my research differs from that
of most scholars in this area because my focus was not the actual writing of the students, that
is, their drafts and finished written work that constitute their required work in their programs,
though I do discuss my own written work and that of the participants in a few cases. The study
focuses on students’ writing experiences and the social organization of their graduate
programs, as well as the policies and practices that regulated the conditions of their writing
and text production. This focus allowed me to discover which policies had positive results, and
which were problematic or lacking.

All of the participants were employing qualitative methods in their research. In the
core group, many were employing institutional ethnography alone or with other methods, and
most were members of study/peer/thesis groups, one of which was an IE study group. Since IE
is not well known, discussions in the study group were of benefit to all in clarifying their
understanding of the concepts and use of IE in their own research and thesis writing.

The dynamics of interaction among students and between students and professors and
supervisors were revealed through ethnography and autoethnography of classroom
interactions, study group dynamics, thesis proposal presentations, and mock thesis defense exchanges, as well as conference presentations and other graduate education school activities. Many of these activities involved some of the same students and professors. Most of the student participants were women; there were only a few men in the study who participated in two of the four study groups in the research and some of the informal interactions between students. Group meetings and informal conversations resulted in the formation of friendships and scholarly discourse communities among the participants and between the researcher and participants which were of benefit to all in advancing through their graduate programs and completing them. The women students and I shared some of our personal experiences as well, including issues around mothering, and continued to interact and support each other outside and beyond the graduate school experience.

The primary relationship, between the student and the supervisor, is highlighted through dialogue that reveals how students’ work advanced over time as a result of feedback from the supervisor in study groups in which I participated as a member of the groups and as a researcher of them. Individual meetings between students and supervisors were very important as well, but I was not a party to those meetings. Also discussed are the positive effects of students working together with their peers, in study groups and other relationships. As the study unfolded, the importance of students’ presenting their work at all stages of their programs in courses, study groups, and conferences, beginning at their graduate school and expanding to national and international conferences, became evident. These occasions provided opportunities for students to advance their research, generate feedback and suggestions for their ongoing work, and create community with other graduate students and scholars.
Throughout the thesis, the question that was forefront was: *what social organization of graduate education programs supports the reading-writing activities and text production of professionals/graduate students in programs requiring a thesis?* By ‘social organization’ I mean the organization of graduate student programs that structure the lives and practices of the enrolled students, their professors and supervisors and other staff.

In the thesis, I divide the written work of the students into three categories with separate chapters: required, extended and supplementary activities and work. In the context of this thesis, ‘required work’ is work that is mandatory to complete a given program, as outlined in the handbooks of the graduate school and department, including course work, comprehensive examinations, the thesis proposal, and the thesis. ‘Extended work’ is work that extends from the required work, such as conference papers and publications (I focus on conference papers), and ‘supplementary work’ is additional work, which may be voluntary, that fills in the gaps, provides additional information and augments the required and extended work of graduate students, such as workshops, auditing extra courses, study/peer/thesis or writing groups, and attending thesis proposal and mock thesis defense presentations.

During the course of carrying out the research in all these areas, examples of positive support were revealed, as well as areas where support was found to be inadequate or lacking, which will be discussed shortly.

This thesis adds to scholarly research on professionals/graduate students’ writing experiences and challenges, on writing scholar’s work on graduate student writing, and on research about graduate education practices and their effect on student writing. As well, it expands on Dorothy Smith’s work on texts. The new challenge for institutional ethnography, as articulated by Dorothy Smith (2005), is the expansion of research into large-scale organizational practices, and the study of how power operates and is reproduced. This study
expands institutional ethnography-informed research into the exploration of institutional practices in universities.

**Problem Areas that Were Revealed in the Research Process**

Looking back at my doctoral program process, it seemed to me that it was taken for granted that graduate education students would acquire the information and skills they needed to successfully navigate through their programs. Information was offered in the form of information sessions, workshops, and special programs, such as the Graduate Professional Skills program or GPS offered through the School of Graduate Studies at my university. New students were assigned a professor as an advisor, and for some, students more advanced in their programs were assigned as mentors. All of these provisions were designed to assist students in their transitions into graduate students, and offer positive support to them.

Nonetheless, many students reported that they felt lost and/or overwhelmed with the process at different stages of their programs. Writing was a problem for many students. Professionals had difficulties transitioning into writing as academics, and learning the conventions and genres of academic writing. Other areas where students encountered difficulties included: learning to write course papers, writing thesis proposals, choosing appropriate research methods, applying research methods to their studies, carrying out research, and analyzing the data once the research was completed. The leap from data collection and analysis to thesis writing was a huge challenge for many participants, as was learning and applying the different genres required for the thesis chapters.

My experience and the experiences of participants in this study indicate that supervisors often have limited time to mentor their students through the different phases of thesis completion. Students were expected to learn about thesis writing conventions on their own, by availing themselves of resources from the graduate school and reading theses in
similar areas and methodologies to their own studies. But many struggled, resulting in frustration and additional time added to their program length for some students. Part-time students and student mothers had their own challenges.

The major challenges/problems/disjunctures that participants encountered and where support was found to be inadequate are divided into five categories: supervision, the special needs of part-time students, challenges of student mothers of young children, identity issues of professionals/students, and writing problems.

**Supervision.**

My research supports Dorothy Smith’s account of thesis-writing as a multi-person process, which she described as a “fascinating and distinctive work organization, in which many institutionally named participants are working together to produce a text identified as the product of the candidate.”

Supervisors were primary in overseeing all aspects of the thesis development from the proposal to its completion, as representatives of the university and its regulations and policies, and the ultimate judges of the content and worthiness of the theses to be defended.

The guidance they received from their supervisors was the most important support for the graduate education students’ writing, as illustrated in this thesis by interchanges between students and supervisors in the context of study groups. These interchanges demonstrate the skills of the supervisors to bring out students’ passions, to help them hone in on the most salient and doable research topic, and to guide them through their research, analysis and thesis writing.

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104 Dorothy Smith, personal communication, Mar. 2010.
Zhao, Golde, and McCormick’s (2005) study of doctoral student satisfaction related to their choice of supervisor and how the supervisor performed. They found that the most important factors were: “academic advising, personal touch, and career development” (p. 14).

Some participants in my study encountered problems with their supervisors around time frames of returning drafts of their thesis chapters. One student in my study waited for eight months to receive comments about the first draft of her thesis, extending the length of her program. Supervisors who had too many students were hard pressed to meet with and accommodate all of them, and also manage their own university responsibilities and research. I cannot speculate on the ideal number of students that can be supervised adequately, but student feedback indicates that a number of students felt they were ‘lost in the shuffle.’ Some felt guilty asking for meetings with their busy supervisors, and felt that they were expected to solve problems on their own. Although the university had developed guidelines for supervision, which included suggestions for yearly meetings with supervisors and committee members, several participants only had one meeting in their entire program time. Yearly meetings are now an audited requirement of the School of Graduate Studies, but whether this will result in better supervision and better student experience is not known. Some students manage well with minimal feedback from their supervisors, but some of the students in my study expressed that they needed more help than was provided by their supervisors to overcome difficulties and expedite their progress through their programs.

Based on my research, I offer some suggestions to improve the supervisory experience for students. I believe that keeping track of their students’ progress, checking in or meeting with them on a regular basis, perhaps once a month or once every six weeks, would be a helpful practice for many students. Checking what their students’ needs are and what advice or resources could help them at each stage of their program are other taken for granted practices
that are not always provided, and that would improve supervision for many students. Several of the supervisors in my study found that facilitating a monthly study group meeting of their students provided a forum where questions could be addressed, and where students could present their work in progress and receive feedback from the supervisor and the other students, so that less individual supervision was needed. I believe these important issues need to be addressed, and more attention paid to supervision of students, according to their needs, so they receive the support they require to advance their reading-writing activities and text production.

**Students with special needs.**

Literature on socialization stresses the importance of students’ integration into the community of an academic department, linking lack of integration with attrition. Groups for students’ mutual support and learning were recommended by some scholars. Gardner (2008) found that certain students had special needs, such as, “women, students of color, older students, part-time students, and students with children” (p. 127), and that they required more support. My study resonates with most of this finding.

Perhaps surprisingly none of the “students of color” in my study mentioned race as a barrier to their socialization process. The graduate school included many students from different races, and quite a few of the faculty were “people of colour,” so minority groups were part of the graduate school culture. The students in the study were all older professionals who required help in transitioning from professionals to academics, especially in regard to their writing skills. Many of them continued to work while they studied part-time, and many voiced criticisms about their graduate programs. I heard a lot from women students with children, especially those who bore children during their programs or who had very young children, who raised some of the issues in Gardner’s article around time issues and needing more flexibility.
Part-Time/Flexible-Time students’ problems.

According to the complaints I heard from working students, it appeared that the graduate program was designed for full-time students without outside responsibilities, such as jobs, children or other caring responsibilities, who are able to devote a majority of their time to their studies and are available during the day. Many of the professionals/students in my study continued to work full-time while engaged in their graduate studies part-time. Some were enrolled in a special Flexible-Time PhD program developed expressly for them. This created a number of disjunctures for these students because of their work commitments and time constraints, and for some, family responsibilities as well. Some of the students had difficulty taking courses that they wanted because the courses were offered during the day when they were not available. Some students had problems arranging meetings with their supervisors, who in some cases were reluctant or unable to meet with them in the evenings or on Saturdays. Other students were frustrated because workshops and other activities at the graduate school were only offered during the day. Some students wanted more on-line courses, especially those that lived some distance away; others wanted more summer courses, notably those who were teaching and had the summers off. Some students wanted help with publishing, but they found that such help was difficult for them to obtain since their time with their supervisors was so limited. These part-time students were not able to immerse themselves in the academic culture, or to discover how to navigate its hidden curriculum. All in all, the students who were working full-time did not feel they were being accommodated or supported adequately after paying full-time fees for de facto part-time studies. These issues are very significant, and warrant the attention of professors, supervisors and administrators of the graduate education school to find solutions so these students have a smoother pathway to the timely completion of their programs.
Student mothers’ problems.

One unanticipated aspect of my research was that I heard about special problems and needs of the women in my study who were mothers of babies or small children. These women spoke about their difficulties when among other women, in women-only study groups, or in mixed groups when no men were present, indicating that they considered these to be women’s problems, not to be discussed with, or of interest to men. They acted as if they had to hide their difficulties fearing that they would weaken their positions as graduate students in comparison to students who were not in this precarious position of having divided responsibilities, or a ‘bifurcated consciousness’ (Smith, 1987, p. 6). These women were passionate about their research and their thesis work, but they were also passionate about their families. The support they received from the university was limited. There were provisions for maternity leave, and some child care programs, but at a high cost, and with a limited number of spaces for graduate students. At the graduate school of this study, the children had to be at least 2 ½ years old for the on-site program, with no provisions for infants, and day care was not available at the graduate education school after the winter and spring terms. Several of the students/mothers told me that on-site, subsidized, flexible day care was what they needed most from the graduate school to help them stay in their programs and complete them. One said the school was not baby-friendly, and that subsidies/bursaries for child care were needed by mothers who had to arrange their own child care. Women with young children or who bore children during their studies took longer to complete their PhDs; for some, it was 8-10 years, because of intervening family responsibilities which tend to be borne by women and the lack of sufficient support from the graduate school and university.

Participants who were in this position related their personal stories of their struggles to work within the institutional constraints and limited resources availed them, and the realities
of balancing graduate work and their lives as professional working women, wives, and mothers. These are the positions, the standpoints of women who are marginalized, who are left to juggle their graduate programs and their babies without due recognition of their particular hardships and needs or sufficient supports. Looking through a ‘gender lens’ can shed light on their lowly status in graduate school:

What do we mean by a *gender* lens? We mean working to make gender visible in social phenomena, asking if, how, and why social processes, standards, and opportunities differ systematically in women and men … [and that] central assumptions about gender continue to be the organization of the social world, regardless of their empirical reality. (Howard et al, 2005, p. x)

Graduate education is founded on the premise of a full-time student who is not encumbered by the care and responsibilities for children and other family members. This norm is masculine and privileges male students in that women are far more likely to care for family members. A part-time woman student who bears a child during her program or who has young children and is also perhaps working is an anomaly, an outlier, who doesn’t fit the standard profile. Therefore, additional supports she needs to ease her burden and help her move through and complete her program as expeditiously as possible are not viewed as necessities. While maternity leave is available and some daycare spaces are offered, they are limited in number and the cost is high. Any provision that is granted is handled as a unique and special case, and not extended as a matter of course. Dorothy Smith’s ‘women’s standpoint’ exemplifies this position: “As a political concept, it coordinates struggle against the masculinist forms of oppressing women that those forms themselves explicitly or implicitly universalize” (Smith, 2005, p. 9).

I agree with the positions and findings of studies that emphasize that graduate student mothers need policies in place to support them through their programs (Raddon, 2002; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009; Mason et al, 2013). It is crucial that these
mothers/professionals/students special needs be acknowledged and addressed, because women will continue to bear babies or look after young children while working on their graduate degrees.

I believe that graduate school students/mothers should have a forum and a voice to iterate what their particular needs are and how the university and graduate department can accommodate, support and assist them so they can complete their programs in a timely fashion and not opt out for long periods or for good because of a lack of needed resources and services. This can only happen if their subject position is recognized, and if they are valued as important contributors to graduate education who merit extra support.

**Identity issues.**

The students in my study and I could be characterized as mature, or “older” students because we were engaged in professional practices for varying lengths of time before entering our graduate programs. Older students are a growing segment of the graduate school population (Statistics Canada, 2005). My research supports Lauzon’s research (2011) on older students, in which students described feeling lost at various points in their programs and insecure about writing as academics. Lauzon also wrote about these students’ needs for a personal connection to their graduate work. This was mirrored in the participants’ connections to their research, which was often based on personal experiences in their professional settings or from their lives.

In concert with literature on identity formation (Li & Seale, 2008; Seymour, 2005), students who continued to work in their professions while studying had problems integrating their identities/roles as graduate students with their roles as professionals, as well as their roles as spouses and mothers, plus many other roles in their too-busy lives. The study concurs with
studies that found that working students had difficulty managing their time and accomplishing their writing tasks, as well as feeling isolated (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2013).

**Writing problems.**

Literature on activists acquiring and using their advanced degrees to promote their causes (Stanko, 2007; Mykhalovskiy & Church, 2006) provides a greater understanding of the motivations and drive of the professional participants who were experiencing disjunctures, or problems in their professional practices because their reasons for engaging in graduate work were comparable. Similar to the activists, they were driven to investigate and examine particular problems through the lenses of academic discourses and research in order to have greater understanding of them, and to articulate solutions and ways to implement them.

The difficulties described in the literature of transforming a professional perspective into an academic one (Hall & Burns, 2009) mirrors the experiences described by many of the participants in my study. Individuals who came from medical backgrounds, where different paradigms and writing genres prevail, faced particular challenges in adapting to writing styles required in their graduate education programs.

Looking at their professions through an academic lens was a skill that students acquired in the program. The participants were learning methods and language with which to critique their professions, to develop their thesis problematics, conduct relevant research, and write it up in the thesis format, in which they could propose solutions to rectify the problems they had identified. Learning new discourses and writing genres of the academy is mentioned as a problem for some students in some of the literature (Paré, Starke-Meyerring & McAlpine, 2009; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Paré, Starke-Meyerring & McAlpine, 2011). The professional students in my study acquired an academic identity through learning and utilizing
academic genres as they progressed through their programs and were socialized into
discourses and genre systems. This occurred through their courses, where they incorporated
the genres of course readings into their class discussions and final course papers; and during
discussions with others, where they acquired more academic terminology from other students
and professors. In addition, at conferences students incorporated discourses of their particular
fields into conference papers and panel discussions; likewise, in study groups they described
their on-going thesis work utilizing language and methods they had learned and absorbed into
their vocabularies. During supervision students discussed their work and thesis writing with
their supervisors and committee members with increasing academic acumen; and in the
writing of their theses, the full force of their discursive prowess was demonstrated.

**Beneficial Activities that Were Revealed in the Research Process**

In my study, students benefitted from a variety of venues for obtaining advice to assist
with their thesis writing work. Institutional practices that supported opportunities for students
to present their research helped them hone in on their research topics, find the best methods
that were suitable for their proposed studies, find scholars whose work could support their
research, and receive valuable feedback from others. Venues for presentation included: course
paper presentations, thesis proposal presentations, conference paper presentations, beginning
with student conferences organized by their graduate schools, and extending to national and
international conferences, study/peer/thesis group presentations, and mock thesis defense
presentations.
Course paper presentations.

Writing course papers and presenting them in their classes were often the first opportunities participants had to write about their thesis topics in the context of course themes and readings. The first papers were often a struggle, as students grappled with new methodologies, theories, and scholarly works, as well as articulating them to their topics of interest that were relevant to the course material. Presenting their papers to their classmates was often a further challenge, trying to make their ideas clear to students with different professional backgrounds. These papers and presentations were a good grounding for future course work, as well as conference papers and conference presentations. In fact, some students developed their first conference papers from course papers.

Thesis proposal presentations.

I discuss the development of thesis proposals at length in the context of study groups. Feedback from the facilitating supervisors and other students in study groups were a great help to students in developing and writing their thesis proposals, a vital step in the thesis process.

Once students had completed their proposals and they had been approved by their supervisors, they were presented to others in their departments. In some departments at the graduate school, these presentations took part in study groups, while in other departments they were held separately, with an open invitation to anyone in the graduate school to attend. The students presented to the professors and students in attendance, often using PowerPoint, and then opened the floor to questions. This was the first public opportunity for students to identify with their thesis topics, discuss the literature, their proposed methodologies and research plan with their academic community. The presentations solidified their connections with their research, and bolstered them to move on to their ethics protocol applications and to begin their research.
Conference presentations.

Kamler and Thomson (2006) discuss the value of academic conferences to graduate students, and their work resonates with my findings. Student conferences which were held yearly in the spring at the graduate school provided opportunities for students to present their work in a non-threatening setting. Participating in their school conferences bolstered students’ confidence to apply to outside conferences beyond their own university, and later, to submit their writing for publication.

Conference presentations offered participants opportunities to elucidate their research plans and processes, and later, their thesis writing through the act of assembling their ideas in a cohesive form. Writing an abstract and then writing a paper provided them with greater clarity about their research. As well, presenting orally required a condensation of their writing, learning how to present to a variety of audiences, to augment and conceptualize their presentations through visual aids, such as PowerPoint, and to answer questions about their work. Some participants talked about the importance of having the opportunity to present to well-known scholars, receiving recognition and validation of their research work and suggestions and critique from other members of their session, audience members and the discussant. Learning to accept criticism was an important lesson for the graduate students. Some students’ work was delayed or derailed by their negative responses to criticism. Feedback from conferences augmented the feedback participants obtained from their supervisors and from other students in study groups, providing alternative viewpoints and suggestions that broadened their perspectives about their research. The participants also appreciated meeting graduate students and scholars from other universities, some of whom were at very distant locations, who were working in similar fields or with similar methodologies. Some students continued to be in contact with some of these individuals.
Getting leads on publication possibilities, post-doctoral positions and job opportunities were valued by some of the people in the study. An added bonus of off-campus conferences was the opportunity to visit new campuses and new cities.

For these reasons, graduate schools provide an important service to their students by organizing on-site research conferences for them, and by providing funding for students to travel to and participate in off-site conferences.

**Study/Peer/Thesis and writing groups.**

In the literature on graduate education studies, what is missing from most of the recommendations, according to my research, is promoting ample opportunities for graduate students to present and discuss their ongoing thesis work with others in a continuous group setting. In my study, study and writing groups provided that continuity and aided students in all stages of their thesis production.

My research demonstrates that engaging in study, peer or thesis groups, discussing their thesis work at different stages, hearing about other students’ processes and difficulties, receiving and offering suggestions, benefitted students’ development of their theses. Areas where they received help included developing their thesis topics, writing their thesis proposals, carrying out their research, analysing it, and thesis writing.

Some supervisors at the graduate education school ran their own study groups as an adjunct to their individual supervision of their students. In these group meetings, general topics could be discussed, students could ask questions, present their work in progress, and in some cases, present their thesis proposals and mock thesis defenses and receive feedback. I participated in three such study groups that met monthly. One met from six to eight pm to accommodate professionals who were not available during the day. The other two met in the afternoon; one met from two to four, and the other from four to six. Some professionals were
able to arrange their schedules so they could attend the meetings, while others attended when it was possible.

All three groups were facilitated by women supervisors. Two of the groups consisted of mostly women students, while the third group was all women. The number of students attending the meetings of each group varied, from a minimum of five to a maximum of sixteen. Many students had supervisors who did not provide a study group. Some of the students who worked with such supervisors found their way to other supervisors’ study groups, often by chance or through friends. The three supervisor-led study groups that I researched allowed students who were not supervised by the faculty members organizing them to attend. Additionally, several supervisors who ran study groups but whose groups I did not attend also shared their experiences with me. The supervisors had different styles of running their groups, varying in the degree of structure, preplanning, formality, and the content of the meetings. All of them included an initial “go-around” where students spoke briefly about their current thesis work and any problems they were encountering, followed by one or two students presenting their ongoing thesis work in depth for suggestions and feedback.

I also facilitated and participated in one student-led study group, consisting of five women in different stages of their thesis work who knew each other from other groups. This group was very informal, with no preplanned agenda. The students were open and direct in describing their thesis processes and problems, and offering advice, direction and support to each other.

Although some students managed to complete their programs without the help of a study group, I believe many students would benefit from such a group. According to my study, a supervisor facilitator is a good idea for students earlier in their processes, but peer-run
groups can also be very helpful for students well along in their processes. Some students chose to participate in more than one group, finding that each one offered something different.

Kamler and Thomson (2006) promote supervisor-led reading/writing groups, writing for publication groups, and thesis writing groups to assist skills development in doctoral students. They argue that one important feature of such groups is that students learn how to critique and upgrade their own writing. In my research, I also found that writing and study groups were beneficial to the growth of the research skills and academic language skills that the students needed to research and write their theses. In addition, the groups provided a network of support. Peers were very important to the participants’ development of their thesis work, acting as sounding boards, and providing feedback and emotional support. Information shared and connections made in study groups led to other opportunities for students to present their work, such as conference papers, sessions or panels, and publications. Dialogue from these groups reveal the growth of the students’ research work and thesis writing that resulted from the help they received from their participation in study groups.

Based on my research, I recommend that graduate schools organize peer/study/thesis groups and writing groups for students, perhaps by department or by common methodology, and invite students to join, rather than leaving it to chance that that their supervisor may provide a group, or that students may find one on their own.

**Mock thesis defense presentations.**

In preparation for their actual oral defenses, which were closed meetings in the case of the graduate school in the study, students presented their theses a few days earlier to a gathering of students and professors. These mock defenses provided an opportunity for students to practice their oral defense presentations, which were twenty minutes long, and practice answering questions from the audience. In some departments, such presentations took
place in the context of a study group meeting, while in others, a separate meeting was announced and an invitation extended to the graduate school community to attend and support the candidate.

Participants in this study found their mock defenses to be very helpful and supportive. Those present, including professors and recent graduates, prepared the candidate for the protocol and process of the real oral defense, so the student would know what to expect. Often the audience suggested questions that might be asked at the real defense. Students were often in trepidation of the oral defense, and the mock defenses helped to alleviate their fears, and helped them feel more confident to tackle their oral defenses.

Suggestions for Additional Social Organization to Support Graduate Students’ Writing and Text Production

Writing instruction.

Workshops on writing at the graduate school were really lectures, and were not adequate preparation for the participants. As well, supervisors did not have the time to provide detailed writing instruction to their students, relying instead on their editing of the thesis chapters and students’ rewriting them, until the work was deemed acceptable. Among the participants, there was so much confusion about the thesis as mentioned previously, that it would be helpful to have guidelines about thesis writing and the other types of program writing. I believe students would benefit from instruction and practice in the conventions of academic writing particular to their area of study. The teaching of rhetoric, the specialized genre forms found in a thesis, is promoted by some scholars, such as Paré, Starke-Meyerring and McAlpine (2011). Students in my study were expected to acquire the writing skills for each task associated with producing a thesis, including writing introductions, data/analysis chapters, literature reviews, theory and methods chapters, results chapters, conclusions, and
abstracts without prior instruction or practice opportunities. Some students struggled and felt they were insufficiently prepared for this onerous undertaking and insufficiently couched by their supervisors, resulting in frustration and feelings of inadequacy on their part. Teaching rhetorical techniques, which are fundamental to the disciplines they are studying, can equip students with important skills to approach and improve their writing. I also support scheduled writing assistance groups, with a facilitator, where students can drop in for help with specific writing problems, and special groups for students who are “stuck,” also with experienced facilitators.

Some graduate education schools have special programs to help enculturate their graduate education students to academic communities and the discourses in their disciplines. For example, at the time of the writing of this thesis, McGill University had a Proseminar for first-year graduate education students, and a Colloquium for second year students, to help students acquire an academic identity with a research community, and form a “discourse community” for mutual support. The University of Melbourne ran a seminar on Surviving the PhD: Answering All the Questions You Never Thought to Ask (Wilson, 2005). Looking at successful models from other graduate education schools is a method of locating alternative program ideas.

It would be helpful if supervisors were given more support to assist their students with thesis writing. There are some excellent resources that can be used for this purpose, such as Lovitt’s (2007) book, *Making the implicit explicit: Creating performance expectations for the dissertation*. This book provides information for each thesis chapter, explaining the criteria for excellence, which can be adapted to the particular style of theses in a particular discipline.

I am not saying that all students require all this instruction and support, but I believe that many students would utilize them and benefit if they were available.
Monthly open meetings.

Another suggestion that I believe would be helpful is setting up an open meeting, perhaps by department, at a particular time and place, such as a Saturday once a month, with a facilitator who is experienced with graduate education programs. Graduate students at all stages of their programs would have a place to meet to discuss questions and concerns. Separate tables could be assigned to students at different stages of their programs. Students who cannot attend in person could participate via Skype or teleconferencing. This could foster comradeship among students who live further away, or who work full time. I believe it would be reassuring to students to know there was a place they could go and feel free to discuss any topic related to their studies, and also socialize with other students and perhaps form pairings or groups that can meet on their own. I also support the development of interactive websites and blogs that can provide resources for students to discuss their difficulties.

Conclusion

Writing this thesis made very important contributions to my own knowledge of my topic in many ways. It contributed to my understanding of graduate education program organization and governance. I learned about the variety of topics and approaches of graduate students to their research, and their frustrations, roadblocks and triumphs in carrying out their projects. I experienced the passion students had for their thesis work and their belief in its value and their contributions to knowledge in their areas of study. I learned about the compassion and support students generously shared with other students. I learned about the skills of supervisors in working with students, as well as the stresses on them and how it impacted students. I learned about my own strength to persevere to finish this thesis in spite of obstacles and setbacks that made me question my path.
Topics related to my thesis that warrant further research include study groups, both supervisor-led and student-led, to further understand their impact on students’ progress through their programs, and to compare the experiences of students who participate in such groups with students who are not involved in study groups, since I did not carry out a comparison in this study. Gathering supervisors who all run study groups for a discussion is another piece of research of value, because several supervisors told me they had no idea how other supervisors ran their groups, and that they would like to meet with others to compare notes. Another area for further study is student-led groups, how they originate, how they are run, and the purposes they serve for the students. A study of writing groups, which I did not experience personally, would also be of interest, since the students I met who had been part of one were very positive about the experience they gained about editing and improving their own and others writing. The experiences and special needs of graduate student mothers is an area that warrants further exploration, including organizing groups of these women for their mutual support, hearing their stories, and asking what accommodations and supports would help them move through and complete their programs, as well as helping them advocate for needed changes.

It is my sincerest hope that this thesis will be of value to research on graduate students’ writing experiences and graduate education programs, as well as to graduate students, professors, supervisors and administrators of graduate education programs.
REFERENCES


Appendices

Appendix A

SUZANNE FORGANG MILLER, CONFERENCE PAPERS, 2005 - 2010

2005  Graduate education in the Rae Report on Higher Education
•  7th Annual Student Research Conference of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, OISE/University of Toronto.
•  Conference title: Knowledge production in the academy: Limits, liminal spaces and horizons.

2007  The dynamics of students’ reading-writing activities in doctorate programs.
•  York University Graduate Education Conference, Toronto, ON.
•  Session title: Inquiries into education practices inspired by institutional ethnography (IE) and the sociology of Dorothy E. Smith. March 3, 2007.
•  Session organizer and chair: Suzanne Forgang Miller, Ph.D. student, OISE/University of Toronto. Discussant: Alison Griffith, York University.

2007  Inverted priorities in the processes of graduate study: Program and grant application, publication and course work.
•  7th Annual Dean’s Graduate Student Research Conference, OISE/University of Toronto.

2007  An exploration of the dynamics of students’ reading-writing activities in doctorate programs in the social sciences: Recruitment of knowledge workers for the academy.
•  Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.

2007  Using Institutional Ethnography to explore the dynamics of students’ reading-writing activities in doctoral programs in the social sciences.
•  Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting, New York, NY. Educational Problems Division and Institutional Ethnography Division.
•  Session organizer and discussant: Lois Andre-Benchely, California State University, Los Angeles.

2008  Using Institutional Ethnography to explore doctoral students’ strategies of use of study groups.
•  Canadian Sociological Association Annual Meeting, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC
- Session organizer: Dorothy E. Smith, University of Victoria. Discussant: Alison Griffith, York University.

**2008 The interdisciplinary work of professionals returning to the academy for doctoral degrees.**
- Session organizer: Naomi Nichols, York University. Discussant: Liza McCoy, University of Calgary.

**2009 Professionals acquiring graduate degrees: Navigating between different textual landscapes.**
- Canadian Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON.
- Session organizer: Suzanne Forgang Miller, PhD Candidate, ABD, OISE/University of Toronto. Chair: Linda Muzzin, OISE/University of Toronto. Discussant: Dorothy E. Smith, University of Victoria.

**2009 Shifting problematics in an exploration of the program work of graduate students.**
- Session organizer: Janet M. Rankin, University of Calgary.

**2010 An account of Ph.D. thesis production in the social sciences, using institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry.**
- Canadian Sociological Society Annual Meeting, Concordia University, Montreal, P.Q.
- Session organizer and chair: Dorothy E. Smith, University of Victoria.
- Discussant: Alison Griffith, York University.

**2010 Professionals who return to the academy for graduate degrees in education: Navigating paths to credential acquisition.**
- Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education Annual Meeting, Concordia University, Montreal, PQ.
- Session organizers: Nicole Simmons, Waterloo University and Michael Kompf, Brock University.
2010  **Doctoral students’ reading-writing activity as text production.**
- Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing Annual Conference, Concordia University, Montreal, PQ.
- Session title: Graduate Student Writing. May 31, 2010.
Appendix B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT LETTER

An inquiry into the social organization of doctoral students’ work: Text production through reading-writing activity

CONSENT FORM FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS AND/OR FOCUS GROUPS WITH GRADUATE STUDENTS, COURSE INSTRUCTORS, THESIS SUPERVISORS

I am asking for your support and contribution to my doctoral research on the knowledge-work of graduate students. I am inviting you to assist me by agreeing to participate in this study, entitled: An inquiry into the social organization of doctoral students’ work: Text production through reading-writing activity

I understand that the purpose of the interview or focus group is to enable me to give my individual input as a graduate student, course instructor, or thesis supervisor at OISE/UT. I understand that the researcher wishes to focus on graduate student’s own reflections and accounts, as well as those of course instructors, and thesis supervisors, of the processes and work graduate students engage in through program work and other work that leads to the production of written work related to graduate programs, including course papers, conference papers, thesis proposals, research, and dissertation writing. The focus is on what practices enable and expedite graduate students’ production of papers and other written work, including their theses, which have been actualized in the specific discourse domains addressed in their graduate programs.

It is my understanding that I will not be evaluated or judged or harmed in any way, that no value judgment will be placed on any of my responses, that the purpose of this research is to study the actual discursive work of graduate students, and that I will contribute to this study by taking part in this interview/focus group with the researcher.

I understand that all raw data and documents collected by the researcher will be held strictly confidential, and that there will be no identifying information, including my name or position or any other information that could identify me, in any report or presentation that may arise from the study, and that all identifying information in the raw data will be destroyed after five years or publication of the study. I understand that only the student researcher, Suzanne F. Miller, and her faculty supervisor, Dr. Linda Muzzin, will have access to the information collected during the study. I understand that I am under no obligation to agree to be part of the
I understand that I can decline to complete any part of the tasks, and that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without negative consequences.

I understand that while I may not benefit directly from this study, the information gained and the knowledge produced may contribute to graduate education. I understand that I may obtain a summary of the findings of the study, and that if I so wish I may obtain, upon request, a copy of the thesis in electronic form when it is completed.

I, _______________________________________________, agree to take part in an individual interview and/or focus group with the researcher, Suzanne F. Miller, as part of my participation in a study entitled: An Inquiry into the Social Organization of Doctoral Students’ Work: Text Production through Reading-Writing Activity.

___________________________________      __________________________
Signature                                                            Date

Please retain a copy of this consent form for your record.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the Researcher, Suzanne F. Miller, 416 924 8902, s.miller@utoronto.ca or her Faculty Supervisor, Professor Linda Muzzin, 416 923 6641 x 4490, l.muzzin@utoronto.ca.

Please contact the Office of Research Ethics, 416 946 3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.