

Introduction

When David Sternberg (1981) wrote his still-engaging if occasionally outdated (and scary!) book on how to survive a doctoral dissertation, he claimed that no how-to books of the type he was writing existed. Today, dozens of books now aim to help students prepare and write doctoral proposals and dissertations (do a google search!). So why offer a book on the doctoral dissertation journey to a market that is already flooded with how-to-write-proposals-and-dissertations books, including ones that focus on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods inquiry in the social sciences? I guess because this book is *not* another one of those, in that it is not a how-to-write book or even a how-to-do-research book.

Instead, *Before the Dissertation* concerns issues to consider *before* students start writing, indeed before they commit to a major high-stakes dissertation project, whether qualitative or quantitative or something in between. It is especially relevant for students who wish to do projects that involve a lengthy research period (which can add to stress), and that also involve reading, data collection, and writing in more than one language. From the earliest stages of doctoral work, even before the proposal stage, and during intermediate stages of preparation for a project as well, there are things to think about and discuss with friends, family, and advisers such as: Why do you want to pursue a doctoral degree? Do you fully understand what you are getting into? How will you manage to develop an appropriate topic? What will your role be in your project and what languages will you use with multilingual participants? How might you engage with

reading, people, and personal writing at early stages in ways that will contribute to your project's development? How much attention should you pay to quality-of-life issues?

In all these senses, this book starts well before other books do and stops where they begin. Still, many existing books touch on the issues in *Before the Dissertation*, so there is nothing radically new here—just an expansion of what tends to be underdiscussed in the proposal-dissertation writing guidebooks and an organic approach rather than a linear and prescriptive one.

Overview of *Before the Dissertation*

This book consists of nine short chapters that for the most part can be read in any order. Some of the main points of the book are repeated in some of the chapters, for those readers who read selectively. However, the first several chapters discuss some important preliminary issues that might best be considered first, such as reasons for students' decision to begin doctoral study in the first place and quality-of-life concerns. Each chapter begins with a common myth about advanced academic work that I hope to quickly dispel. The chapters then lay out some issues and offer some examples (stories) from my work with students, from my own experiences, or from existing literature on early doctoral study. The chapters pose questions that connect issues directly with individual readers so as to help them make sensible decisions about their doctoral work. A summary of main points and suggestions for discussion and reflection are offered at the end of each chapter.

The book could be used in graduate classes on issues in doctoral study, most usefully earlier rather than later in the program of study, such as introduction to graduate study or early seminars on dissertation planning. It lends itself well to intense and personal discussion among class members and encourages peer sup-

port as well as regular interaction with professors and advisers. It could also be a companion (a “textual mentor”; see the definition in Chapter 1) to individual students who, on their own, wish to reflect on their decision to pursue doctoral studies and on what might lie ahead for them in the coming several years of work on a doctoral project. It will accompany all readers in their early stages of thinking, reading, discussing, exploratory and reflective writing, and decision-making. The style of the book is intended to be personal and engaging, free of jargon and unnecessary terminology, and respectful of mature L1, L2, and EAL (first language, second language, English as an additional language) readers of English. I hope that my personal style will help keep all of us from taking ourselves too seriously. (Seriously—you will not die if you don’t finish a doctoral dissertation.)

The Audience for This Book

Before the Dissertation speaks to an audience in the social sciences, but in particular to one that I am especially interested in and familiar with: doctoral students who have experience with and interest in international and multilingual students as well as native English-speaking students in diverse settings who wish to investigate topics in (second) language and multicultural-transcultural education. Much of this research is conducted in various linguistic and cultural contexts and makes use of more than one language for data collection, analysis, and writing—a focus not apparent in most guide books. Nevertheless, although appropriate for use in English-dominant doctoral programs throughout the world, some of my points will pertain more closely to students in the North American educational system than to ones, for example, in the British system. Some years of course work and planning typify the former, but not the latter. It is likely that many of the issues I discuss are indeed experienced

by graduate students in the British-style system, but at the master's level stage, before they have actually begun a doctoral program, as well as early in their doctoral programs. Although many of my resources concerning advising and supervising of doctoral students are from U.K.-system authors, my primary focus will be on the North American context. The decisions for students are the same: Why am I doing a doctoral program? What kind of research project will possibly sustain me for several years? What is the role of the doctoral adviser-supervisor and how can I best manage this relationship?

The main audience for this book is thus doctoral students who are first or second/additional users of English, who are interested in pursuing topics in one of the social sciences (including education and multilingual inquiry), and who may just be finishing course work in an English-dominant university and are wondering what might happen next. Sternberg (1981) long ago pointed out what is still true today (see Lovitts, 2005): The dissertation phase of a doctoral program is really a second, different program from the course work stage. Students nearing the end of course work (in the North American system) might have little idea how they will get through the very different dissertation stage. I think it is not much easier for students in the British system who need to start thinking about their projects without the years of required course work to ease them into a project. So, *Before the Dissertation* will be a good companion for students who feel a bit lost and fit the following descriptions: those who wonder if they made the right decision to pursue a doctoral degree; who have little sense of what a good research topic for them will be; who believe that everyone else around them already knows how to do research and write in flawless academic English and that they were admitted to their program by mistake; or who are overwhelmed by pressures and obligations in their lives that have nothing to do with doctoral work. I hope to convince such

readers that they are in good company. (Out of curiosity, consider asking your professors and adviser(s) what *they* went through in completing their doctoral degrees.)

But what if you are a master's-level student at this stage? It is also possible that, even though this book is written mainly for doctoral students, master's students who are required to write a thesis in order to graduate will also benefit from reading it. Moreover, for those master's students who are considering continuing to study at the doctoral level, *Before the Dissertation* might provide some advanced information (warning?) about what lies ahead. A decision to pursue a doctoral degree should not be made lightly. It hardly makes sense to realize several years into a degree program that this was not really what you wanted to spend your time, money, and effort on (attrition rates in doctoral programs are depressingly high; see Golde, 2000, 2005).

Other important readers will be doctoral instructors, advisers, and mentors, who may find that *Before the Dissertation* offers some insights into what some doctoral students go through in the months, or even years, before they write their proposals and actually start their doctoral research and begin communicating with their advisers. These insights may inspire faculty to connect with graduate students in expanded ways and also to begin discussing issues in dissertation work with them earlier rather than later. The book may also help instructors and advisers understand the kinds of obstacles faced by some students that tend to impede or halt their progress. If, on the other hand, advisers take a hands-off approach, in which they want to see a student only when that student has a dissertation chapter drafted and ready to be critiqued, then this book probably goes beyond what they believe their job should be. (Such advisers may not distinguish between a hands-on approach and hand-holding, but they are not the same.) There are always dilemmas about how involved advisers need to be in students' lives and work, but the litera-

ture on supervising generally concludes that closer, more regular attention pays off pragmatically and psychologically (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 1998; Lee, 2007; Lunsford, 2012; Meloy, 1994; Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007).

Finally, it is possible that students who are pursuing English-dominant doctoral degrees in their second languages (English as an L2 or additional language) might find the mentorship in *Before the Dissertation* especially comforting, although the ideas and issues apply to all doctoral students. As Paltridge and Starfield (2007) discussed in their book for supervisors, international students who use English as a second language might be unfamiliar with some of the unwritten and often unspoken expectations in U.S.- or U.K.-style doctoral programs. For instance, if students expect to be told what to do every step of the way, to be assigned a topic, to be handed a full reading list without needing to search for their own literature, and to receive (rather than pro-actively negotiate) detailed and prescriptive advice, they will likely be disappointed. In the social sciences, unlike in some of the hard sciences, they will probably be working on a topic of their choosing (in consultation with an adviser) rather than on a team project under the umbrella guidance of a main faculty member who has gotten grant money. It will be up to individual students to seek help, to teach their adviser(s) about themselves, their home cultures, and their hopes and expectations, and to instigate change if they are not satisfied (cf. Fujioka, 2008).

But whether students are pursuing a doctoral degree in English as an additional language or English as a first or dominant language, *Before the Dissertation* will provide them with many things to think about before they actually start writing a proposal or commit to doctoral research. Some things are good to think about before it's too late—in other words, before energy, peace of mind, and bank accounts are depleted. The decision to pursue a doctoral degree needs to be the right one.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 is a foundational chapter in that it explains the rationale for the book, defines what I mean by “textual mentor,” and reviews some of the common problems that prospective dissertation writers face. It stresses the importance of doing sufficient homework, leg work, head work, and heart work before committing to a doctoral journey.

Chapter 2 is a second foundational chapter. Just as there are many reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree (both external and internal incentives), there are also reasons not to do so, or reasons to adjust the timing of students’ commitment. Although it seems common sense, prospective dissertation writers might not know the specific requirements and demands at their university; it pays to ask earlier rather than later. This chapter also addresses questions about conducting projects involving more than one language. Importantly, it emphasizes quality-of-life issues having to do with health, relationships, and balance—topics rarely discussed in dissertation guide books. In general, it asks a lot of questions that would be wise for students to consider before they make a final commitment.

Chapter 3 discusses several types of writing that usefully help shape a project at its early stages and that aid planning, decision-making, and record-keeping. These include research memos, dissertation journals, field notes, personal journals, and “academic letters.” Such writing can liberate novice researchers from fear of being judged harshly by others and can provide an emotional outlet (something essential) because this kind of personal writing can be written in any way the writers wish, with impunity.

Chapter 4 asks where ideas come from and explores initial thoughts on topics that are and are not appropriate for a major book-length research project. One of the points of this chapter is that a topic that sustains interest, curiosity, and commitment over

time (including for publications that come post-dissertation) must come from the heart (personal experience, philosophy of teaching and learning, current work issues) and yet be capable of connecting with others (including a faculty adviser) and with literature in the field. It also addresses issues of access to research sites and securing consent of participants, both of which are important to think about at the early topic-development stage.

Chapter 5 is devoted to reading and discusses the role of reading in topic development and knowledge building. Some disagreement exists as to how steeped in reading students need to be at early stages of dissertation work and how central the literature review is at these early stages, so I present my pro-reading stance as one of several views. I also include in this chapter some early suggestions and cautions about keeping track of and organizing readings and of reflecting on them in reading response journals.

Chapter 6 reviews what it means to “think theoretically and conceptually.” Written for people who fear terms like *theory* and are confused by the requirement that they provide a theoretical or conceptual framework for their research project, the chapter untangles some of the mysteries of abstract thinking and offers some strategies for conceptual framing that are useful to think about as a project develops.

Chapter 7 presents some issues concerning finding advisers and mentors and beginning to think way down the line about committee members. The stance I take in this chapter is that decisions about who to work with, how to work with them, and how to construct a committee are political, psychological, and emotional as well as pragmatic. Such decisions are also negotiable. Prospective dissertation writers need to take a proactive stance in forging and managing these relationships.

Chapter 8 suggests another important source of help in shaping a project and making decisions, that of supportive people such as study groups, friends, and colleagues-classmates. Even one

or two trusted people can form a reciprocal mentoring relationship that will last over time. This kind of support is different from that provided by professors and advisers (see Chapter 7).

In Chapter 9 I return to the question of topic, and how readings, writings, and supportive discussions and exchanges can help doctoral students develop and refine their topics. Once a topic has been refined, students should be ready to commit seriously to their projects (focused reading, dissertation proposals, data collection, analysis, early writing).