

Writing a Master's Dissertation – Students' Perspectives

José Brandão Carvalho
University of Minho, Portugal

Luísa Álvares Pereira
University of Aveiro, Portugal

Rómima Mello Laranjeira
Mackenzie University, Brazil

Abstract

Students are expected to write complex text genres in higher education contexts. Such complexity stems not only from the nature of the knowledge they convey but also from the norms and conventions adopted by the academic communities that use such texts. Among those genres, the dissertation seems particularly complex, considering both the set of problems related to its configuration (structure, language, norms of reference), and the factors that constrain its production (methodological procedures, student/supervisor relationship, time management, institutional constraints, individual nature of the writing process). The present study seeks to identify and analyze (i) students' perspectives and representations of the dissertation writing process, and (ii) the problems that arise in the writing process. It is based on semi-structured interviews with students, at three different universities in the North of Portugal, who recently completed their dissertations in Humanities, Education and Engineering. The analysis is based on the assumption that writing a dissertation involves not only cognitive, linguistic and social dimensions, but also emotional aspects that can condition it decisively.

Introduction

Academic writing in higher education is a complex, multidimensional and heterogeneous field of studies, which has been developed in several institutions across the world. Due to significant developments in the last 30 years, we can nowadays find different theoretical and methodological traditions. These can be quite different depending on their educational history and as well as on institutional practices (Russell et al. 2009).

Research grounded in either cognitive or sociocultural theories has produced a set of relevant data that enable us to understand how students write and the problems they have with the writing process. On the one hand, we can find studies with a focus on cognitive research that consider writing as a cognitive problem-solving process (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987, Flower and Hayes 1981), while, on the other hand, there are studies which draw on sociocultural theories such as socio-constructivism, which value the social aspects of human activity and conceive of writing as a social activity. These social-oriented perspectives stress that the complexity of the writing processes depends on social situations, institutional settings, personal values and beliefs (Mateos and Solé 2012).

These two research movements have identified a set of problems concerning students' writing in higher education. Among them are problems related to knowledge transformation, synthesizing different text sources and putting into one's own words the ideas retrieved from texts in a literature review (Carvalho 2012). Other problems have to do with the fulfilment of the

demands associated with the production of some text genres, such as the master's dissertation. This seems to be a particularly complex genre, considering both the aspects related to its configuration (structure, language, norms of reference) and the factors that constrain its production (methodological procedures, student/supervisor relationship, time management, institutional constraints, individual nature of the writing process). The characteristics of this genre, and the complexity of the research and writing processes that underlie its production, are problematic and are often a source of negative emotions, such as anxiety and insecurity, that demand the supervisors' support (Castelló and Iñiesta 2012, Donahue 2013, Harwood and Petrić 2017, Russell and Cortes 2012).

The problems faced by some higher education students, when it comes to writing, may be related to the complexity of writing practices at university, which are indeed very different from those used by students previously at school. These new practices demand students' mastery of a wide range of competences and procedures. They must know the discursive characteristics that necessarily involve the production of texts, taking into account the specificity of the disciplinary knowledge and the features of the genres they are asked to produce. Students must also acknowledge the literacy practices in which they participate now. New forms of literacy practices and an appropriate use of texts demand using language properly in a given academic and disciplinary field (Álvarez and Yániz 2015, Bazerman 1988, Hyland and Sancho 2012, Kruse 2013). In other words, the students must acquire new writing competences in order to produce specific genres within a certain community of practice.

The study of student writers' perspectives is one of the aspects focussed by research within the field of academic writing. Studies aiming at understanding students' conceptions about writing have been developed in different contexts around the world (Castelló and Donahue 2012). In Spain and Latin American countries, students' conceptions and attitudes towards writing have been analyzed (Álvarez, Villardón and Yániz 2010, Castelló and Mateos 2015, Villalón and Mateos 2009). And in Portugal, students' perceptions and representations about writing are also being studied. Barbeiro, Pereira and Carvalho (2015) developed a significant study based on 1150 students' answers to a questionnaire about literacy practices in Portuguese higher education. The results showed that the majority of students understand the procedural nature of writing, regardless their field of study. And despite the difficulties they acknowledge, students recognize the complexity, the dynamism and the characteristics of the writing process.

The Study

Methodology

The European Literacy Network COST Action IS1401 - 'Strengthening Europeans' Capabilities by Establishing the European Literacy Network' (ELN) - is a network supported by the European Commission. This network has scientific, technological and societal goals. Within this action, one of the groups, which is developing research on Academic Writing, is carrying on a collaborative project that aims to explore dissertation writing, from the student writers' perspectives, in a variety of European contexts and a variety of languages.

The specific objectives of this project are: (i) to explore what doing a BA and MA dissertation means from the dissertation writers' perspectives; (ii) to identify and analyse what significant experiences BA and MA dissertation writers face during the process of writing their dissertations, and how they feel about these experiences; (iii) to identify and analyse how they manage these significant events, and what problem solving strategies they use when facing negative or problematic events; (iv) to identify and analyse what students feel they have learned while they were writing the dissertation, both about writing and about their subject.

Data have been collected in nine countries (Denmark, Bosnia, Macedonia, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Ukraine and the UK). The first stage involved the collection of data in team members' countries using the same methodology. The team has developed a methodological framework for the project, consisting of an interview protocol that included the drawing of a dissertation journey plot. In addition to answering semi-structured questions, the interviewees were asked to draw two graphs representing: a) the significant events; b) their learning

experiences throughout the process of writing the dissertation. In these graphs, interviewees were supposed to classify those events and experiences in terms of their intensity and their positive or negative nature.

Analysing data collected in semi-structured interviews is a complex task involving the definition of categories in order to construct a coding scheme to be applied by all team members. As a contribution to the construction of this coding scheme, the Portuguese team decided to carry out an exploratory study. This study consisted of the analysis, without the definition of any previous category, of a set of interviews collected in different contexts. In the selection of the sample, we took into account aspects that could make this difference, namely the gender of the interviewee, the institution attended, the field of studies and the academic or professional nature of the master's degree being completed. The objective was to verify whether, regardless of the different factors involved, there were common aspects that could be chosen as main categories in the analysis of the complete corpus, collected in different European countries, in order to get a consistent and valid instrument for the future comparative analysis. In addition to this, it was important to see how the common features found in the interviews were verbalized by students.

Taking all these aspects into account, we decided to carry out analysis of three interviews, among the nine conducted overall in Portugal. Considering the exploratory nature of the study that we intended to develop, we selected students from three different Portuguese universities, and different scientific fields: (i) Student A: a 32 year old male student studying Literature; (ii) Student B: a 23 year old female student enrolled in a Teacher Training Course; and (iii) Student C: a 23 year old female Engineering student. The first student had attended a research master's programme in a classic, old Portuguese university. The others came from two newer universities in the north of Portugal, and had recently completed professional master courses where their dissertations directly related to training practices developed in working contexts.

All three interviews were read and analyzed by each member of the Portuguese team. The analysis followed the procedures suggested by Grawitz (1990) and Bogdan and Biklen (1994) for a content analysis that is not based on preliminary hypothesis, this is, when categories are not defined in advance. As we were reading, we sought to identify words, phrases, patterns of behaviour, events, and emerging forms of thinking. In this way we aimed to detect patterns and regularities in order to establish an inventory that could shape the categories.

This analysis allowed the identification of a set of topics that could be found in the three interviews. It was not only important to identify these topics but also to understand how they were verbalized by the subjects, that is, the discursive processes that they had activated. This explains our option concerning the presentation of the results in the next section. We will not only present the main topics/categories we identified, and their subtopics, but also the words used by each student to convey them. This option, as well as the decision of choosing a very small sample (only three students), seemed to be the best one at this stage of the research project, in which finding the most appropriate methods to analyse the data was more important than achieving definite results.

Results

The results highlight the diversity of elements involved in writing a master's dissertation and made it possible to identify the aspects that are common to the three interviews and that, in some way, may be key elements in the analysis of all the interviews that constitute the global corpus.

In fact, and according to the interviewees, writing a dissertation entails three major aspects:

- (i) it is a task developed under supervision;
- (ii) it involves reading;
- (iii) it implies writing at different stages and levels.

It is also a knowledge construction and developmental process in what concerns three elements:

- (i) knowledge acquisition ('What I know');
- (ii) processes (research; reading/writing; professional practices - 'How I do it');
- (iii) feelings and emotions ('How I feel').

Each of these aspects will be presented in the next section.

Supervision

The role of the supervisor throughout the dissertation construction is one of the main aspects that emerge from the analysis of the interviews.

The supervisor appears as someone who guides and supports the students:

He said it wouldn't be fruitful [...] this guidance helped me (student A);

The supervisor helped; she said: - this is not necessary (student C).

This support concerns both reading and writing. As far as reading is concerned, supervisors provide references or help students in the choice of the most relevant sources:

The supervisor gave me an extensive bibliography [...] it was the basis of what I developed later (student A);

I sent her any article I found in my search because not all that is on the Internet is reliable [...] I had that support too (student C).

The supervisors' guidance in different aspects of the writing process, such as the integration of different textual sources, the text extension, or the text revision, is also acknowledged by students:

My supervisor may guide me in some ways, some forms of writing, perhaps (student A);

Their comments helped to overcome difficulties in writing and in the integration of the sources in the text (student B);

They help; they advise us how to write; with their experience, they can tell us how far we should go in the development of each topic' (student B);

She helped me in the final revision of each chapter (student C).

In addition to support and guidance, the evaluation of students' work appears as a function performed by the supervisor:

The supervisor enjoyed it (student A);

Although it was good to know that I was almost finishing, when she told me that I had to review some parts, I realized things were not so well (student B).

The nonfulfillment of the students' expectations towards the supervisors' role may sometimes be a problem, a cause of anxiety and stress. Student A expressed this very clearly, when he said:

Somehow I felt like an orphan [...] I wanted to have an answer soon, I wanted to know if it was right [...] I was at a crossroad, because I did not have the feedback and did not know if this was the right way to go on.

We have an idea, maybe even a romantic one, that the supervisor is going to be the one who will open all the doors in your life, he will suggest conferences, he will write articles with you, he will, for hours, debate a theoretical subject that he cares about as

much as you do. That is an idea that we gradually deconstructed, and, at the end, I discovered that the subject I study is of my own interest.

Reading

The students refer to different aspects involved in the reading process. They not only recognize the importance of reading during the process, but also describe how they performed reading and identify their reading difficulties.

According to students, reading takes place mainly at the beginning of the process and has a relevant role in the definition of the research process and in the construction of the theoretical framework:

An extensive bibliography [...] it was the basis of what I developed later (student A);

The literature review was one of the initial tasks (student C).

The literature review is not the only goal of reading. It also enables students to become familiar with the genre:

I looked at the form, I paid attention to how that book was written more than to the contents of the book I was reading (student A);

I haven't had much training in the domain of academic writing, I read many dissertations (student C).

There are different ways of accessing bibliographic sources, from lists of texts provided by supervisors to bibliographic searches in data bases:

The supervisor gave me an extensive bibliography (student A);

There are websites, Google Scholar, SCOPUS that help us [...] I started searching, using some keywords (student C).

Among many different texts, it is important to choose those that are really important to the research process. Student C describes how she selected those texts:

I read the abstract and saw if it really interested me.

The students recognize the importance of taking notes while reading. In fact, all the three refer such practice:

I read, I took my notes (student A);

I took notes, I pointed out what I had to point out (student B);

I always had a blank sheet of paper with me and I always pointed out the ideas I was finding (student C).

As they recognize the importance of reading, students also refer to the difficulties they had while reading, especially those that resulted from the complexity of the texts involved:

I wondered whether I was understanding those texts in the correct way [...] I went on reading but I did not feel very confident (student A);

I took notes [...] but I still did not know what made sense (student B).

Writing

Writing has a central place in the construction of a master's dissertation, and this is naturally reflected in the students' discourse on how that process was carried out. Different aspects of the writing process arise, as students describe their experiences.

Choosing the topic and defining the structure of the dissertation are the first problems that students had to face. Once these problems were solved, the process could proceed:

Before I started, I already had a notion of what I was going to work on, so I made a plan based on four chapters that focused on different areas (student A);

The index – I organized a mental framework, about what I had to do. From then on, I began to organise the information I had already collected, in order to compose the text (student B);

The topic was not well defined yet, I draw a scheme, and then it was much easier; once I had the structure of the dissertation on a sheet of paper, I was able to start writing (student C).

Writing and reading are intrinsically related to the literature review of a dissertation. As one reads, one writes to take notes. Afterwards, based on those notes, it is necessary to construct a text that synthesizes the information withdrawn from the different sources. These are complex tasks, because, on the one hand, the students must define a coherent structure to organise the information retrieved from various texts, and, on the other hand, they have to convey that information in their own words, different from those used by their authors.

These tasks are described in the interviews:

I read, I take my notes and then, when I have everything, I start sewing it in a text (student A);

I read several texts and then I wrote for myself (student C).

The students reported the difficulties they had felt when carrying out this practice. These difficulties revolved around defining a coherent structure:

I only had loose notes when I began to write the theoretical chapters (student B);

There were too many ideas; I got rather confused, then things became more structured (student C).

They also concerned the paraphrasing of texts:

I did not want to write like they write [...] but if it was so well written, how could I put it any other way? (student B);

I tried to put their ideas in my own words [...] I wondered: how shall I express this idea? (student C).

Writing a dissertation is neither a linear nor a uniform process. Throughout the process, students adopt different writing rhythms. At some moments they write fast, at other moments they write more slowly:

The first chapter was the one I wrote more calmly, during more time. It took me six months to write it [...] The other four, the introduction and conclusion were written at the end of the third semester [...] with such adrenaline [...] I wrote the chapters with a certain speed. I had everything under control, things came out very fast, the writing was fluid (student A).

I did not follow the sequence of the chapters. I wrote different parts. First, I wrote about the context, the literature review was also written at the beginning, well [...] the abstract and the introduction were written almost at the end of the process (student B).

Rewriting, as a consequence of text revisions, was carried out at different moments of the process. It is inherent to any writing task and naturally it is something students refer to in the interviews:

Until July, I regularly reviewed the theoretical chapter, adding information retrieved from texts I had read, sometimes cutting things out (student B);

My literature review had 46 pages and I had to reduce it to 20, it was difficult (student C).

Text revision is carried out not only by the students, but also by their supervisors and other people as well:

The supervisor helped me a lot in the revision, cutting things out; she said it was important to ask other people to read our papers, because it is difficult for us to find spelling errors, punctuation failures and other problems; and she helped in the final revision of the chapters (student C).

One last aspect concerning writing has to do with the specificity and accuracy involved in the academic discourse. In the interviews, students show their awareness of this issue:

It is important to sort the arguments, in order to make sense, to ensure that the reader understands, everything must be very well explained (student A);

I had to shift from the discourse used in the company where I was a trainee to the discourse of the dissertation [...] We must pay attention to the way we write, the use of an accurate language, new vocabulary and the adequate verbal tenses (student C).

Knowledge construction and professional or personal development

Among the most interesting aspects that arose from the analysis of the interviews, we highlight the learning outcomes achieved by students as they were working in their dissertations.

One of the students synthesized all she had learnt in one sentence:

A person gets much better at writing a dissertation (student C).

Students' achievements go beyond the acquisition of knowledge on the topic of their dissertations and involve different kinds of processes, such as writing, reading and doing research, the development of professional skills and their personal development at different levels.

All students recognize having learnt about the subject of their dissertations:

I spent a lot of time in libraries, my whole learning was from books (student A);

I learnt about the content (student B);

We cannot compare the knowledge I had when I started with what I know now (student C).

At the same time, writing the dissertation resulted in the development of their writing abilities:

Despite the difficulty, I learnt how to write, I write better, I improved the quality of my texts (student B);

I improved writing a lot [...] It was really funny, reading my text at the end of everything and thinking: 'Did I write 200 pages?' It was very good (student C).

In addition, students recognize improvements in their ability to read:

I went on reading and I was sure I had understood (student A).

They also recognize improvements in their ability to develop research autonomously:

I felt I had all the necessary instruments to perform the research work independently, whether I had feedback or not (student A).

Professional development is also referred to as one of the results of the work carried out, in order to write the dissertation:

I was really interested in learning how to do the things they did in the company [...] I not only learnt how to write better, but also how to do the work at the factory (student C).

Beyond the recognition of all these learning outcomes, it is important to highlight the students' personal development. It involves different emotions: confidence, motivation, responsibility. In short, students recognize their growth and feel happy and fulfilled with it.

My self-confidence increased after the process was finished and the dissertation was accepted. Yes, I am much more self-confident now. I have become a tougher person (student A);

After writing the first chapters, I felt more motivation (student B);

One grows, becomes more responsible; I realized that I was becoming different, a much more responsible person. I often was talking with my parents and they said: 'even in the way of speaking you are different; you are more thoughtful' (student C).

Conclusion

Despite the exploratory nature of the study described above, and the small sample used, it was possible to understand that writing a dissertation is really a complex exercise that involves multiple aspects, in addition to the multitude of literacy skills involved in the process.

The analysis of the interviews of three students who had just obtained their master's degree enabled, in fact, the identification of the aspects they most emphasized when requested to speak about the construction of their master's dissertations. These were: the relationship with the supervisor and the fulfillment of their expectations towards the supervisor's role in the process; the reading tasks carried out, and their implication in the writing process; the writing process in its different dimensions and stages from the definition of the topic to the final revision; the learning achievements that stem from the process they had been involved in, and which go far beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge on the subject they were studying and comprise different types of processes (reading, writing, doing research, among others), as well as different dimensions related to their personal development.

The relevance of these topics wholly justifies their inclusion as categories to be used in the comparative analysis of the interviews conducted in the various countries involved in the project. We admit, however, that different and wider analyses may lead to the identification of other topics that were not so evident in the interviews we analyzed. Those related to the institutional constraints, the working/environmental conditions, and the support provided may also be taken into account in any analysis that aims at fully understanding this process, and finding how cultural and linguistic differences have explanatory capacity for differentiated processes.

In a final synthesis of our analysis, we may say that the writing of the dissertation is associated with growth and great learning, and it is seen as a moment of passage and change, despite some moments of tension, and associations with negative feelings of frustration, fatigue and discouragement. In addition, the work of the supervisor is evidenced both by the role played in the discussion of the concepts of the dissertation, and the support provided in the discovery of the mechanisms of academic writing. We shall also note the perception of reading as a strategy to acquire knowledge on the subject of the dissertation, and a means to get acquainted with the genre(s) that is/are under construction.

Writing, in turn, is described as a multifaceted, non-linear process, under permanent reformulation; and there are still some real obstacles that need to be overcome, such as those related to the synthesis of several source texts and the difficulty in assuming a voice that is both autonomous and faithful to the ideas expressed in the texts previously read.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by CIEd – Research Centre on Education/Institute of Education, University of Minho (UID/CED/1661/2013 and UID/CED/1661/2016) and CIDTFF/University of Aveiro (UID/CED/00194/2013), through the national funds of FCT/MCTES-PT.

References

- Álvarez, M., and Yániz, C. (2015) 'Las Prácticas Escritas en la Universidad Española'. *Cultura y Educación* 27 (3), 611-626
- Álvarez, M., Villardón, L., and Yániz, C. (2010) 'Influencias de Factores Sociocognitivos en la Calidad de la Escritura en los Estudiantes Universitarios'. *Educatio Siglo XXI* 28 (2), 181-204
- Barbeiro, L., Pereira, L., and Carvalho, J. (2015) 'Writing at Portuguese Universities: Students' Perceptions and Practices'. *Journal of Academic Writing* 5 (1), 74-85
- Bazerman, C. (1988) *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press
- Bereiter, C., and Scardamalia, M. (1987) *The Psychology of Written Composition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Bogdan, R., and Biklen, S. (1994) *Investigação Qualitativa em Educação. Uma Introdução à Teoria e aos Métodos*. Porto: Porto Editora
- Carvalho, J. (2012) 'Moving from Graduation to Post-Graduation in Portuguese Universities: Changing Literacy Practices, Facing New Difficulties'. *Journal of Academic Writing* 2 (1), 14-23
- Castelló, M., and Donahue, C. (eds.) (2012) *University Writing: Selves and Texts in Academic Societies*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing
- Castelló, M., and Iñiesta, A. (2012) 'Texts as Artifacts-in-Activity: Developing Authorial Identity and Academic Voice in Writing Academic Research Papers'. in *University Writing: Selves and Texts in Academic Societies*. ed. by Castelló, M., and Donahue, C. London: Emerald, 179-200
- Castelló, M., and Mateos, M. (2015) 'Faculty and Student Representations of Academic Writing at Spanish Universities'. *Cultura y Educación*. 27 (3), 477-503
- Donahue, C. (2013) 'Negotiation, Translinguality, and Cross-Cultural Writing Research in a New Composition Era'. in *Literacy as Translingual Practice*. ed. by Canagarajah, S. New York: Routledge, 149-161
- Flower, L., and Hayes, J. (1981) 'The Pregnant Pause: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Planning'. *Research in the Teaching of English* 15 (3), 229-243
- Grawitz, M. (1990) *Méthodes des Sciences Sociales*. 8th edn. Paris: Dolloz
- Harwood, N., and Petrić, B. (2017) *Experiencing Master's Supervision: Perspectives of International Students and their Supervisors*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Hyland, K., and Sancho, C. (eds.) (2012) *Stance and Voice in Written Academic Genres*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Kruse, O. (2013) 'Perspectives on Academic Writing in European Higher Education: Genres, Practices, and Competences'. *Revista de Docencia Universitaria* 11 (1) 37-58
- Mateos, M., and Solé, I. (2012) 'Undergraduate Students' Conceptions and Beliefs about Academic Writing'. in *University Writing: Selves and Texts in Academic Societies*. ed. by Castelló, M., and Donahue, C. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 53-68

- Russell, D., and Cortes, V. (2012) 'Academic and Scientific Texts: The Same or Different Communities?'. in *University Writing: Selves and Texts in Academic Societies*. ed. by Castelló, M., and Donahue, C. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 3-18
- Russell, D., Lea, M., Parker, J., Street, B., and Donahue, T. (2009) 'Exploring Notions of Genre in "Academic Literacies" and "Writing Across the Curriculum": Approaches Across Countries and Contexts'. in *Genre in a Changing World*. ed. by Bazerman, C., Bonini, A., and Figueiredo, D. West Lafayette, IN: The WAC Clearinghouse, 395-423
- Villalón, R., and Mateos, M. (2009) 'Concepciones del Alumnado de Secundaria y Universidad Sobre la Escritura Académica' [Secondary and University Students' Conceptions of Academic Writing]. *Infancia y Aprendizaje* 32 (2), 219-232