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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating the doctorate: a reflection on the journey of ‘becoming’ a PhD in applied language sciences

Mark Nartey^{1*}

ABSTRACT: In the last two decades, academic reflections on the PhD experience and studies on various aspects of doctoral research education have attracted scholarly attention in the higher education and advanced academic literacy literature. In this article, I adopt a reflective-narrative framework to recount my engagement with the doctoral program at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. I discuss how I tackled specific aspects of the PhD and thesis: choosing a topic/title for my project, writing the abstract, undertaking the literature review, conducting the analysis and my experience with the writing process. I also highlight the challenges I faced, how I overcame them and the insights I gained from them, thereby illustrating how doctoral narratives can be empowering and provide inspiration to current and future doctoral students. The experiences I recount reveal the complex nature of the doctorate as both an individual and a collective endeavor. Implications of the paper for the scholarship on narrative inquiry, doctoral thesis writing and academic identity are discussed.

KEYWORDS: academic identity; doctoral student; PhD thesis; postgraduate studies; doctoral experiences; reflective-narrative

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

There are various myths, memes and stories about the PhD. Some think that one has to be a genius to do a PhD. Others reckon that a PhD should lead to a brilliant, world-changing discovery. Another group of people believe that PhD study is lonely, depressing and unrewarding. In this article, I reflect on my engagement with the doctoral program, especially how I tackled specific aspects of the PhD thesis, and offer suggestions that can help prospective and current doctoral students to succeed. Based on my experience, I submit that the PhD is a rigorous journey that may be accompanied by all kinds of difficulties: physical, emotional, mental or supervision related. These challenges notwithstanding, the PhD is a valuable enterprise that enriches one's life and prepares one for other (taxing) pursuits in life. I wish all PhD students a great finish and for those who intend to pursue a doctorate, I wish you the courage to go for it. In the end, you just will discover that the experience, while rewarding, is a very humbling one!

1. Introduction

Academic interest in the PhD program and scholarly narratives on doctoral research education have been predominantly recounted from the point of view of supervisors or supervision (Lee, 2008; Machin et al., 2019) and examiners or PhD assessment (Holbrook et al., 2007; Kumar & Stracke, 2011; Sharmini et al., 2015). Other studies have concentrated on the technical aspects and pragmatic areas of the doctorate such as choosing a supervisor, deciding on and narrowing down the topic, (alternative) methodological approaches to research, writing up the thesis and the viva voce (Dunleavy, 2003; Phillips & Pugh, 2000). Altogether, this scholarship discusses the multiple ways in which doctoral programs are traversed by students, supervisors and administrators, and highlights the diversity of global approaches to the doctorate. This body of research also demonstrates that the doctorate is a highly complex, heterogeneous and situated phenomenon that resists easy solutions. There are few papers on what Bencich et al. (2002) refer to as the emotional and intellectual experiences of doctoral students that are narrated by the students themselves. These studies include work on PhD satisfaction (Dericks et al., 2019), mentoring (Al Makhmreh & Stockley, 2020), peer support (Heinrich, 1995), experiences of undertaking literature reviews (Walter & Stouck, 2020) and shared experiences on the PhD journey (Noy, 2003). Other issues that affect doctoral students such as gatekeeping (Kay, 2019; Wanat, 2008), recruitment/admissions (Holdaway et al., 1994), the emotional labor of collecting data (Walter & Stouck, 2020) and factors that influence PhD candidates' success (Van Rooij et al., 2019) have also been investigated. Altogether, this scholarship demonstrates that there are various contributory factors to successful PhD completions.

Bencich et al. (2002: 289) observe that “at the beginning of the dissertation research process, doctoral students cannot see the end, nor can they imagine how they will get there”. Hence, sharing opportunities that allow students to relay their experiences to peers during the course of the PhD or in hindsight, post-doctorate (as in the present paper), can be useful to current and future doctoral students as well as supervisors, providing them with information that can help them prepare for certain possible scenarios. Such narratives can provide inspiration to other doctoral students, flagging possible pitfalls to be avoided and illustrating helpful practices that can be implemented. Even though there are several textbooks that shed light on postgraduate research, there are few articles on the PhD experience recounted by recently graduated doctoral researchers. Such papers will complement the (theoretical) information offered in the textbooks by, for instance, highlighting the challenges faced by PhD students, how they overcame them and the insights gained from them. Thus, the sharing of PhD experiences is not only informative but, more importantly, can be empowering to students in tackling the difficulties they may encounter during their studies. Such sharing, this paper argues, can help students cope better with their challenges, thereby contributing to their wellbeing and resilience (cf. Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Against this backdrop, I offer a personal reflection on my quest to obtain a PhD in applied linguistics.

2. Conceptual framework

This paper adopts a reflective-narrative framework to explore the writing of my doctoral thesis. Narrative inquiry is a way of thinking about and studying experience by following a recursive and reflexive process (D.J. Clandinin & Huber, 2010). It is “sensitive to ... subtle textures of thought and feeling” (Webster & Mertova, 2007: 7) in an account of lived experiences and allows for the events and situations that have been of most significance to be foregrounded in the stories told by participants. Narrative inquiry focuses “not only on individual experiences but also on the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted” (D. J. Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007: 42–43). The reflective-narrative framework adopted in this paper enables an in-depth understanding of the doctoral writing process from an insider perspective as it locates the researcher firmly within the research process, and allows him/her to describe, explain and understand his/her experience rather than predict it.

Within the broad reflective-narrative framework, I adopt autoethnography, which Ellis (2004) defines as “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to

the cultural, social and political” (p. xix). By describing and systematically analyzing personal experience in order to understand sociocultural experience, an autoethnographic approach suggests that writing about and through oneself is scholastically insightful. It allows a writer/researcher to address himself/herself (“auto”) as a subject of a larger social or cultural inquiry (“ethno”) vis-à-vis evocative and revealing writing (“graphy”) (Ellis et al., 2011), and thus affords an author the space to express views and foreground constitutive dimensions that might ordinarily be attenuated (or even eliminated) in conventional scientific discourse. In this way, I articulate my personal, lived experience and voice the relationship I had with different stages of the research process. Autoethnography can be described in two ways: first, it can focus mainly on theoretical issues that are referred to (entirely) implicitly or tangentially (Dent, 2002). Second, both theoretical and personal perspectives can be explicitly presented either separately (Ellis, 1997) or interwoven in which case they are in dialogue throughout the text (Jones, 2002). This study considers the latter approach to be more suitable as it enables me to adopt the narrator’s voice that presents an experience (or a number of experiences) as well as adopt the theoretical voice that conceptualizes what is presented. Autoethnography is beneficial because it enables researchers to “use personal experience to illustrate facets of sociocultural experience and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2011: 9). Thus, by comparing and contrasting my personal doctoral experience with existing research, I am able to highlight key aspects of the doctorate to both learners and experts in a manner that is both instructive and helpful. This paper extends the scope of application of the framework to the field of applied linguistics where it has been less deployed compared to the reflective practice traditions of education, health sciences and sociology.

3. Reflecting on “doctorateness”

I recount in the sections below my engagement with the doctorate by first explaining the thesis as a key genre in doctoral research education. I then describe how I addressed specific aspects of the PhD and thesis: choosing a topic/title for my project, writing the abstract, undertaking the literature review, conducting the analysis and my experience with the writing process.

3.1. The doctoral thesis as a genre

The doctoral thesis is a focused piece of original research that is performed to obtain a PhD. It is conceived of as a research report of the results and findings of a higher research study (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). Hence, a completed and successfully passed doctoral thesis means that one has acquired substantial academic knowledge in a specific field and has been socialized into cultural, disciplinary and professional norms and practices. The doctoral thesis is of considerable length and size, and as Parry (1998) asserts, its conception and production suggest that the research conducted has been appropriately performed within the norms, argument structure and discourse structure of a particular discipline. Various studies on the assessment of the doctoral thesis from the perspective of examiners attest that a good thesis demonstrates most of the following features: originality and significant contribution to the literature, critical engagement with the extant scholarship, methodological robustness and a convincing approach, engagement with the results and findings and publishability (Holbrook et al., 2007, 2004; Sharmini et al., 2015). These issues featured prominently in my examiners’ comments and during my thesis defense. Therefore, it is important for students to bear in mind their primary audience (i.e. examiners) while writing their thesis. To the extent that a doctorate is the highest qualification in academia, it can be stated that it represents the peak of a student’s academic achievements. At the same time, as Mullins and Kiley (2002) put it, it is not a Nobel Prize; therefore, its attainment must be put in proper perspective.

In general, I found the writing of my thesis recursive, reiterative and non-linear such that I needed to go back-and-forth as well as simultaneously look back and ahead throughout the writing process. This reflects Afful’s (2008a) “confession” that the thesis writing process can be “messy” as well as Kamler and Thomson (2006) view that doctoral thesis writing is an interplay of the research activity itself and writing. Beyond my general interaction with the thesis through

a cyclical process, I specifically engaged with key rhetorical units, which I now turn my attention to.

3.2. Choosing a topic/title

According to Conle (2000) and Afful (2008b), feelings and experience combine in the first step of any doctoral research: the motivation that informs involvement with a topic. Both authors also observe that this motivation typically stems from the researcher's personal interests, expertise and the gaps in the literature. In my experience, I found these observations to be true as I began to develop interest in corpus-assisted discourse studies towards the end of my master's degree. This interest was generated by fruitful discussions I had with one of my undergraduate teachers on possible areas I could explore for a PhD, echoing the point made in various studies (e.g., Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wellington et al., 2005) that the choosing of a dissertation topic is often done in consultation rather than in isolation. Second, I reckoned that my knowledge of discourse analysis, acquired mainly from my undergraduate courses, was a foundation on which I could build. Therefore, I was fairly confident that I could conduct my study once I start to read the literature. Third, I identified, somewhat indistinctly, the lacunae in the body of scholarship (especially with respect to a paucity of studies in African/non-Western contexts) which became more perceptible as I read deeply and broadly and proceeded with the research. In addition to these academic and intellectual considerations, I had read from guidance books on postgraduate research (cf. Brabazon et al., 2020; Dinham & Scott, 1999; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014) that the choice of a research topic should be constrained by practical issues such as time, cost and access to data. Consequently, I thought that a topic in discourse studies, specifically political discourse analysis, was feasible. Based on the aforementioned considerations, I decided to investigate ideological representations in the discourse of a pioneering Pan-African leader. Unlike Afful (2008b) who states that he did not encounter problems with the choice of a topic for his doctoral thesis, I pondered various ideas before settling on one. Hence, I found the choosing of a dissertation topic both challenging and rewarding and greatly benefitted from discussions with mentors and former teachers on its viability.

Notwithstanding the difference between my experience and that of Afful, the literature suggests that doctoral students have difficulty in selecting a feasible, interesting and completable research topic, a view echoed in other narratives (cf. Morton & Thornley, 2001; Noy, 2003). I dealt with this challenge by discussing my ideas early on with experienced people in my field as well as being open to new ideas rather than taking an entrenched position. After identifying my topic, a challenge I encountered was how to focus it in order to have a manageable project rather than an unwieldy one. I also had to deal with the dilemma of ensuring that the scope of the topic was neither too broad nor too narrow. In addition to the discussions I had with mentors, former teachers and (former) doctoral students, I dealt with these issues by examining the titles and research questions/objectives of dissertations and research articles related to my topic, and this helped me to delimit the scope of my study. This point on reading the literature cannot be overemphasized as it became clear to me that you cannot try to focus a topic or figure out a research question when you have not read the broad literature on that topic. I was also guided by the axiom that your dissertation is not your "magnum opus" since it is the beginning of your research and not the end. As various textbooks on doctoral research education and writing the thesis advice, I found that the selection and focusing of a topic should be informed by students' personal interest and must make them demonstrate their strengths.

With respect to the title of my thesis, it was an aspect I considered last together with my chief supervisor as I had different working titles at various stages—i.e. from the research proposal stage to the confirmation of candidature stage and then to the post-confirmation and thesis defense stage. I changed the research proposal title "Ideological representations in Kwame Nkrumah's sociopolitical discourse: A corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis" to "Discourse and political myth-making: A critical discourse study of Nkrumaism" in my thesis. This was the third and final version of my thesis title, and it gives an indication that titles can be given pedagogical attention in

advanced academic literacy courses. The notion of political mythology that my thesis concentrated on was initially conceived to be one aspect of my thesis. However, after my confirmation of candidature, it became clear to me that examining that in detail will be beneficial to my work. In hindsight, this decision paid off greatly as I had eight published papers from my thesis (and two studies under review) by the time I had my viva voce. It is therefore important for doctoral students to strike a balance between having a plan or an idea they would want to stick to and being flexible/adaptable. Although this view of having a working title and only committing to a title once the thesis is complete appears to be a given and can be found in other narratives (cf. Afful, 2008a, 2008b), some doctoral accounts were silent on it.

Given that the title is the first thing readers see on the thesis, thereby serving as a headline of a sort, it is imperative for doctoral students to put some thought into the framing of their titles since this can determine whether people (especially “outsiders”) proceed to read the thesis abstract, which is what I discuss next.

3.3. Formulating the abstract

In agreement with Swales (2004), I consider the abstract not merely as a form of summary of the thesis but, more importantly, as a socio-rhetorical device that previews a piece of academic writing (usually theses and research articles) with the aim of influencing the opinions of readers before they encounter the actual contents of the work. The persuasive function of the abstract is underscored by Trafford and Leshem (2008) who identify the following purposes of the thesis abstract: (i) summarizing the thesis and conveying the essence of the research, (ii) providing examiners with initial insights on the research and the researcher’s writing style, (iii) articulating specific essential information selected about the research and (iv) acting as a filter for potential readers who may wish to access the research but who need to know more about it before doing so.

Mindful of the importance of the abstract, especially in making a positive first impression (on examiners) as well as Dunleavy’s (2003) criticism of doctoral abstracts as often being very badly written because their authors “normally write them in a hectic rush to get finished” (p. 203), I expended much effort in drafting my abstract. I had heard from various speakers at postgraduate seminars that the first three things most examiners engage with when assessing the thesis are the abstract, table of contents and list of references. Consequently, I treated the writing of my abstract very seriously and did not regard it as a peripheral aspect of the thesis, albeit it seems supplementary when compared with the length of the other sections of the thesis. Unlike other universities that prescribe a standardized format for length, layout and structure of abstracts, my university does not. Despite this latitude, I thought it germane to keep my abstract to a single page. Based on suggestions in PhD guidebooks and insights I had gained from graduate workshops, my goal was to make my abstract self-explanatory, complete in its own right, provide a synopsis of the entire thesis (including the analysis of results and findings) and respond to the question of what my thesis is all about in order to whet the appetite of readers. To accomplish this goal, I utilized what genre analysts such as Swales (2004) and Hyland (2000) call “moves”—i.e. sub-communicative units that help to achieve the overall communicative purpose of a piece of writing. The specific moves I used were aim of the study, methodology, findings and implications.

As with other components of my thesis, I found it useful to make notes in a file labelled “abstract”, even though I did not draft it until I had completed the first full draft. Reserving the writing task until I had completed the first full draft had the following merits: (i) a retrospective overview of the thesis with respect to the outcome of the research and its conclusions, (ii) having a consolidated and complete text that is unlikely to undergo any major changes, (iii) a detailed knowledge of the literature and (iv) an up-to-date knowledge of the developments in the field. Also, I found the suggestion of Trafford and Leshem (2008) helpful in ensuring that the text produced for the abstract was factual (but not descriptively detailed), clearly written and free of references and jargons, informative (but not argumentative in writing style) and written in an appealing style that engages with both lay and expert audiences. After drafting the

abstract, I reworked it few times ahead of my thesis submission. The abstract of the thesis is different in content and length from the abstract of a research article. Hence, I found it helpful to read the abstracts of a number of theses in order to obtain ideas on how to construct mine. Writing a one-page abstract for my 116, 000-word thesis was challenging since I had to decide which aspects of the thesis were most significant to be included in the abstract. To keep my abstract succinct, I did not include an introduction or a background to the study as others had done. I started with a one-sentence aim of the study, followed by a brief description of the methodology, a summary of the key findings and a presentation of the study's implications.

Based on my engagement with the abstract, I view the abstract as a rhetorical device that one can utilize to project confidence in the quality, scholarship and doctorateness of their thesis. It also presents an opportunity to market the thesis by influencing how readers will approach the substantial text of the thesis through already having a favorable conception of what the thesis is all about. These thoughts are reinforced by Trafford and Leshem (2008: 152) when they submit that “writing your abstract is an opportunity to sell the scholarly quality of your thesis to prospective readers ... as it presents the merits of your thesis and shows how your contribution to knowledge met the specified gap in knowledge that was your original reason for undertaking the research”.

3.4. Exploring the literature

Engaging with the body of knowledge in one's field of inquiry is an integral part of the doctoral thesis because it allows students to situate their study within the extant literature and demonstrate their authorial voice (Hofstee, 2006). Undertaking a review of the literature allows the researcher to define what the field of study is, establish what research has been done that relates to one's work, consider the existing theories, concepts and models applied in the field of study, discuss methodological approaches that have been used by other researchers and identify the gaps in the scholarship or the contribution that one's study will make (Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wellington et al., 2005). Thus, the literature review enables the researcher to develop a theoretical rationale and/or show why his/her study is warranted.

In my thesis, I did not have a stand-alone chapter called “literature review” although I initially thought this was going to be the case. I abandoned this approach because I realized during the planning and conceptualization of this chapter that incorporating it within the “theoretical and conceptual framework” chapter will better serve the needs of my study. It is a given that the literature review begins with reading widely; that said, I discovered that it is also essential to read with your study in mind, implying that the focus of one's study should be somewhat clear before starting to explore the literature. From my undergraduate and master's degree experiences, however, I knew that the focus of the study and the research questions will be developed and refined through extensive reading, thereby making the question of “where to start” a challenging one. This conundrum suggests that at a certain point in the literature review, one's reading informs the kind of research questions posed or the focus of the study and at another stage, the objectives of the study guide the kind of reading that one does (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). According to Rudestam and Newton (1992), one way of visualizing the range of literature explored is to regard the body of work as constituting three levels of literature: (i) background material that is of broad relevance to your study, (ii) studies that address issues that are closely related to your study or a part of it and (iii) literature that is directly related to your study. In my thesis, I focused more attention on the second and third levels. Also, I found it helpful to conduct a systematic literature review and meta-analysis (Norris & Ortega, 2000, 2006) which I later published as a stand-alone article. In recounting how I handled the review of literature in my thesis, I will consider the following aspects based on guidebooks I read in preparation for my PhD (cf. Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014; Trafford & Leshem, 2008): literature identification, literature use and application, positioning in relation to sources and technical accuracy and organization format.

With respect to source identification, I was already acquainted with various sources of information before I began my doctoral study. These include the use of electronic bibliographic databases, search engines, e-journals, inter-library loan facilities, interaction with library staff, networking sites for scientists and researchers, emailing authors and personal communication with relevant parties. Even though my supervisors did not offer me any assistance in identifying the sources I needed, possibly, because they had rightly assumed my competence in locating the relevant information, they occasionally sent me materials and drew my attention to studies they thought I should look up supposing I had not come across those works already. My information literacy skills notwithstanding, I attended various workshops on information acquisition, retrieval, organization and storage held by my university's library. In terms of what to collect and what to read, I followed the standard advice of starting with titles, abstracts and references and then deciding which studies needed to be read in full and/or critiqued.

The main challenge I encountered with the literature identification was documentary inundation or what Afful (2008a) calls "information overload", which made me ponder how I would use all the information acquired. To tackle this problem, I classified the various strands of information I had obtained into thematic areas such as theoretical versus empirical studies, methodological approach, conceptual framework and geographical location. In addition, I found Bruce's (2001) insightful discussion on the eight criteria for determining which sources to include in the literature review (i.e. authority, topicality, availability, relevance, currency, comprehensiveness, breadth and exclusion) relevant in prioritizing the information I had obtained and deciding how to use or apply it. Furthermore, I found that allocating what I read to a category relevant to a particular aspect of my work or a chapter of my thesis was a useful way of storing information for future use. Rather than taking detailed notes while reading, I made a short summary of key points after reading. Importantly, saving references right from the onset using a recognized referencing system and computer software programs such as Endnote, Mendely and Zotero, as noted in several guide-books on postgraduate education, cannot be overemphasized. An important observation I made about the literature use and application borders on writing about the literature (Murray, 2002). In this vein, I realized that it was beneficial to write while you collect information as well as collect information while you write. This mechanism (i.e. writing as I went along) enabled me to clarify my thinking and create dialogue between me and my reading, between me and my supervisors and between me and other researchers. In reality, waiting to write about the literature after one has read "everything" seems is impracticable since such as approach can make the writing task unwieldy and more cumbersome. Hence, in my experience, Murray's (2002) assertion that writing about the literature acts as a way of learning about the literature could not be truer.

In order to build my argument and convey my stance, I employed four distinct levels of engagement: summarize, synthesize, analyze and authorize (cf. Trafford & Leshem 2008). That is, I summarized, synthesized and analyzed my sources at different stages of the writing process, which then enabled me to use my sources to authorize the position I held towards my research. In positioning myself in relation to the existing literature and locating my research alongside extant work so as to substantiate the need for my research, I typically utilized the first-person pronoun ("I"). Interestingly, scholars of academic writing such as Ken Hyland and John Swales have noted that the first-person pronoun seems to be the most visible way of demonstrating authorial voice. That said, it has been argued by other scholars such as Kamler and Thomson (2006: 57) that "the question of the personal and doctoral writing is more complex than suggested by advocating or abhorring the use of I/we". Another means by which I situated myself and my work within the existing scholarship was to offer a critical appraisal of the studies I reviewed instead of merely reporting them. In this regard, I found the strategic use of hedging devices, evaluative terms and reporting verbs valuable. The insights I had gleaned from Hyland's (2000) work on disciplinary discourses and social interactions in academic writing was particularly helpful. I used varied linguistic expressions such as nouns (e.g., "probability", "possibility", "likelihood"), copulas (e.g., "seems", "appears"), modals (e.g., "can", "may", "will"), adjectives (e.g., "certain", "obvious", "deducible"), verbs (e.g., "claim", "assert", "contend") and hypothetical constructions (e.g., "if ... then")

to indicate the tentativeness of my or other people's claims and to reinforce my position where necessary. Altogether, these lexico-syntactic resources enabled me to assert my authorial voice and exhibit criticality in my writing through a careful and tactful consideration of my personal opinion, other authors' work and my research activities. Based on my interaction with other people's work in order to provide a justification for my study, I can attest to Wellington et al. (2005: 54) submission that criticality entails healthy skepticism (but not cynicism), confidence (but not arrogance or "cockiness"), judgment which is critical (but not dismissive), having an opinion (without being opinionated), having a voice (without "sounding off") and being respectful (without being too humble or obsequious).

The final point to be made about my engagement with the literature relates to technical and organizational issues. These included citation precision with respect to the correct spelling of the names of authors, punctuation in in-text citation and consistency in the method used in chronicling studies and sequencing scholars of multiple-authors in in-text citations. Mindful of the fact that these seemingly infinitesimal issues can cast a positive or negative light on the overall quality of the thesis, I took them seriously. Indeed, I was aware of Afful's (2008a) caution that carelessness in the technical aspects of the thesis contributes to solecism that can make examiners "nose" for more "serious" errors. Hence, even though the sources I consulted had different referencing styles and citation practices, it was necessary to ensure uniformity in my organizing principle while bearing in mind issues of chronology, recency and alphabetical order. From my incorporation of previous literature in various parts of my thesis and based on the development of my learning during the writing of my thesis in general, I realized that engagement with the literature, as Wellington et al. (2005) assert, is more of a cyclical process rather than a linear process that has a beginning and an end.

3.5. Engaging with the analysis and writing process

I had skimmed through a number of doctoral theses and published seven papers as a master's student. I was, therefore, familiar with data analysis, academic writing and other tasks involved in producing academic work before beginning my doctoral education. Yet, throughout the writing of my thesis, I could resonate with Luebs et al.'s (1998) submission that learning to write, on demand, polished professional versions of "unfamiliar" genres such as the research article and research proposal is one of the most challenging aspects of the graduate school experience. The guidance of my supervisors was most crucial in the data analysis and "how to write" aspects of my thesis.

With respect to data analysis, I became increasingly aware, through discussions with my supervisors, that the foundation of a good analysis is a robust methodology and a sound analytical framework. Hence after my confirmation of candidature where I presented a pilot study of my research, my supervisors and the confirmation panel gave me suggestions that helped me to modify my analytical framework and refine my methodological approach. My chief supervisor also played an immense role in my training as a (critical) discourse analyst via a learning-on-the-job and learning-by-doing approach. Utilizing discourse analytical skills and being conversant with the tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) especially were mandatory for my work. Meanwhile before commencing my doctorate, I had never performed a critical analysis of any text although I was aware of the various paradigms and orientations in CDA research. Consequently, the hands-on practice sessions with my advisor was what prepared me for the bigger task of analyzing the data for my thesis. Another significant role of my supervisor during my analysis was helping me confront my biases, especially since the issues I was critically exploring (i.e. colonialism, neocolonialism, nationalism, Pan-African unity, political and sociocultural narratives) were sensitive and it was likely that I had my personal views on them. This helped me guard against overinterpretation of my findings and the tendency to be emotionally involved with my data and instead adopt the position of an "objective" researcher. Additionally, I realized that heeding to my chief supervisor's suggestion to convert portions of my analysis that have been completed into research papers as soon as I could helped me to develop other aspects of the analysis that were still under construction. The feedback I received from reviewers helped me to address the main challenge

I encountered in my data analysis: synthesizing the various analytic frameworks adopted in my work. Drawing on different approaches in an integrated manner proved difficult; however, reviewer comments I received on my papers gave me clues on which aspects of the approaches I could draw on in order to effectively combine the approaches. I therefore think it a good idea for doctoral researchers to submit a paper as soon as they get some results and not allow the fear of the paper being rejected to dissuade them.

Apart from my supervisors, I found that informal conversations I had with fellow PhD students and members of faculty were useful in shaping certain parts of my analysis. Some of my colleagues did not only give suggestions that refined my ideas, but also helped me to crosscheck my metaphor source domains, a tedious and time-consuming activity. This peer support and demonstration of solidarity affirm the view expressed in several studies that formal scholarly communities where students share their experiences with each other during the doctorate or in hindsight, post-doctorate, could be beneficial to the students and those who come after them (Bencich et al., 2002; Heinrich, 2000; Morton & Thornley, 2001). Indeed, Heinrich (2000: 63) advocates “a community of scholarly caring where group support [is] integral to participants developing a scholarly identity that manifests itself in dissertation scholarship”. From my experience, I found such group support to be educative, informative and empowering.

In terms of the task of writing, one thing that stood out for me was that the act of writing itself formed part of my thinking and development process. Consequently, unlike traditional proponents of the “think and then write paradigm” (Moxley, 1997; Thomas, 1987), I did not regard my thought process to be distinct from my writing process. This did not, however, rule out the need for me to plan before starting to write. For me, thus, the three-stage process of planning, thinking and writing (Wellington et al., 2005), like all aspects of my thesis production, was cyclical and recursive. Hence even though it was difficult to write when my ideas and arguments were not fully formed, I also discovered that a lot of my ideas were generated and developed by the writing process. Furthermore, a practice that proved to be productive for me was to write frequently, doing small sections at a time. Receiving feedback on one’s writing or getting comments on early drafts has been identified as one of the main strategies that helps one to become a “productive” writer (Hartley, 1997; Haynes, 2001). In this regard, the role of my chief supervisor (and to a lesser degree my co-supervisor) was essential in helping me enhance my ideas, strengthen my arguments and polish my writing. The comments my chief supervisor made on drafts of my thesis chapters addressed thematic areas that needed development, arguments that required further elaboration as well as language/expressional issues and mechanical accuracy. I also asked my colleagues to read my drafts and I found this peer review process useful.

In discussing the writing up of qualitative research, Woods (1999) mentions the need to include “other voices” in the research report. My continuous engagement with the literature as part of the writing process was therefore necessary. Lastly, a key feature of the writing task for me was to establish a strong connection between the introduction and conclusion chapters. The synchronization of these two chapters is significant owing to the notion of primacy and recency effect discussed in communication research (Igou & Bless, 2003), which indicates that the information put at the beginning and end of a text greatly influences readers’ perception and evaluation of the text. Based on the above and my learning process during the writing of my thesis, I can assert that the task of writing is rarely unproblematic and the development of academic writing skills is an arduous process than can be slow and even painful.

4. Conclusion: a challenging, humbling and rewarding learning experience

All said, my engagement with the doctoral thesis in my quest for a PhD was intellectually demanding, emotionally draining and physically taxing. It highlights my embarking on a journey, tackling difficulties and overcoming challenges in order to achieve an eventual sense of victory and fulfillment. The account presented in this paper can thus be regarded as a therapeutic process in which I try to cope with the experiences of my doctoral thesis particularly and the PhD program in

general. What stands out clearly to me is that academic life is not only full of learning, excitement and discovery, but also doubts, frustrations and uncertainties. From my engagement with the doctorate, I believe that PhD students and/or postgraduate researchers will find the following tips helpful:

- Jettison the student-cum-novice mentality and see yourself as a fully-fledged academic in your own right.
- Be aware of the resources, training courses and other methods of support available in your university, and utilize them.
- Keep the vision of the completed dissertation in mind, believing that you can accomplish your goal.
- Have a plan, but be flexible and adaptable.
- Be patient with yourself and apply yourself to the process.
- Be open to constructive feedback and do not be afraid to ask for help.
- Make a distinction between (research) activity and (research) productivity.
- Strong time management is one of the most important parts of PhD study.
- The PhD is not only a test of your intelligence, but also of your resilience.
- The stamina in your motivation is more important than the intensity in your motivation.
- The PhD is a completed research project or a completed thesis, not your best research.
- There is no substitute for having the right attitude.
- You are not your PhD because you are more than your thesis.

Even though no two PhD experiences are exactly the same, evidence in the literature suggests that certain individual experiences of the doctorate are, in fact, shared (González, 2006; González et al., 2001). Consequently, this paper contributes to the scholarship on narrative research as one way of highlighting the experiences of doctoral students. Another contribution of this paper can be seen in terms of the literature on doctoral thesis writing. It is a commonly held view that the PhD student, especially in the humanities, is an independent person who spends long hours in seclusion in search of answers to a problem. Although a certain level of independent work is required from a doctoral researcher, my narrative contests the view of an autonomous researcher often identified in the humanities (Johnson et al., 2000), and underscores the current concept of the social constructedness of doctoral thesis writing (Dunleavy, 2003; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). To the extent that I originally conceived my own topic, I can be regarded as autonomous. However, in the process of undertaking the research and writing the thesis, I utilized several support systems, both face-to-face and computer-mediated, thereby reinforcing the view that the writing of the thesis is a negotiation involving the student and other parties such as supervisors, examiners and peers. Finally, my narrative sheds light on the notion of academic identity, which is shaped, developed and sculpted during the process of interacting with various support networks and being socialized into disciplinary norms and practices. It illustrates that the writing of the doctoral thesis contributes to “a becoming” or an identity work (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Richardson, 1997). Undoubtedly, the doctoral student undergoes a certain level of transformation in the course of writing the thesis. This change derives from intellectual growth and scholarly development and gains expression within organizational, psychological, social and research contexts (Austin, 2002). Through my becoming a PhD in applied linguistics, especially in the writing of my thesis, I noticed how I had acquired an academic or scholarly identity within the scientific-cum-discourse community of applied linguists.

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