The Qualitative Doctoral Dissertation Proposal

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This article discusses the primary qualities of a doctoral dissertation proposal and how those qualities relate to the qualities of a dissertation and to the nature of a research university. Typical parts of a proposal are discussed—problem, significance, literature review, theoretical perspective, questions, methods, and ethics—and reasons are given for the role that each part plays in the development of a dissertation. Emphasis is placed on the nature of argument and on the integrity of the proposal as a whole. Examples, including notes on writing, are drawn from several qualitative proposals.

INTRODUCTION

The dissertation proposal is one of the milestones in the education of a doctoral candidate. The proposal begins the final long leg of the doctoral journey, and its acceptance is usually met with a well-deserved sense of accomplishment, a sigh of relief, and a tingle of anticipation. It is indeed a personal milestone. However, the development of the proposal can be a tough slog and stumbles can mark the path, particularly at the start. Some difficulties are inevitable—destinations worth arriving at frequently are not easily approached—but some can be made less arduous, if not avoided. Although the unique path that every dissertation proposal takes means that, especially for those to follow, a map is out of the question, a general sense of the terrain is usually helpful; it helps to know that this is a territory marked by sweaty inclines, serene plateaus, and precipitous drops.

The following is a general sketch of the territory from one doctoral supervisor's point of view. It is not a map. My intent is that the sketch will assist doctoral travelers by raising issues that they at least should be aware of in the development of a dissertation proposal. After all, the proposal is a document aimed at convincing a supervisor and committee that the topic is worth researching and the candidate has the wherewithal to carry it out. Nevertheless, what should a proposal include, and why? Although dissertation proposals can vary enormously in form and length, they tend to share some very basic qualities. What are these qualities? And how are they connected to a more general understanding of scholarship?

Teachers College Record Volume 108, Number 4, April 2006, pp. 529–576

0161-4681

I have sketched qualities that I regard as important in three broad categories: context, content, and notes on writing. My comments primarily pertain to qualitative inquiry, although some of what I have to say is relevant to other approaches.[1]

THE CONTEXT

The qualities of dissertation proposals and dissertations naturally reflect their scholarly context, including implicit understandings of the nature of a research university and the apprenticeship education of doctoral candidates. These are qualities that any doctoral candidate should be aware of, but they are not uncontroversial, and where one stands with respect to them differs from field to field, from individual to individual, and from supervisor to supervisor. Let me begin with comments about the qualities of doctoral dissertations.

QUALITIES OF DISSERTATIONS

As to self-conscious method, writing that is self-conscious tends to reflect the layers and complexity of the process of a dissertation as it unfolds from conceptualization to finished product. But more significantly, self-conscious method is the means for justifying the various moves that are made within all the other qualities expected of a doctoral dissertation, from conceptualization to literature review, to argument, to form. And here, perhaps, we can see the rough distinction between research in general and research done within the rubric of a doctoral dissertation. A doctoral dissertation is, after all, not only a piece of original research; it is a demonstration that the candidate is ready to do independent research. It is tied to the apprentice-

instance, saying that a dissertation must ''make a point and back it up'' or should ''support its conclusions'' are different ways of saying that it must make an argument. Most arguments are not unitary entities; they are complex. Consequently, to say that a dissertation should make an argument does not mean that there is a single linear strand of thinking that culminates in a single ''therefore'' statement, as with a syllogism. The reference to ''the argument'' in a dissertation is often a manner of speaking that may, most likely, refer to a network of arguments, some of them sometimes more central than others. Often the arguments in dissertations are implicit, as with many qualitative dissertations. That is, a reader does not literally ''see'' a formal statement of the argument (in fact, to make the argument formally explicit might look rather odd). In these cases, to say that a dissertation must have an argument is a metaphoric way of speaking. But even in such

concepts. For instance, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, results, and findings are among the terms that are commonly used in place of claims, and the term phenomena can be substituted for data with no loss of meaning. In the case of qualitative inquiry, for instance, we construct an interpretation (make a claim or come to a conclusion) based on our analysis of observations, interviews, memories, documents, and so on (the data). There are warrants that connect our interpretations to the data—that is, there are statements, almost always implicit, that allow the data to be seen to be relevant to the interpretations. We usually qualify the interpretations; the statement in the final chapter of a qualitative dissertation that the interpretations are not, strictly speaking, generalizable beyond the particular case examined is a form of qualifier, and that qualifier is subject to

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Third, as Toulmin (1969) remarked, the warrants for a conclusion (or an interpretation) are seldom explicit. Warrants are brought to the surface and become visible when interpretations are challenged. Challenges to an interpretation are almost always challenges about the quality of the evidence. Remember from above that *evidence* is a term that generally includes data, warrants, and backing. There are four possibilities: (1) the challenge can be that there is not enough data to support the claim (e.g., claiming that a teacher believes in streaming because on one occasion she was heard to say, ''streaming seemed to work with that class''); (2) the challenge can be that the warrant is inadequate (e.g., ''yes, I agree with your data—there are dozens of trailer trucks parked in the desert—but I don't see how that leads to a conclusion that there are weapons of mass destruction''); (3) the challenge can be that there is inadequate data and inadequate warrant (e.g., ''you have satellite photos of only two trucks, and besides, on what grounds does a truck in the desert mean that there are weapons of mass destruction?''); or (4) the challenge can be a fundamental disagreement with the theoretical perspective (backing) as when, say, a person refuses to accept the ''evidence'' for parapsychological phenomena.

Toulmin's argument pattern, then, is one way of representing the deeply ingrained, but seldomly discussed, belief that the quality of our inquiries depend fundamentally on evidential argument. The idea of ''evidential argument'' can be taken both literally and metaphorically, as I have suggested above, depending on the field of study. For instance, standard empirical proposals commonly use terms like *evidence*, *data*, *support*, *claim*, and so on. Philosophical (analytical, conceptual) inquiries are generally written with empirical phenomena as a backdrop and, although the terms *argument* and *claim* appear frequently, terms like *data* and *evidence* seldom appear either in the proposal or the study, if at all. Qualitative inquiries normally take pains to make clear that they are not generalizable (to qualify the claims that are made, to use Toulmin's language) and to argue for the usefulness of the findings; in so doing, they implicitly assume evidential argument even though the terms *evidence*, *data*, and *warrant* are unlikely to be seen in the proposal or in the dissertation. Narrative studies seldom, if ever, use terms like *evidence* even though the crafting of a narrative clearly is dependent on various types of evidence. I am suggesting, then, that any academic scholarship is guided by the implicit and explicit rules of inquiry (evidential argument), but the degree to which one will actually find the associated terms (claim, evidence, data, support, argument, and so on) depends on the field of study. Regardless of approach, the grounds on which the outcomes of a study can be regarded as ''true'' (warranted, justified, accurate, revealing, insightful, useful, and so on) is a legitimate question for any dissertation.

Let me conclude this important detour by coming back to a statement that I made above: A dissertation is a document that (in one fashion or another) makes claims (of one sort or another) that are supported (in one way or another) by argument and evidence (of one type or another). The simple formality of Toulmin's argument pattern and the general idea of evidential argument should not be read narrowly to refer only to empirical, hypothetico-deductive, scientific forms of argument, which is why I have italicized the parenthetical comments in the previous sentence. Dissertations of all types fit into this framework in one way or another. The ''claims'' (results, findings) of dissertations with a more empirical/quantitative bent tend to be focused on a well-honed, specific (null) hypothesis that often can be stated in a single sentence; in these cases, the claim of the dissertation is explicit, and the term ''claim'' is frequently used to discuss the work.

The ''claims'' of empirical/qualitative dissertations are seldom, if ever, talked about using that term, and what is being claimed, so to speak, is more general than one would find in a quantitative work. The ''claim'' is usually implicit, but if made explicit, it would be written something like: (a) the descriptions in this study are accurate, (b) the interpretations in this study are trustworthy, (c) the perspective offered in this study is useful. In each of these cases, a claim is being made, but the term claim is not used, nor is it

unorthodox, the means for proposing it are defensible, reasoned arguments. There is an art to writing a good proposal (and good proposals are carefully crafted), but in the end, a proposal is an academic document, not a literary one, and straightforward clarity about what, why, how, who, and when is critical.

Coherence is another critical issue. Proposals are composed of parts, and these parts need to be clear and coherent, but they also need to fit

PROBLEM

One of the most important parts of a dissertation proposal is a clear statement of the problem that the study will address. A clear problem statement should be able to be framed (in the candidate's mind, if not literally) in such a way as to complete the sentence, ''The problem this study will address is. . . '' [8]

> knowledge of the practice setting to the educational arena and will be equally competent teachers. Literature, however, suggests that beginning teachers in the primary and secondary school systems struggle with learning to teach. Are new nurse educators different? The focus of this thesis [dissertation] will be on the experience of nurses who move from practice to teaching.

Articulating the problem in the proposal is one of the more difficult stages of a dissertation, one of the sweaty inclines. With few exceptions, authors have difficulty in constructing, narrowing, specifying, and justifying the problem that their research will address. It is not uncommon to hear a graduate student talk with a tinge of desperation about needing to find a dissertation problem. Although more often than not, this is simply a way of expressing a difficult stage in the process, the word find is not quite the right metaphor. Construct or develop are better terms for capturing the process. Problems are usually constructed out of a complex interplay among one's own thinking about an issue, one's own experience, and one's understanding of the research literature.

There are many reasons that this critical aspect of the research process is difficult, but the one that I want to focus on at this point concerns a distinction between an *educational problem* and an *educational research problem*. Educational problem is a more encompassing concept than educational research problem. All research problems in the field of education necessarily involve educational problems, by definition, but not all educational problems are research problems. Only a portion of all the imaginable educational problems merit the attention of two or three years of painstaking systematic inquiry. Following are two (overdrawn) hypothetical examples that will help make the distinction concrete.

In the first example, imagine that 40 angry parents in a rural school board call the director of education to complain that their children have not been picked up by the bus for three consecutive days. This is clearly an educational problem (a phenomenon to be understood) and it is serious, to

surrounding regions, seem to learn to read much faster than their peers in other regions. This too is clearly an educational problem (a phenomenon to be understood), but intuitively we sense that it is a problem that might well merit systematic, sustained research. It is a problem that merits the time it would take to shape it, to narrow it, and to hone it into a research problem.

Notice a striking difference between these two hypothetical examples: In the learning-to-read example, common sense suggests the importance of consulting existing research in the field, whereas in the missing bus example, common sense suggests that it would be a waste of time. Besides the difference in scope between these two examples, then, a research problem is always articulated with reference to the research literature in the field. In her qualitative study, *Teaching Poor Readers in Grade One* (1995), June Rogers examined the relationship between her teaching of poor readers according to specified types of remedial instruction and their reading development. In the following quote from her proposal, notice how she articulates the problem and justifies it with reference to the research literature.

> Recent research on reading acquisition, particularly in the area of phonological and reading strategy awareness, is extensive. However, the majority of the research has been conducted with groups of randomly selected children using quantitative methodology from which generalizations about reading acquisition have been made. The focus has not been on individual poor readers. Studies on children's writing acquisition have typically used qualitative methodology. Some of these studies have focused on individual children and some have illuminated the link between reading and writing. To my knowledge, however, no study has investigated the link between reading and writing in combination with phonological skills instruction and reading strategy instruction to facilitate the reading development of individual poor readers in grade one using the ''being there'' approach of interpretive methodology. In her discussion of educational research methodologies and designs, Rosenblatt (1988) argues that, while the experimental model is important in educational research:
>
> > Extrapolation of results to practical situations should be very

> There is, thus, a need to focus on the individual poor reader in light of what current research is suggesting about how one learns to read. My study seeks to uncover the poor reader's understandings of the reading process derived from a specific remedial reading program that is based on what current research suggests are three important factors in reading acquisition: phonological awareness, reading strategy awareness, and opportunities to write. Only through an in-depth examination of the poor reader's understandings of the reading process in this context can we assess the contributions of a specific program aimed at facilitating the reading ability of the poor reader in grade one. I suggest that this in-depth examination can be accomplished through an interpretive study aimed at capturing vivid, contextual descriptions and understandings. (Rogers, p. 4)

An educational problem gets translated into a research problem (1) when it is couched in an argument (an argument, not merely an assertion) that illustrates its educational significance and (2) when it explicitly refers to existing research. The distinction between the educational problem and the educational research problem can be helpful for thinking about the conceptual development of a problem statement regardless of whether the terms themselves are actually used in the proposal proper. It should not be surprising, however, that issues about the problem of a study are more complex than this relatively straightforward distinction. Most research problems (or, if you like, the development of educational problems into research problems) have layers to them, a quality that is partially due to the different ways in which we use the word *problem*. An example of what I mean can be seen in Vicki Bales's (1995) examination of the change process, from the participants' point of view, in a community-based service organization for women. During the development of her proposal, I sent her the following e-mail.

> Hi Vicki! I mowed my lawn yesterday and woke up this morning thinking about your research problem and how I could clearly state what I'm getting at when I keep harping about the problem statement. Before I try an, admittedly, rather strange analogy with lawnmowers let me make a couple of preliminary points. First, I shall be pushing for just a tad more precision and clarity in your brief ''problem statement,'' not because of any gross inadequacy with the statement, but to be sure that there is conceptual clarity underlying it. At this point, my response to your message has more to do with me trying to make myself as clear as possible than it does with the state of your proposal. So here goes:

I suspect that my difficulty in being clear has to do with the different contexts (all very closely related) in which the word ''problem'' is used; or, in another way of speaking, the word ''problem'' has a bunch of overlapping meanings, depending on context, and in any given utterance we might use the word ''problem'' in several different ways. A silly analogy might help. Suppose my neighbor wanders into my backyard and sees me sitting among the debris of what appears to be a lawnmower—parts strewn here and there, tools all over the place. There I sit, holding a thingamajig in my hand, staring at it pensively. The onlooker says, ''Hey, what's the problem?'' I respond, ''I'm trying to get this mower back together.'' In a colloquial way, we have communicated clearly to one another and, given the context of the situation, we have a mutual understanding of what each of us said and meant.

However, in fact, the original question (what's the problem?) is ambiguous. My response picked up on one of several meanings by zeroing in on what I was coping with at the very moment (trying to get the mower back together); and, awkwardly, but more literally and linguistically formal, I was saying, ''*My problem is that* I am trying to put this mower back together.'' The meaning of the term ''problem'' in this context has to do with what one is trying to *do*. We might call it the *action sense* of problem. Given the passing pleasantries of a sunny Sunday afternoon the interchange between my neighbor and me might well end with no more than the action sense of problem (he's not really into lawnmowers or neighbors).

On the other hand, my neighbor might well have meant something beyond the action sense of problem; and I might have responded by saying, ''I have taken this mower to three different shops and not one of them fixed it properly, so I've decided to fix it myself.'' Such a statement could be formally reframed as, ''My problem is that no repair service I've tried has been able to fix the mower.'' Notice that there is a shift in meaning with regard to ''problem'' here. It has less to

put, what is mechanically matter with the mower? I respond, ''Well, there was this pinging sound that got louder and louder and the whole thing began to shake and smoke and then it just stopped—I think that the main-bearing is worn out.'' As a cautionary note, there are obvious difficulties with mechanical analogies like this (the primary source sense is extremely simple in machines as compared with social situations), but the simplicity allows certain distinctions to be highlighted.

Further, my neighbor looks around and sees that most of my yard is in perennials and the small amount of grass is crispy brown and short, and he says, ''So, what's the problem?'' And here he means, what is the context that gives your problem meaning. I say, ''Oh, its not my lawn that needs mowing, but my uncle broke his leg and their mower was broken and they were having a big party to celebrate their daughter's graduation and their grass has gone ballistic and I said I'd mow their yard.'' Let me recap the different senses of problem in this bizarre example:

1) action

2) source

3) primary source

4) context

Now then, your original problem statement reads as follows:

> My problem is to contribute to developing theories about feminist pedagogy and to a growing but still limited understanding of feminist service organizations by examining how a feminist, community–based service organization operates and with what pedagogical consequences for the women involved.

Notice that it is primarily in terms of the action sense of problem. And the remainder of what you have written seems to work away at the source sense and the context sense. Notice that the source sense of problem is addressed by the literature review—metaphorically you are saying that one aspect of the problem is that there are various inadequacies in the literature (no shop has fixed this lawn mower), a literature which addresses in one way or another or doesn't address the primary source sense of the problem. And I keep asking you to articulate in a few brief sentences or a shortish paragraph on what that primary source sense of the problem actually ***is***. The primary source sense of the problem is not that there are gaps in the literature, even though

the gaps are one of the sources of the problem and if there were no gaps at all and if all the literature were totally adequate, then there would be no problem at all.

Let me provide an example to convey the primary source sense of the problem. I have made this up and it is only tangentially related to your work, but it does capture the spirit of what I've been talking about:

> Feminist service organizations are in desperate need of increased funding if they are to survive (why that is important will be argued below) and the reluctance of the government to fund is based on inadequate conceptions of the function, dynamics, and outcomes of these organizations. Recently, the government has agreed to target funding toward specific components of these organizations. However, present plans are based on ill founded conceptions of the dynamics of how they work and the existing literature either does not address or inadequately addresses key issues that are in need of deeper understanding so that funding agencies can be better advised. In order to address these inadequacies and gaps I will contribute to developing theories about feminist pedagogy and to a growing but still limited understanding of feminist service organizations by examining how a feminist, community–based service organization operates and with what pedagogical consequences for the women involved.

I'll stop there and send this off to you. Get back to me and let me know if it makes sense. In short, I'm pushing for a kind of ''it goes ping and the bearings are shot'' type statement somewhere in the development of the problem in the first chapter. Talk later, BK

As suggested at the start, proposals frequently have a separate section that argues for the significance of the proposed study. That discussion commonly involves the study's potential contribution to the improvement of practice or to its theoretical contribution, although those exact terms may not label the discussion. Not all educational problems merit the sustained attention of systematic inquiry that a dissertation requires, as has been pointed out above with the distinction between educational problems and educational research problems. It is also not uncommon that a discussion of the significance of a proposed study is written in terms of the literature—that is, the significance can be partly in terms of a critique of the literature, showing what the literature has contributed and what it has missed. Again, the idea is to demonstrate that the proposed inquiry fills a significant gap in the literature and will contribute to a theoretical or practical knowledge base that is educationally significant.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The theoretical perspective of a proposed study might also be called the theoretical orientation, the framework or, in Toulmin's (1969) terms, the backing. Not all proposals have an explicit discussion of the theoretical perspective and, for those that do not, the perspective of the study is usually implicit in the proposal. Whether explicitly stated or not, the theoretical perspective is particularly important when it comes to interpreting the data in a qualitative study. A fundamental assumption for any academic research is that the phenomena (data) that we wish to understand are filtered through a point of view (a theoretical perspective)—that is to say, it is assumed that there is no such thing as a value-free or unbiased or correct interpretation of an event. Interpretations are always filtered through one or more lenses or theoretical perspectives that we have for ''seeing''; reality

> path is often a matter of the heart as well as the mind. My decision to analyze readings on the Information Society, naturally, was guided by my role as a researcher, but it was also influenced by who I am as a person. In this section I would like to show some of the more personal reasons for taking this particular path in the thesis, ultimately leading to the phenomenon of the Information Society and to the work of Stephen Pepper as a way of understanding that phenomenon.
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> The time and energy that it takes to do a doctoral thesis is such that it is highly unlikely that a person will be able to finish unless she is deeply and personally committed to the work. It is always difficult to know with any precision the historical paths to where a person ultimately finds herself, but I do think that the source of my commitment to this particular study ultimately can be traced to my enduring curiosity with how things work and my strong-willed independence to find things out for myself. For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated with the inner workings of machines of all sorts, and as a child I took great delight in taking things apart and showing other kids how they worked. In retrospect, this double interest in exploring mechanisms and explaining how they worked led quite naturally to the field of education and an interest in teaching about educational technology. (Although the paths seem clear and natural now as I write, they twisted and turned in real time.) (p. 20)

At five pages, Álvarez's personal statement is lengthy but not self-indulgent. She traces the path of her intellectual interests from her early interest in computers, to technophobia, to education, and on to her doctoral interest in metaphor. As she said,

> Morgan's work with metaphor had a powerful influence on me and was the initial stages of my thought that there was a possible connection between the metaphoric ways that people viewed their reality and the technology phobia that I witnessed in the computer labs. At the time I was dimly aware of how I was thinking, but I did not have the time to pursue those thoughts in any systematic way. I do remember tucking the thoughts away in my mind as something to pursue in depth at a later time. Now, as I look back, I can see that my interest in metaphor mirrored my interest in mechanical things and in software. I was still fascinated with how things worked. The idea of metaphor (in a philosophical rather than literary sense) was a tool that opened a window onto how things worked in the intellectual sphere. . . . This was how I ran into the work of Stephen Pepper. It is hard to describe the visceral feelings that one can have when you intuitively feel that

Another source for the development of questions comes from the research literature. Chris Castle's (2001) dissertation is about ways of knowing and ways of teaching in different museum settings. Notice how she relates the research questions to the literature in her proposal:

> could provide a useful comparative framework from which to explore Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge. For example, it is possible that growth in the categories of teacher knowledge conceptualized by Churcher might accentuate growth in pedagogical content knowledge. Moreover, perhaps, there is considerable overlap which will be seen in the various conceptions of teacher knowledge.
>
> These ideas relate to further specific questions to be addressed in the study: What does the growth of pedagogical content knowledge ''look like'' over time? For example, are new patterns or pattern changes in the beginning science teacher's teaching evident over time? How is this growth experienced by the beginning science teacher? For example, how does the beginning science teacher perceive their thoughts, beliefs, or values as changing with respect to the teaching and learning of science? Each of these questions in turn speak to the guiding questions outlined at the beginning of Section I: What is the nature of the growth of pedagogical content knowledge in beginning science teachers, and How does collaborative reflective practice contribute to the growth? (McGinley, pp. 10–11)

Aside from giving specific examples, it is difficult to say about the questions that a qualitative study might address, because those questions emerge from the particulars of human situations. Suffice it to say that the narrowing of a problem and the honing of specific questions are critical in a proposal. I do find it helpful to recall that qualitative inquiry focuses on the quality and texture of events rather than how often those events occur; this is the most elementary distinction between qualitative and quantitative inquiry. Erickson's (1986) comments about qualitative (interpretive) research, particularly with regard to participant observation research, are helpful because he sets a tone for thinking about the sorts of questions that a qualitative study might address:

> Interpretive [qualitative] methods using participant observational fieldwork are most appropriate when one needs to know more about:
>
> 1. The specific structure of occurrences rather than their general character and overall distribution . . . .
>
> 2. The meaning-perspectives of the particular actors in the particular events. . . .
>
> 3. The location of naturally occurring points of contrast that can be observed as natural experiments when we are unable logistically or ethically to meet experimental conditions of consistency of intervention and of control over other influences on the setting. . . .

4. The identification of specific causal linkages that were not identified by experimental methods, and the development of new theories about causes and other influences on the patterns that are identified in survey data or experiments. (p. 121)

Erickson (1986) continued,

existing research. A dissertation proposal refers to the literature to see what research has and has not been done with regard to the problem. It is a way of helping to build an argument for addressing a particular problem, and it is also a way of finding information that might be helpful for conducting the research. There are several logical possibilities with respect to the literature review:

No research has been done on the problem

This makes the review of the literature simple but awkward to write. Bluntly put, one possible reason that there is no research on a particular problem is that scholars may regard the problem as not worth researching. The lack of research in an area shifts the burden of writing to arguing persuasively why research of a particular type is needed (rather than to reviewing the literature). In any event, the proposal should indicate what type of search has been done (ERIC, the Internet, and so on) and what descriptors were used. Readers need to be convinced that a serious effort has been made to find research in the problem area.

Some research has been done on the problem

Usually some relevant research has been done on a problem. In this case, the researcher needs to show how that research is related to the proposed problem, including how it helps and how it is inadequate. It might involve arguing that the related research is methodologically flawed, that it misses a particular aspect of the problem, that the questions raised in the proposal are different from those in the related research, or that existing research is inadequately framed or misses a new way of thinking about the problem. Here is an example, again from Paul McGinley's (1991) proposal:

> While each of these themes is important, none address the subject–matter concerns of beginning teachers. Surprisingly, in spite of recent subject specific curriculum reforms, there are few literature references related to beginning teacher induction on curricular and pedagogical issues about what to teach, how to teach it, and how to know whether the students have learned it. Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1990) suggest two factors which might explain ''the lack of attention to subject matter in the literature on beginning teachers and teacher induction.'' (p. 4)

In some areas of qualitative inquiry, the aim of a proposed study may be to contribute to a growing case study literature. In this event, one is less likely to find a review of all preceding case studies and is more likely to

find an argument about how the proposed work will add to the corpus of cases. It is assumed that each case is unique and, in that sense, an original inquiry. (This rationale becomes less tenable as the case study literature grows.)

An abundance of research has been done

When there is an abundance of research on a particular problem, a researcher may find that a vein of inquiry has been exhausted and that there is little left to do that is original. More commonly, a researcher provides a fresh (original) perspective on a stale, exhausted line of inquiry.

There is an abundance of related literature

Sometimes a particular problem has a lot of relevant literature, but the literature is not research literature; instead, it is in the form of position statements, policy statements, ideological statements, rhetorical exhortations, and so on. In this case, such literature should be reviewed, as appropriate (it often serves as part of the context for the proposed research), but the fact that there is little or no research literature should be acknowledged, and it should be argued why the proposed research is needed. Meagher-Stewart (2001) found that there were several bodies of literature relevant to her study of public health nurses and that only one of those

> of the proposed study and the lack of information on the research problem. I will also explore conceptual frameworks of (a) pedagogical content knowledge developed by Shulman (1987) and others and (b) reflective practice developed by Nolan and Huber (1989) and others. Moreover, I will illustrate the significance of linking the two frameworks together for articulating and addressing the research problem. Finally, I will develop the specific questions to be addressed. (p. 2)

Then, in the introductory paragraph to his literature review, McGinley states,

> Section II: The Literature
>
> This section is divided into three parts each of which contributes to a rationale for the proposed study by illustrating the importance of addressing the research problem and verifying the lack of information on it. The first part examines: (a) the major themes of current research on beginning teachers, (b) concerns of the inclusion of beginning teacher the lack of emphasis on subject matter beginning teachers, and (c) arguments for subject matter considerations in induction programs. It also further conceptualizes Shulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge. The second part examines research suggesting a connection between reflective practice and teacher growth with respect to content knowledge. It also further conceptualizes the notion of practice according to several researchers. The third part examines: (a) reflective research literature which considers the pedagogical content knowledge and reflective practice of7.4(f-9df519615.cie(th

ETHICS

In addition to acknowledging the university's ethical review protocol, it is appropriate in the proposal to acknowledge any potential ethical problems beyond common everyday risk. Anyone intending to do research involving people should (1) not be naïve concerning issues of power and privilege, (2)

> Yes, certainly you have my permission to use my thesis [dissertation] proposal. I have attached the Third Draft, Nov 97, which I believe was the final version. I am flattered that you asked! Along the way I shared the proposal with several fellow students and they all told me the same story you got—that no one wanted them to see what they had originally written because it sounded so naive in retrospect. I suppose mine does too but c'est la vie, without that benchmark how else can you see that you've actually learned something in the process?

A second reason for exceptions to the image of a proposal I have outlined can occur when a doctoral student is working within a well-formed tradition of scholarship (which is frequently embedded in a series of ongoing research projects that are the lifeblood of the student's and a professor's work). In these circumstances, there is usually a community of understanding, so to speak, and a proposal can be relatively short because much of what has been said above is implicitly understood.[12]

NOTES ON WRITING

The parts discussed above constitute a generic qualitative dissertation proposal. These parts are standard. Let me now turn to a handful of notes about writing qualitative proposals and dissertations. (By and large, the issues about writing are the same for both and, as above, some examples come from dissertations rather than proposals simply because the degree of development in a dissertation provides a clearer example.) Qualitative dissertations put heavy demands on the ability to write well. All the virtues of qualitative inquiry—the textures and nuances of human interaction, the complexity of perspective and perception, the sense of being there—are virtues unfulfilled in the hands of a clumsy writer. If someone does not like the challenges of writing, then qualitative research probably is not for them. The challenges begin with the proposal. There is art to it and, as in art, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. If taken with caution, these notes on placement and integrity may be helpful—at the very least, they will stimulate thinking about the joys and tortures of writing.

At the level of base practicality, a dissertation proposal should be as user-friendly as possible. The ideas need not be simple, but every effort should be made to ensure that the reader does not trip on obstacles in the path. The destination is to be as clear and concise as possible about what one proposes to do. Doctoral students frequently misjudge how much help a reader may need to absorb the intended meaning of the text of a proposal. Making a proposal user-friendly concerns commonplace practical issues, including the appearance of the document. Drafts should have a table of

contents that lists sections and subsections exactly as they are in the body of the proposal and with page numbers so that a reader can get a sense of the whole and find key parts quickly. (I prefer a title page that includes the title, author, institution, date, number of the draft, and a table of contents.) Even first drafts should be purged of misspellings, incomplete sentences, grammatical errors, and so on—in other words, they should be proofed.

Beyond such practical issues are those that generally fall under the category of good writing: Clarity, conciseness, attention to detail, and sensitivity to structure and development are generally features of good writing. Over the years, I have found Strunk and White's (1959/2000) *Elements of Style* to be more helpful than most guides to the art of writing, but writers tend to have their favorites. Van Leunen's (1992) *Handbook for Scholars* is helpful as well. Also see Kilbourn's (2001) comments about communicating clearly in the initial paragraph of a proposal or dissertation.

PLACEMENT

Some features of good writing are particularly important for academic prose, including dissertation proposals, especially when it is dense and lengthy. These features generally concern strategic moves to guide the reader through the text in a way that increases the likelihood that she or he will acquire the intended meaning. Where are things put that will help a reader move through the text with understanding? There are numerous issues concerning placement, but two in particular seem to plague proposals, particularly in their early drafts.

The first instance concerns the statement of the problem

The difficulty is this: Frequently, it takes a reader far too long to get to the point of the proposal—to a clear articulation of the problem.[13] It is as though the writer is afraid that if he or she makes the point too soon, the punch line would be given away. Not so. A reader is desperate to know what the problem is as soon as possible so that the rest of the proposal can be read with that problem statement in mind. It involves a delicate balance for a writer. How much context should be provided before the point is made? The answer to that question is almost always, as little as possible. To be sure, the statement of the problem in a proposal presents a genuine dilemma to a writer. Logically speaking, a clear statement of the problem would come after a long, carefully developed argument that lays out the general background, including a review of the literature. At the end of such an argument (after, say, 15 pages or so) an author would to say something like, ''Consequently, in light of the argument just made, our understanding of so and so

has been inadequately researched. In this proposed study I will address that problem by . . .

understand how I got there, and then . . . '' The urge to say everything at once cannot be satisfied. In linear prose, some ideas need to be brought to the foreground while others remain in the background; moving smoothly through the foreground background terrain sometimes requires ''meta-writing'' or, as some say, ''sign-posts.'' Metawriting hovers above the text, so to speak, and orients a reader—its distinguishing characteristic is that it is writing about the text rather than of the text itself. Jerome Bruner is a skillful writer, and a quick example from his Acts of Meaning (1990) is instructive (metawriting in italics).

> What I want to argue in this book is that it is culture and the search for meaning that is the shaping hand, biology that is the constraint, and that, as we have seen, culture even has it in its power to loosen that constraint.
>
> But lest this seem like a preface to a new optimism about humankind and its future, *let me make one point before* turning, *as promised, to the issue of relativism.* For all its generative inventiveness, human culture is not . . . (p. 23, emphasis added)

Metawriting can help frame meaning for readers so that they get the intended point, and it helps them see the logical progression of a complex argument. Metawriting calls for a different style, as seen in the following few lines of an imaginary proposal:

the argument. If the author had simply had that brief discussion about interpretation rather than alerting the reader to it, there would be a good chance that the reader would wonder not only why it was there but also why it was so brief and incomplete. By saying that it will be brief and will be treated more fully later, the author helps the reader relax and recognize that this is not all that will be said about interpretation.

Metawriting can be overdone, of course, but if used judiciously, it can help an author master the writing rather than be subservient to it. One of the most difficult things to do in a proposal (and dissertation) is to keep the big picture in view while examining the details. It is a familiar foreground-background problem, and writing that takes control of the text, shapes it, and points readers in directions the author wants them to go is one way of addressing it.

INTEGRITY

A good proposal has its own integrity. The parts must fit together, and the fit must be clear to the reader. Integrity is related to the overall logic of the inquiry and to meaning. Naturally, a proposal should be consistent with terminology, grammar, writing style, editorial style, and citation style. But, more important, the conceptual and methodological parts of the proposal need to make sense in relation to one another, and the writing must be done in such a way as to make that clear.

Ciaran Sugrue's (1992) research into teachers' ideas about child-centered curriculum in Ireland is an elegantly designed inquiry, one in which there is integrity among its various parts. The study had three phases. In the first phase, Ciaran interviewed 16 teachers for their views of child-centered curriculum. In the second phase, he selected 6 of the 16 to conduct a mini-case study of a week's duration each. In the third phase, he selected 1 of the

practitioners' interpretations of a policy of child-centredness. Details of these teachers' intentions are but a partial account of their curriculum constructions. Consequently, observational data of actual practice was required, not to determine the degree of congruence between practitioners' intentions and actions, but to gain insight into the dialectical relationship between thought, action and context by documenting the process of curriculum construction. Details of practice enabled me to provide more focused accounts of curriculum construction which, in turn, facilitated the isolation of recurrent ''cultural themes'' of practice for more thorough investigation. It was not practicable, within the limits of the study, to observe the curriculum practices of all sixteen interviewees. In the circumstances, six was a reasonable compromise between the need for breadth and a more focused investigation than was the case in phase one. By purposefully selecting practitioners who taught in very different contexts, phase two sought to respect complexity and contextual variation as well as biographical and professional difference while simultaneously isolating the most significant tensions and dilemmas of curricular construction.

From a methodological perspective, the progressive focusing of the substantive issue through the three-phase design implicitly demonstrates the limitations of more narrowly conceived research questions and indicates the distinctive nature of the present inquiry. It also enables the specific details of individual practitioner's practice to illuminate the general problem of child-centred curriculum. However,

framing comments at the beginning of this sixth chapter. These well-developed paragraphs were not as well developed in the first draft of the

as does articulating the various facets to the problem, as seen in the letter to Vicki. A second area of difficulty concerns the specific questions that the study will address. This is often a matter of being precise and cautious with wording so that one does not inadvertently commit the study to a different

pyramid, the social context talks about what is going on in society that is relevant to your research. (I am not saying that you need to talk a lot about this, but I am saying that it is part of ‘‘setting the problem.’’) For

former. On the other side, to research only ''them'' bleeds the work of the sense of urgency that you feel and the sense of participation-in-the-construction-of-their-situations that you have. The two destinations are not far apart and I can readily imagine a study that would involve both, but what is important to recognize is that each context brings forth different issues of method and logistics and different justifications for ''why would this be important to do?'' The work is important to do, don't worry about your ability to articulate that; but you need to work on what the work ***is***. Further, the research problem will likely have parts but they will be seen to be conceptually linked. For instance, when I say that I can imagine a study that would involve both a focus on you and on ''them,'' there would need to be a clear conceptual link between those two parts.

In the proposal and thesis you have to (1) justify why the research problem you have constructed is worth researching (the social and educational contexts help you do that), (2) you have to justify why the methods you choose are appropriate to the questions the problem generates, and (3) you have to show why the kind of information that your research will generate is needed. This last point is important. Your interpretive thesis will produce a certain kind of information and understanding that is characteristic of this mode of research. Why is that information necessary or important? That is, in what context of professional practice would it be useful or helpful and why and to whom? Some of this comes from paying attention to your own gut reactions as you read the research that has been done and as you reflect on your own situation and that of your students and ex-students.

It might be helpful to think less in terms of the need for ''change'' and more in terms of what people are coping with in their various contexts. I think the kind of research you want to do will probably aid our understanding of the complexity of teaching/reading situations. Go back to the first few pages of Erickson on this. It may well be that an implicit part of your argument involves the perception of teachers and professors to change, but I suggest that your strongest argument will be that there is a kind of information that we need to have (that we presently don't have) in order to understand better the nature of the situations with which your participants (perhaps including yourself) are confronted. ''Change'' is another problem for another day and the rhetoric about change is, to my mind, often counterproductive to genuine change. In any event, I don't think interpretive method is best suited to a ''change'' context—that almost always involves getting into some manner of documenting (quantifying) progress. It might be

useful at this point to have another look at June Rogers's proposal in order to (1) have a sense of its structure, and (2) to see what part of the elephant she is dealing with so that you can get a better sense of what part(s) you want to deal with. [Let's see, now I have pyramids, trains, steps, trails, paths, destinations, and elephants—not bad, eh!—I'll not shirk from a mixed metaphor!] Jim, you are doing very well; keep on as you are. You aren't too far from having a draft that you can show potential committee members. That's all for now. BK

The three or four drafts that it normally takes to produce a good proposal are not wasted effort even though a candidate is understandably anxious to move on to the research itself. Although it is well recognized that issues may emerge in the conduct of a qualitative research that could not be anticipated, it is critical that the overall conceptualization of a study be worked out in advance so that a researcher knows what he or she is doing. It is the thoroughness and intensity of the conceptualization at the proposal stage that affords a researcher the confidence to respond appropriately when unanticipated issues do arise. Furthermore, the writing in good proposals usually turns up in the first chapter of a dissertation. The process of writing the proposal itself—the gut-wrenching process of getting the ideas to work—is a training ground for the attention to detail that is required to conduct a solid piece of research and produce a strong dissertation. It is important to remember that a doctoral dissertation proposal is one of the first formal steps in the apprenticeship of becoming an academic researcher. Its primary function is to convince the university (as represented by a supervisor and committee) that the author is ready to conduct a study and that the plans are sufficiently worked for it to be completed satisfactorily within a reasonable time.

APPENDIX—QUALITIES OF A PROPOSAL

1. How informative is the introduction? Is it easy to understand?

2. How long before you understand what the proposal is about?

3. Is there a clear articulation of the problem that the study will address? How far do you have to read before you have a clear sense of it? (Note: There is a difference between a statement of what the research will do and the problem that it addresses.)

4. Is a plausible argument made for doing the study? Will the study likely make a significant contribution to practice or theory?

6. Is the literature review adequate, and is it conceptually integrated with the problem and the questions posed?

7. Is there a convincing argument for the theoretical perspective taken

Bales, V. (1995). Time out: Feminist research and pedagogy in a community-based service organization. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.

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curriculum, and qualitative inquiry. Recent publications include ''Fictional Theses'' in Educational Researcher, December 1999; ''The Art and Structure of a First Paragraph,'' Teachers College Record, January 2001; and ''Balancing Feedback and Inquiry: How Novice Observers (Supervisors) Learn from