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## Journal of Second Language Writing

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jslw](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jslw)

## Full Length Article

# Performing expertise in doctoral dissertations: Thoughts on a fundamental dilemma facing doctoral students and their supervisors

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Doctoral dissertation writers  
 Performed expertise  
 Supervisor role  
 Imposter phenomenon

## ABSTRACT

By the time L1 and L2 doctoral students complete their dissertations, they are expected to be experts in their areas and methods of inquiry and in the academic discourse in which they represent their work. Likewise, their supervisors are expected to be expert guides and managers of their students' work throughout the process. However, a review of the literature on expertise indicates that neither students nor supervisors, especially inexperienced ones, necessarily embody the expertise that is expected of them. Therefore, they must learn to perform like experts, with students displaying the expertise of scholars and supervisors managing students' projects in ways that convey and encourage displays of expertise. Raising students' and supervisors' awareness that these performances are a normal part of an academic life can help prevent the debilitating anxiety that comes from expectations that are set unrealistically high.

## 1. The issue

What is it we expect of doctoral dissertation writers by the time they finish their projects, whether they are writing in their L1 or L2? We expect them to be expert enough in their topics and research techniques to have produced an “original” piece of scholarship, written according to linguistic and textual conventions of a particular discipline, that will stand up to scrutiny by their advisors and committee members, and later, members of the larger academic community. Likewise, what do we expect of the dissertation supervisors who guide these students? Ordinarily we expect them to guide and shape the dissertation projects from the design stage to the final product and defense, and in the case of both L1 and L2 students, to help them with disciplinary expectations and language in their writing and to provide intellectual and emotional support. The final document, which is perhaps the most significant piece of writing in a graduate student's life, will feature the names of both the supervisor and the student and so contribute to their scholarly reputations. Stakes are high for both.

However, in many cases, dissertation supervisors are not experts in these ways, and likewise doctoral students, regardless of first language, rarely become expert writers or researchers during the short years of their study. It takes many years, of effortful behavior to develop expertise, and most of us never reach the level of true expert (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). This means that doctoral dissertation writers and possibly their supervisors will be enacting performances that are not yet fully embodied and that may therefore cause stress and anxiety, particularly if their goal is mastery and control. Indeed, goals of mastery and certainty, both unachievable, risk “undervaluing the contribution and quality of the research itself” (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2014 p. 1142) and contributing to sometimes debilitating anxiety on the part of dissertation writers (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008). As Kamler and Thomson (2006, p.3) point out, dissertation writing is “one of the major sites of anxiety for students and, we contend,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2018.02.005>

Received 25 July 2017; Received in revised form 8 January 2018; Accepted 21 February 2018

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their supervisors.” Even Anglophone doctoral students working in their L1 s are not immune to these struggles (Casanave, 1997, 2008; Habibie, 2016; Hyland, 2016).

But students whose language background, class, gender, or race place them at a disadvantage in the Anglophone university system are especially challenged, as are mid-career students who are already working educators and who may also have families. Mid-career students cannot devote full time and attention to their projects. Students may additionally be reading and writing in their L2 and so require extra time and effort. Time is short, however, and even with sufficient topic knowledge, neither L1 nor L2 students have time in the doctoral program to develop into “experienced writers, who rely on the structured, symbolic genres embodied within their habitus to construct credible representations of their disciplinary competence” (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008, p. 250). Students’ supervisors, too, particularly at early stages of an academic career, need to display textual and interpersonal expertise they may not have in either L1 or L2, and that may or may not develop from years of trial-and-error experiences of supervising (Halse, 2011) or from participation in supervisor training. Such training, when available, may only rarely focus on writing (Guerin et al., 2017).

My point in this essay is that our attitudes about dissertation writing and supervising thus need to expand to include the concept of expert performance, in addition to (unreachable?) goals of mastery of content knowledge, research methods, and linguistic and textual conventions. Even with sufficient content and research knowledge, expertise and agency in writing or supervising a book-length project like a dissertation cannot develop in a one-shot attempt at dissertation writing. Nevertheless, a convincing performance—a voice of authority—is still required in the politicized and hierarchical environment of the university (Thompson, 2012), where L1 and L2 doctoral dissertation writers are obligated to perform like experts for a single high-stakes project in order to graduate.

By “perform,” I do not mean to imply intentional fakery, but to highlight that dissertation writers must display more expertise than they currently embody. Dissertation writers are thus actors in domains that demand displays of certain personae and not others (Goffman, 1959; McIntosh, 1985), and supervisors (who themselves are actors) must help them learn to perform these personae. As Goffman told us, performances are natural in everyday life—we cannot not perform. Likewise, in academia, discursive performances routinely construct academic identities (Hyland, 2010, 2011). But not all performances are as high stakes as dissertation writing and supervising. Hence, given the short amount of time that most students have in doctoral programs, the performances are likely to feel fraudulent rather than embodied, leading to anxiety and self-sabotaging behaviors characteristic of the Imposter Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978; Crusan, 2014; Gardiner & Kearns, 2012; Hutchins, 2015; McIntosh, 1985; Watson & Betts, 2010). With awareness on the part of both dissertation writers and supervisors, such negative attitudes and behaviors can be reduced, for example through behavioral coaching (Kearns et al., 2008), and by accepting that dissertation work is a performance that displays rather than necessarily embodies expertise.

In the remainder of this essay, I first review briefly how others have characterized expertise. I then discuss what we might mean by expertise in doctoral supervising and in dissertation writing, and why the notion of performing expertise suits a healthier, less stressful version of doctoral study than does a focus on mastery and control.

## 2. Characterizing expertise

When we look at some of the literature on expertise, we will be challenged to determine whether or how studies of tasks within structured domains such as chess, sports, and music apply to the less well-defined activities and practices of dissertation writing. These studies (with some differences; see Ackerman, 2014) have generally pinpointed the central roles of extensive domain knowledge, memory, practice, and innate talent (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Ericsson, 2014; Hambrick, Oswald, Altmann, Meinz, Gobet, & Campitelli, 2014; Herling, 2000; Kellogg, 2006). Studies of expertise in teaching (e.g., Berliner, 2001, 2004; Farrell, 2013; Tsui, 2003, 2009)—a vague and poorly defined activity in education—overlap to some extent with more controlled studies in other fields, and may provide further insights into what expertise in dissertation writing might look like. Particular domain knowledge stands out as central to expertise in teaching, as do flexibility in problem solving, good intuition, effortful planning, sensitivity to demands of teaching tasks, good pattern recognition, good relations with students, and routinization of repetitive tasks that allows for attention to more complex work. Importantly, expertise by definition requires us to progressively solve problems at the edge of our competence (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993), and so goes well beyond the requirement of mere practice (Hambrick et al., 2014).

But the issue of time devoted to effortful (as opposed to routine) practice is central. Overall, expertise “is developed over hundreds and thousands of hours” and is “specific to a domain and to particular contexts in domains” (Berliner, 2004, p. 201; Berliner, 2001). For example, practice in academic and professional writing often occurs within narrowly defined domains over many years as part of apprenticeships and co-authorships with supervisors, colleagues, and mentors. If indeed the role of years of practice is an important component in learning to teach and write, we can ask what we might expect from dissertation writers. It can take five to 10 years to develop expertise in fields like teaching, as well as in chess, music, and so forth (see views on the “10,000 h” rule by Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson et al., 2007; Gladwell, 2008), and even then a person might simply develop into an experienced non-expert, rather than a true expert who continually pushes ahead at the edge of her competence (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993). As I suggested in the introduction, perhaps it is unrealistic to expect dissertation writers to develop real, embodied expertise in their topic areas and their writing skills during the few years devoted to dissertation projects.

## 3. Expertise of doctoral supervisors

It is not a secret that “the issue of getting the dissertation written is as problematic for supervisors as it is for doctoral students” (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p.1). One reason is that it is unrealistic to expect dissertation supervisors, especially those new to the job,

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