

Writing a master dissertation – students' difficulties and coping strategies

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The study

- **CONTEXT:**
 - COST Action IS1401 - Strengthening Europeans' Capabilities by Establishing the European Literacy Network
 - WORKING GROUP 2 - DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF LITERACY AND EDUCATION IN A DIGITAL WORLD
 - TEAM C - ACADEMIC WRITING

The study

- **AIMS:**

- To explore what doing a BA and MA thesis means from the thesis writers' perspectives;
- To identify and analyse what significant experiences BA and MA thesis writers face during the process of writing their thesis and how they feel about these experiences;
- To identify and analyse how they manage these significant events and what problem solving strategies they use when facing negative or problematic events;
- To identify and analyse what students feel they have learned during thesis writing both about writing and about their subject.

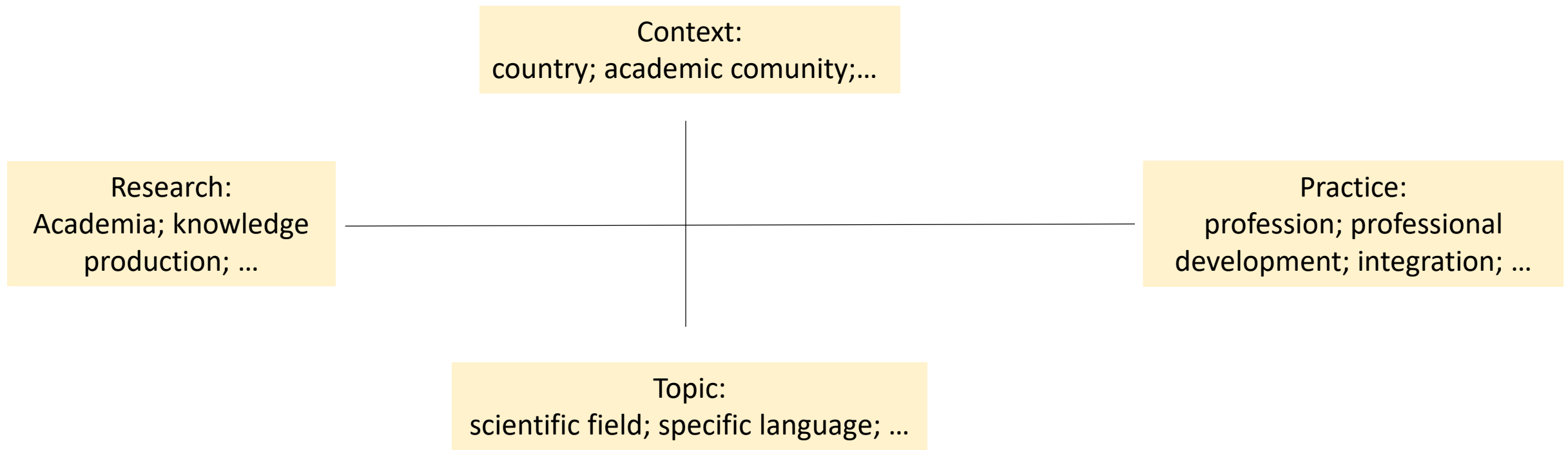
The study

- **METHODOLOGY:**
 - **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS :**
 - 3 MA students:
 - Literature **(L)** - **University of Coimbra**
 - Education / Teacher training **(Ed/TT)** - **University of Aveiro**
 - Engineering **(ENG)** - **University of Minho**

Writing a master dissertation / thesis

What are we talking about?

Diversity



Complexity:

The master dissertation seems a particularly complex genre, considering both the set of problems related to its configuration (structure, language, norms of reference), and the factors that constrain its production (methodological procedures, student/supervisor relationship, time management, institutional constraints, individual nature of the writing process).

[Castelló & Iñiesta, 2012; Donahue (2013); Harwood & Petrić (2017); Russell & Cortes, V. (2012)].

Common Aspects:

- Work under Supervision
- Reading
- Writing



Knowledge Construction and Developmental Process:

- Subject - What do I know?
- Processes (Research; Reading/Writing; Professional Practices) - How do I do it?
- Self - How do I feel?

Supervision

- The supervisor gave me an extensive **bibliography** ... it was the basis of what I developed later ...
- He said it wouldn't be fruitful ... this **guidance** helped me.
- The supervisor **enjoyed** it.
- Somehow I felt like an **orphan** ... I wanted to have an answer soon, I wanted to know if it was right ... I was at a crossroads because I did not have the **feedback** and did not know if this was the right way to go on (L)

- ... we have an idea, maybe even a romantic one, that the supervisor is going to be **the one** who will open all doors in life, he will suggest conferences, he will write articles with you, he will, for hours, debate a theoretical subject that he cares about as much as you do.
- That is an idea that we gradually deconstruct, and, at least, I discovered that **the subject** I study is **of my interest**.
- My **supervisor** may **guide** me in some ways, some forms of writing perhaps, but it is my choice, it is in my interest. And it **gave me an independence** of this process, gave me an **independence**, let's say. (L)



Supervision

- I sent her any article I found in my search because not all that is on the Internet is **reliable** ... I had that **support** too ...
- The supervisor **helped**, she said: - this is not necessary;
- they help; they **advise us how to write**; with their experience, they can tell us how far we should go in the development of each topic ... (ENG)

- ... the supervisor (and the **colleagues**) **helped** to clarify doubts, giving opinions ... their comments helped to **overcome difficulties** in writing and in the **integration of the sources** in the text. “ (ED/TT)



Reading

- I had an **extensive bibliography** ... it was the **basis** of what I developed later.
- I read, I took my **notes** and then, when I had everything, **I start sewing it in a text.**
- "Should I keep reading, am I understanding these texts in the correct way, right?"
- Because I kept reading. I continued reading, with this **insecurity**, some texts. I was sure I had understood, that they were useful to me and that I was learning, right? (L)



Reading

- The **literature review** was one of the initial tasks
- There are websites, Google Scholar, SCOPUS, that helps us, ...
I started **searching**, using some keywords...
- I read the abstract and saw if it really **interested** me. There were many that I read that were not worth ...
- I always had a **blank sheet** of paper with me and I always **pointed out the ideas** I was finding
- I **read and wrote at the same time**. Because it was a lot of information ... I read about a subject and **took notes**, I read about another subject and took notes. Then I **put the sentences together in a logic manner...** (ENG)

- I **took notes**, I pointed out what I had to point out, **but** I still did not know what make sense, and how I would put it together. (ED/TT)

Writing: Starting the Process

- ... before I **started** I already had a notion of what I was going to work on, so I proposed a **schedule** based on **four chapters** that focused on different areas ... (L)

- The index - "I got a more **organized framework** in my head, what I had to do, from there I **began to divide the information** I had already researched and to **organize** it in order to compose the text" (ED/TT)

- the topic wasn't well defined yet, we draw a **scheme**, and it was much easier;
- once I had the **structure** of the dissertation on a sheet of paper, I was able to **start** writing (ENG)

Writing: the Process

- **I have a writing process:** I read, I take my notes and then, when I have everything, I start sewing it in a text ...
- My first chapter is the one I wrote more calmly, with more time. It took me six months to write it.
- The other four, the introduction and conclusion were written at the end of the third semester ... with such **adrenaline** ... I wrote the chapters with a certain **speed**.
- I had everything **under control**, the writing came out **very fast**, the writing came out **fluid**.



Writing: the Process

- ... it was **too much information**. ... I read several texts and then I wrote for myself; I tried to put their ideas in my own words
- There were too many ideas; I got **confused**, then I got more structured, ... I draw **concept maps and schemes**
- I read several texts and then I wrote for myself; I tried to put **their ideas in my own words**, ... I wondered: - how shall I express this idea?
- We must use an **accurate language**, and the use of **adequate verbal tenses (ENG)**

- I did **not want to write like they write**, but it looks like it's written so well, how am I going to put it any other way? “
- They were like **loose notes**. (...) When I began to write the first chapters of the theoretical framework ...

Writing: Model Texts

- **More than the contents** of the book I was reading I looked at the **form**, paid attention to **how that book was written**. And that somehow helped me, it's **the closest I get to a writing manual**, see? (L)

- **I read many articles**, it made me much better ...
- **I read many dissertations** ... (ENG)



Knowledge Construction and Self-Development Process

- We cannot compare **the knowledge I had when I started** with **what I know now**, after writing a dissertation.
- A **person** gets a **lot better** at writing a dissertation;
- I **improved** writing a lot ...
- It was really funny, reading my text at the end of everything and thinking: - **“Did I write 200 pages?”** It was **very good**.
- A **person** grows, becomes **more responsible**
- I became **aware** that I was becoming **different**, a much more **responsible person**. I was often talking with my parents and they said: "even in **the way of speaking** you are different, you are **more thoughtful**. ENG)

Knowledge Construction and Self-Development Process

- I was aware that the work was mine and I felt I had all the necessary instruments to perform the work independently, whether I had feedback or not ...
- I was already feeling more confident with the books I read.
- I've become a tougher person.
- I had more self-confidence after the process was finished and the dissertation accepted. Yes, I am more self-confident now. (L)

- When I began to write the first chapters of the theoretical framework, it started to give me more motivation, and I started to get more into the subject ... (ED/TT)

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Thank You