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

Context:
country; academic community;...

Research:
Academia; knowledge production; ...

Practice:
profession; professional development; integration; ...

Topic:
scientific field; specific language; ...

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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)
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 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)

- 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)
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)
References:


Thank You