Dissertation Writers' Negotiations with Competing Activity Systems

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Abstract

Previous research on dissertation writing fails to embed it within the context of different, and often competing institutional forces constituting the genre expectations associated with producing the dissertation. The purpose of this study was to examine the negotiations of dissertation writers in a large Midwestern research university across a range of different activity systems: the Graduate School, department, advisor, committee, employment, and potential job market as different "layered" (Prior, 1998) systems. Analysis of interview data of 11 writers indicated that writers perceived marked differences in the objects/outcomes, roles, norms, and genre tools to vary across these different systems. While the Graduate School and departments formulated one set of expectations, the advisor or committee articulated different expectations for completing the dissertation. Writers also experienced time conflicts between the demands of teaching and writing. And, they experienced conflicting outcomes for the dissertation related to writing for an advisor or committee as opposed to positioning themselves for the job market, creating ambiguity related to their dissertation audience. They also noted that the research university positions the dissertation genre as preparing students for positions in other research universities as opposed work in universities in which teaching is a priority.

A recent report on the state of graduate education in the United States by the Association of American Universities (1998) identifies several problems and recent reforms associated with this nation's Ph.D. programs. The report noted that from 1985 to 1995, the number of doctoral degrees awarded increased 25% from 31,297 to 1985 to 41,610 in 1995. The report notes that issues of advising, completion time, size of graduate programs, career advising and placements remain as challenges for graduate education. The report indicates that the Ph.D. phase is known to be rather lengthy, averaging seven years (p. 6), a figure that varies widely across departments. This figure generally increases significantly when education and humanities departments are the focus of concern. As time-to-degree completion rates have generally been documented as rising over the years, there has been some focus on gathering data and making recommendations to address issues of a tight job market, faculty advising, and financial support during graduate programs.

Graduate students' perceptions of their graduate school experiences paint a less-than-positive picture of their experience. A survey of doctoral students by the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students (2001) found that students in the humanities indicated low levels of satisfaction for information provided for prospective students, preparation for a broad

range of careers, teaching and T.A. preparation, professional development, career guidance and placement services, and controlling time to degree, results that suggest that graduate students in the humanities are still coping with a range of issues.

However, in these reports, there is little if any mention of the dissertation-writing phase itself, a process that can take students up to two or three years on average to complete (Association of American Universities, 1998, p. 6). Two studies indicate that about half of all doctoral students never complete their programs because they cannot complete the dissertation (Lovitts, 1996; Ogden, 1993); another study found that one in four students who are ABD—all but dissertation-- never complete the dissertation (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Ogden (1993) noted that, while the time spent finishing program course requirements has not changed much over time, the major time increase has occurred in terms of the numbers of years completing the dissertation. In his 1993 analysis, only 22% of students took five years or less to complete the dissertation, while the majority took over seven years, particularly in the field of education. In contrast, in 1971, the median time to earn the degree in the humanities was 5.6 years (Ogden, 1993). In 1999, the median time was 8.9 years (Leatherman, 2001). The median number of years from the B.A. degree to completing the doctorate was 11.7 years and the median age of persons receiving the degree was 35.1 (Leatherman, 2001).

Some of this increase in completion time may be due to a shift in the function of the dissertation as an object-driven tool within the activity systems comprising graduate education, the subject of this report. While the purpose of the dissertation was originally meant to be a student's first scholarly publication and public display of scholarly ability, it has recently been perceived more in terms of functioning as part of graduate education's gate-keeping motive associated with a tight job market (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000). It is assumed that by maintaining high standards of production for writing the dissertation, that only those candidates who can achieve these standards would be entering an over-crowded market. Recent debates about the uses of alternative, narrative/fictional genre, or digital forms of the dissertation have revolved around the issue of the academic integrity and rigor of alternative forms relative to maintaining this gate-keeping function for the dissertation genre, given the object of preserving selectivity and "high standards" in the tight-market profession (Duke & Beck, 1999).

To help with difficulties of completing the dissertation, students may turn to various "self-help" books (Bolker, 1998; Brause, 2000; Davis & Parker, 1979; Gardner & Beatty, 1980; Hawley, 1993; Long, Convey, & Chwalek, 1985; Mauch, & Birch, 1989; Meloy, 1994; Ogden, 1993; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Preece, 1994; Rudestam & Newton, 1992; Sternberg, 1981). These books realistically and even pessimistically examine issues such as personal isolation, lack of financial and emotional support, writing and research difficulties, and low time-to-degree completion and graduation rates for Ph.D. students. However, their analysis of the experience employ discourses of therapy and popular psychology to portray the experience as a solitary, "survivalist" task. As one commentator noted, "In the final analysis, doctoral pursuit is a lonely quest of heart and head" (Hawley, 1993, p. 7). Others paint an even bleaker picture: "It is in the social sciences, education, humanities and letters disciplines that people have their lives disrupted and even sometimes permanently scarred by a dissertation-writing experience" (Sternberg, 1981, p. 1).

Similarly, much of the psychological research on graduate education adopts this individualistic framework by focusing on variables influencing measurable outcomes such as attrition rates and self-reported attitudes or experiences in Ph.D. programs (Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995; Kerlin, 1995), measures of individual student self-efficacy related to departmental relationships and institutional dynamics (Faghihi, Rakow, & Ethington, 1999), and theories of doctoral persistence (Tinto, 1993). This research also highlights individual students' financial and emotional support (Ehrenberg & Mavros, 1995), stress and anxiety patterns (Rocha-Singh, 1994), loneliness and isolation (Dooley-Dickey & Satcher, 1991; Germeroth, 1991), and personal barriers to dissertation writing (Green & Kluever, 1997; Sullivan, 1996). The analysis of one graduate student's ("Nate") enculturation focused on how he eventually acquired linguistic conventions of the dissertation that marked him as an "insider" within his profession (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988). This study was later challenged for its overly dichotomized version of scholarly communities and their boundaries, with the critic seeing scholarly communities constructed by a more fluid and dynamic series of interactions negotiated by both individuals and institutions (Prendergast, 1997). For example, Nate's activities might be read as more of a layered process of social negotiations he makes within the academy, as well as a process of the academy initiating him into its intellectual territories (Prendergast, 1997).

An Activity Theory Analysis of Dissertation Writing

We propose an alternative perspective to understanding dissertation writing as constituted by students' participation in a complex maze of competing activity systems: the Graduate School, the department, advisors and committees, graduate student employment, and the job market, systems rife with conflicts, tensions, and contradictions. As Winsor (1999) notes, "current understandings of activity theory assume that tensions and discontinuities within any system are normal because complex organizations almost always encompass several subsidiary activity systems with different interests." (p. 201).

In his analyses of graduate students' academic socialization in research seminars, Paul Prior (1994, 1997, 1998) posits the idea of laminated or layered activity systems in which participants may assume multiple footings (Goffman, 1981) or stances as different systems move to the foreground or background:

These views suggest that multiple activity footings co-exist, are immanent, in any situation. When one activity system is foregrounded (e. g., school learning), other activity systems (e. g., of home, neighborhood, government, business) do not disappear. This kind of view also highlights *perspective*, the ways coparticipants in an activity and coordinate differently configured activity footings. (Prior, 1997, p. 277).

> For dissertation writers, the different systems of graduate schools, the department, advisors and committees, graduate student employment, and the job market are therefore not separate, autonomous systems, but are continually intersecting and overlapping each other. [1]

Each of these systems is driven by different objects and motives. Graduate schools and departments want students to complete degree programs in a timely manner and are continually creating policies designed to improve completion rate. At the same time, they perceive their role as upholding standards, resulting in various rules related to quality. Advisors and committee members want students to engage in research they deem as significant or groundbreaking within their respective disciplinary systems with the outcome of making a contribution to those systems. Students are often employed as T.A.s or research assistants within the university's employment system, work that provides them with invaluable teaching or research experience in preparation for future teaching or research in academia. And, the job market system, constituting by various recruitment and hiring practices, is seeking to find the best candidates to fill a limited number of positions, often with the hope of finding candidates who will later obtain tenure. In the job market system, the dissertation not only acts as a tool in training, it also acts as a tool in evaluation of competence and a tool in hiring (Duke & Beck, 1999; Goodchild, Green, Katz, & Kluever, 1997; LaPidus, 1997; Olson & Drew, 1998; Prendergast, 1997; Saks, 1996; Young, 1998).

These systems involve a rich interaction of the agents, tools, motives, and objects, shaped by different perspectives of students, administrators, advisors, committee members, employers, and publishers of academic journals, perspectives constituted by different discourses (Gee, 1996). These perspectives, as Engeström (1999) notes, are "rooted in different communities and practices that continue to coexist within one and the same collective activity system" (p. 382). The concept of perspectives "serves as a hedge against simplified views of context that ignore the unsettled and conflicted relations between different positions and actors" (p. 382). This raises the question for Engeström as to whether participants can share the same perspective of objects or motives in the same system when these participants may be aligned to different, competing systems. While administrators or advisors may have one perspective on the object of dissertation writing, students may have quite a different perspective given their alignment to specific advisors, their employment, or the job market.

Complicating this landscape is the fact that these systems are continually in flux as new forms of disciplinarity, genres, and research paradigms challenge and replace the old, only to be subject to new challenges. As Engeström (1987) notes:

> Old and new, regressive and expansive forms of the same activity exist simultaneously in the society. Children may play in a reproductive and repetitive manner, but they do also invent and construct new forms and structures of play, new tools and models for the play activity (p. 10). [Note: Page numbers are from the online version of Chapter 3: http://communication.ucsd.edu/MCA/Paper/Engestrom/expanding/ch3.htm]

Engeström's Model of Development: Identifying and Coping with Double Binds

Engeström's (1987) model of development is useful for understanding graduate students' development during their dissertation writing. Engeström draws on Gregory Bateson's (1972) model of three levels of learning. Learning I involves a behaviorist rote learning. Learning II entails a reflexive learning how to learn, particularly in response to contradictions and double blind situations. Learning III involves dealing with contradictions within situations in which learning habits do not always work, requiring the development of new, alternative habits and practices.

Engeström is particularly interested in the transitions between Learning II and Learning III. He notes that in Learning II the object of learning "is conceived of as a problem demanding specific efforts" (p. 3), a problem often involving contradictions in a system. Individual manifestations of Learning III are commonly called 'personal crises,' 'breaking away,' 'turning points,' or 'moments of revelation.'" (p. 5). In Learning III, the learner recognizes and addresses the problem based on the need to resolve the contradictions operating at Learning II, often through collective action. In doing so, the learner perceives the "object system...as containing the subject within it [creating] a search for a collective subject, capable of mastering the complexity of 'contexts of contexts,' i.e., of societal practices with highly developed division of labor as well as multi-level technological and symbolic mediations" (p. 4).

In Learning III, the subject gains an awareness of a practical mastery of whole systems of activity in terms of the past, the present, and the future. This awareness leads to a reworking and restructuring of activity through "learning by expanding" (p. 7) the old into the new. Creating new systems entails:

> mastery of double binds. Double binds may now be reformulated as a social, societally essential dilemma which cannot be resolved through separate individual actions alone—but in which joint co-operative actions can push a historically new form of activity into emergence (p. 8).

This focus on the tensions between the old and the new leads him to proffer a new definition of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development as "the distance between the present everyday actions of the individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in the everyday actions" (p. 10). Addressing the contradictions inherent in the "given new" activity systems lead to "the rise to actions anticipating the *created new* activity" (p. 16). Engeström cites the example of Huck Finn, who as a vagabond in a small, segregated town, is friends with both the middle-class Tom Sawyer, and also with the black slave Jim. He recognizes the contradiction here between "the private freedom of the individual vagabond and the public unfreedom prevailing in the vagabond's immediate culture context" (p. 11). In escaping on the raft with Jim, the honest Huck faces another contradiction between having to lie to those pursuing escaped slaves in order to protect Jim and his moral obligation to support Jim's attempt to become free, creating a double bind. Having agonized over this double bind, Huck creates new activities in experiences with

assisting the Grangerford daughter escape her family and, having assisted two crooks in stealing money, helping return the stolen money to the rightful owner. Engeström notes that through these actions, Huck is creating a new activity of "radical moral anarchism" involving "a deadly serious moral and existential struggle" (p. 14).

For Engeström, the construction of "created new" activity involves several phases. Initially, a person experiences a "need state" (p. 16) associated with competing object/motives involving the experience of contradictions in a system. For example, graduate students experience a tension between spending too much time on their teaching, time they would prefer to devote to writing their dissertation. However, if they are committed to teaching and a future career in teaching, they may also sense that by devoting more time to their research and dissertation, their teaching may suffer. This familiar contradiction for not only graduate students, but also faculty, leads to analysis, inner dialogue, and reflection associated with an awareness of the double bind.

This reflexive element is a central aspect of Engeström's concept of the double bind. Triggered by a set back, disturbance, or surprise, learners recognize, define, and reflect on the double bind in order to begin entertaining ways of coping with the double bind. At the graduate school level, Nancy Welch (1993) documented her own experience of coping with contradictions as a composition T.A. in an English Department training program designed to promote one particular ideological orientation towards composition instruction. Welch noted that she and the other graduate-student trainees had little choice but to adopt the ideological presuppositions inherent in the training program, which she eventually perceived as indoctrination. While other students resigned from the program, she stuck with it because she wanted to finish her degree, creating contradictions—does she remain in a program whose beliefs she rejects or lose the opportunity to complete her degree? Through reflection on the objects and motives shaping this activity, she eventually identified her own double bind. This created the need for her to experiment with new activities through creating a "contradictory unit of the given new and the created new" (p. 16). Welch ultimately withdrew from the program and, having recognized the value of an alternative form of teaching, transferred to another university in which she could teach according to that new activity.

Engeström's model of development serves to illuminate graduate students' development in learning to cope with the contradictions that arise between the competing objects and motives driving different systems related to dissertation writing. For example, graduate students are often faced with the contradiction between attempting to break new disciplinary or methodological ground in their research that may lead to creating new activities while at the same time adhering to current norms for validity of research methods operating within status quo activities. In facing these contradictions, students recognize that they are caught in a double bind, requiring the creation of new activities.

The Dissertation as Genre Social Action

Recent genre theory posits that genres are social actions or tools driven by participation with the objects/motives of activity systems (Bazerman, 1997; Bazerman & Prior, in press; Berkenkotter

& Huckin, 1995; Berkenkotter & Ravatos, 1997; Russell, 1997). Rather than simply studying the genre as a text or rhetorical form, defining genres as social action entails studying the various activities involved in navigating the competing systems associated with producing the dissertation. In mediating motive/agent relationships, the dissertation genre functions to display what Wenger (1998) defines as "dimensions of competence" reflected in a mutuality of engagement, accountability to an enterprise, ways of looking at the world, and negotiability of a repertoire. Through adopting certain "modes of belonging," participants establish agency within systems by being included in important events (Wenger, 1998).

Understanding the uses of genre tools entails perceiving how they afford or mediate systems; they "evoke the worlds to which they were relevant and position individuals with respect to those worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001, p. 63). Based on Paul Prior's (1997; 1998) concept of "*disciplinarity* as the ongoing, mediated constitution of a kind of sociomaterial network" (1997, p. 277), the dissertation genre can function as one type of tool "for displays of disciplinarity, and [for] mediating the (re)production of disciplinary communities of practice" (p. 277).

Analyzing the dissertation as genre social action within the activity of graduate students' development focuses on how graduate students identify and grapple with double binds created by the contradictions inherent in the different layered systems (Prior, 1998) of graduate school, advising, work, and professional development. As Winsor (1999) notes:

> Typical understandings of genre theory suggest that shaping influences flow in only one direction—from the social context to the text. In contrast, activity theory has the potential to help us stop thinking of context as a container in which text is subsequently produced. Rather, an activity system and the elements making it up (i.e., tools such as texts, actors, and the object at which they aim) can be seen as mutually constitutive and always in flux (as, indeed, are the elements themselves). (Winsor, 1999, p. 201).

In coping with the double binds associated with competing objects or motives, as Engeström's model suggest, students begin to envision new, alternative activities in systems as imagined "contexts of eventual use" (Witte, 1992). This includes ways to use the dissertation genre as tool to "position" themselves within these potential systems, positioning that entails active participation in presenting conference papers, networking with members of a field, publishing, and challenging status quo perspectives (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000).

Graduate students' success in identifying and coping with double binds leading to new activity draws on prior experiences in old activities of students' previous graduate coursework and research projects. Based on research on graduate students' participation in graduate-level seminars, Prior (1998) identifies several modes of belonging exhibited by graduate students. In some cases, students are merely "passing" (p. 101) through their programs by completing assignments or engaging in "procedural display" (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989, p. 266). Others display "deep participation" (p. 102) through participation with faculty or peers in collaborative research projects or writing, leading to a sense of agency, status, or being included

in important events (Wenger, 1998) as valued participants in graduate school. As Prior (1998) reports, in their "deep participation" with faculty and peers, students experience first hand many of the contradictions associated with conducting research within a range of competing activity systems. They witness faculty and peers coping with their own perceived double binds, leading, in some cases, to new forms of activity. Through recognizing the value of research, they also begin to value the need to break new ground in research, a valuing or "need state" (Engeström, 1993) that motivates them to want to cope with double-binds and to create new forms of activity.

Graduate Students' Perceptions of Dissertation Writing

The purpose of this study was to examine graduate students' experiences of writing their dissertations in terms of their participation in a range of competing activity systems at the University of Minnesota. The data presented in this report was part of the first author's dissertation study (Lundell, 1999); the second author served as the advisor of this dissertation. This research report examines part of the data in that study to address the following questions:

- What are the contradictions graduate students experience in their dissertation writing associated with various activity systems?

- In coping with these contradictions, what double binds do students identity and how do they use those double binds to create new activities?

The participants in this study, all represented by pseudonyms in this report, included eleven doctoral students engaged in writing their dissertations from five departments at the University of Minnesota. The University of Minnesota is one of the largest graduate schools in the country, ranking fourth in the number of degrees awarded (656) in 1999 (Leatherman, 2001).

The participants were four males and seven females from humanities and education departments, of which eight were Caucasian, two were international students (one from India, one from Africa), and one was bi-racial (Native American and Caucasian). Students in humanities programs were selected because the time-to-completion and attrition rates, particularly in the ABD phase, are so much higher for humanities students than for students in other majors (Lovitts, 2001; Ogden, 1993). It is also important to note that the study focused primarily on students' perspectives on their dissertation writing experience based on students' interview perceptions. It did not examine the writing itself nor did it ascertain perspectives of faculty, administrators, or employers. The fact that the study relies on students' perspectives is certainly a limitation of the study in that faculty, administrators', or employers' perspectives also shape the environment in which students perceive their experience.

The data collection phase of this study began in the summer of 1997 and continued through the winter quarter of 1998. Students were interviewed twice during this period. These in-depth interviews followed a semi-structured format, and the conversations reflected a phenomenological process and open-ended, interpretive method (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Van Manen, 1990). During the second interviews, participants discussed writing samples from their

dissertations (chapter, outline, or proposal). Transcriptions of the interviews resulted in 350 single-spaced, typed pages of textual data. Field notes and records based on Lundell's perceptions of participants' interviews and writing resulted in approximately 80 single-spaced pages. The interview data was coded using a computer software program employed to identify and sort references to specific topics and issues. To determine the overall frequency of coded categories, the percentage of conversational turns out of the total number of turns was then determined.

Competing Activity Systems of Dissertation Writers

The results of the interview data analysis indicated that, consistent with a genre-as-social-action perspective, the dissertation writing involved a whole series of social and political negotiations with the Graduate School and departmental rules, advisors, committee members, T.A. teaching demands, peers, families, and the potential job market. Focusing simply on textual or rhetorical aspects of dissertation writing does not capture the ways in which participation in these different systems served to constitute the challenges associated with dissertation writing as a genre of social action. To successfully complete their dissertation, participants needed to learn various practices for operating in these different systems. In some cases, the systems did not effectively socialize students to help them acquire practices necessary for successful completion of the dissertation. In other cases, students were successful because the systems provided explicit socialization of these practices, instances that suggest ways for improving the overall experience.

Based on the coding of the interview data, we organized the data into two broad theoretical categories: "Institutional/Cultural" and "Individual/Self." Items in the "Institutional/Cultural" category totaled 71.1% of the measured responses, and items on the "Individual/Self" side of the matrix represented 28.9% of the total. These participants' conversations about their dissertation weighed in most heavily on the broader, institutional issues and less on the individual contexts by a total of almost two to one.

At the "Institutional/Cultural" level, five topics emerged related to participants' descriptions of the activity systems or institutional shaping their experiences and identities: "Graduate School," "department," "advisor and committee," "graduate student employment," and "job market." At the "Individual/Self" level, five topics emerged: "attitudes," "peers and family," "writing process," "identity," and "advice." These topics refer to attitudes or activities impacting participants' more immediate personal lives, or which represent things they perceive as being within their own control or interpersonal realm of agency.

Because we are concerned more with the former category of the "Institutional/Cultural" as activity systems, and because this emerged as the more significant category in terms of participants' conversations in this study, this report focuses on these categories rather than the latter. (The reader is referred to Lundell (1999) for results related to the "Individual/Self" level.) In studying participants' perspectives on different systems, we focused on their perceptions of the objects/motives, rules, roles, and traditions constituting different systems. For each of the five layered systems (Prior, 1998) described by participants, we describe how these perceptions

reflected students' ability to identify and cope with double-binds arising from contradictions within and across the systems of Graduate School, department, advisor and committee, graduate student employ, and job market.

Graduate School

The first system is that of the Graduate School at the University of Minnesota and its various objects, rules, and traditions constituting and monitoring the dissertation production. Participants were most likely to refer to this system, with 23.5% of the total number of turns. The major themes reflected in the interviews under this category included (in general order of their frequency among participants): negotiating academic forms and styles such as departmental conventions and genres, managing institutional and personal issues during the writing phase, shaping of students' future goals related to the dissertation product, negotiating university bureaucracy and structures, and defining the function and role of the dissertation within this system.

One of the primary objects of the Graduate School office is to maintain uniform standards across different units within the university. Underlying this system is a discourse of management evident in rules, policies, procedures, and mission statements that serve to establish and justify institutional order and control (Usher & Edwards, 1994). As Lemke (1995) notes, a discourse of management attempts to standardize phenomena as institutional procedures or policies, masking over the unique particulars of an activity. It is therefore the case that the Graduate School rarely makes exceptions in dealing with deviations from the norm.

The Graduate School has outlined the necessary requirements to move students toward the goal of attaining the Ph.D. including course work, exams, and thesis writing. The Graduate School catalogue states this about the function of the dissertation:

> The thesis must demonstrate the student's originality and ability for independent investigation, and the results of the research must constitute a contribution to knowledge. The thesis must exhibit the student's mastery of the literature of the subject and familiarity with the sources. The subject matter must be presented with a satisfactory degree of literary skill. (The Graduate School, University of Minnesota, 2001, p. 42).

According to this statement, the dissertation genre functions as a tool for display of the student's "contribution to knowledge" and "mastery of the literature of the subject and familiarity with the sources." To display "mastery of" and "familiarity with the sources" associated with framing the research within a larger disciplinary world, students acquire the genre rules of the research review as part of the genre action of displaying competence. As Julie noted:

> I don't know how you read these things, but I read the scholarly literature in my field and I think it tends to be over-cited...that there are lots of ideas and understanding that really don't need attribution, but people do it to show that they're part of this larger conversation.

Students noted that they perceive their work not simply in terms of meeting current requirements, but as also preparing them for participation in future academic work in "contexts of eventual use" (Witte, 1992). As Seth notes:

> With the dissertation, it's forced me to picture the kind of writing that might have to get done in the future which I think is a good piece of preparation…I was going to mention…the larger possibility of publishing parts of it, or it as a whole, outside of the department. And that is always something else that's in the back of my mind, that it's meeting or will do something in my mind that is publishable.

However, while students sense that they are connected to a "larger conversation" in the disciplinary field or in future academic publishing, they begin to perceive contradictions between having to adopt an "objective" style associated with Graduate School's mandated dissertation style and the kinds of writing they perceive in current journal publications or conference papers involving novel forms of reporting or displaying research results. Zachary commented that, while he used the dissertation research review to display himself as someone creatively versed within the discipline, at the same time, he had to adopt a style that undermined his creativity:

> On the one hand, it is about detachment, and on the other hand, locating the source of authority within oneself. It's about a self that, well, you're proving yourself. The dissertation is about the ideas, about you and your creative capacity, but it's also so detached from your person and kind of transcendent. So on one hand…it legitimizes a self, but it's a detached universal self…hard to explain.

Zachary identifies a tension between adopting a detached rhetorical or stylistic stance and establishing a sense of authority about the validity of his ideas. While he wants to prove himself as an authority, the use of a detached stance seems at odds with adopting a writing persona as part of the genre as social action, a tension that locates a student like Zachary within the rules of the Graduate School system. This concern with the language of the dissertation genre raised questions for the participants about the overall purpose of the dissertation within the larger object of the Graduate School system. Given the need to display competence in their knowledge and "literary skill," participants wondered about the audience to whom they are writing. While they are writing for their advisor and committee members, they are also writing for a larger audience of potential readers, including potential employers, a system that may differ from the advisor and committee system. Elena asked,

> How is this going to function? I mean, we're not writing it for those five people to sign on the dotted line, and we're not just writing it for ourselves, and there's that, too. But who's our more general audience? And that tends to be really sticky because it makes us think about language. It makes us think about accessibility. It makes me think about how we write it.

In asking about the "function" of the dissertation relative to the Graduate School's object of maintaining standards related to display of "originality and ability for independent investigation," "contribution to knowledge," and "mastery of the literature of the subject," Elena

is raising the issue of who serves as the actual audience for the dissertation. She notes that while her committee is obligated to read the dissertation, but that, for her, they do not represent her "general audience" constituted by certain disciplinary perspectives not represented on her committee, audiences who may also judge her work. Without a sense of an audience beyond her immediate audiences, she perceives little purpose in the writing other than simply a display of competence for her advisor/committee members. Without a sense of a larger rhetorical purpose of communicating with a wider disciplinary audience, students then believe that the writing is designed for no more than "procedural display" (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989, p. 266) of competence related to the Graduate School's object. Yet, without effectively addressing her immediate audience, she may not pass the dissertation. As she notes, "It's like I'm going to write a book and no one's going to come. You know, it's like putting on a performance and having five people in the audience."

These contradictions emerge from tensions between two different systems—the immediate advisor/committee audience operating according to the rules of the Graduate School system and the wider audiences associated with disciplinary fields or potential employers who may apply a different set of rules or expectations. This creates a perceived double bind for Elena, particularly in terms of wanting to write for a wider audience as a specialist but also having to address her more immediate advisor/committee audience, who bring their own disciplinary orientations to evaluating her work.

To cope with this double bind, Elena participated in new activity involving a writing group with three other dissertation writers in her department who shared her own experience of double binds:

> We've all been friends, so we therefore know that we have the same hesitancies and doubts about this whole establishment and the requirements to get authority and power in this institution, especially through writing this document…we spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to talk to these people, or who should be on our committee….we show each other writing, and it's been so wonderful to have that support because there are some people who know what's going on. They know the ins and outs of my dissertation at least.

This writing group functioned as a new activity that provided Elena and its members with an alternative audience familiar with both the advisor/committee audience and a wider potential audience. Given her "need state" (Engeström, 1987) for a wider audience other than just her committee members, Elena received comments from peers who were connected to the disciplinary orientations of wider audiences. At the same time, because they were familiar with the internal experiences of committee members in the same department, they could provide feedback from the committee's perspective. The writing group functioned as a "created new activity" (Engeström, 1987) in which members could test out and explore tentative ideas. At the same time, the new activity was still grounded in the "given new" activity of coping with advisor negotiations and emotional barriers.

However, other students, facing similar double binds, simply accepted these double binds without attempting to create new activities. As Liz noted, "I don't think I have any hugely important thing to say. I see this as a hurdle to get through, that is really what it is... and nobody's going to read it, you know, maybe my advisor." And, when they may gain a sense of accomplishment in completing the dissertation, they do not see it as influencing the field. As Nicholas noted:

> I think I'd have done it differently had I done it again. I'd just zip something out quickly under the idea that really you do learn past the dissertation. You know, you learn when you're a more viable part of a community, and your input is legitimate and not pretend...where you do have votes and a say, and you are building a community and are tenured afterwards.

These students therefore perceived little purpose or value in the dissertation in terms of fulfilling alternative objects other than fulfilling a "hurdle" and simply meeting the Graduate School requirements. Students such as Elena value the dissertation as serving some larger rhetorical purpose by constructing a new activity that served to address her double bind associated with writing solely for a committee audience.

Department

While the Graduate School appears to be the overriding structure for final documentation of the dissertation, each department has some control and degree of interpretation within that structure related to students' defenses and course work requirements. Departments proffer their own interpretations of how to achieve that object, often providing that information on departmental Web pages. These Web pages varied from very specific, user-friendly sites designed to recruit prospective students to more straightforward, pragmatically focused sites which include handbook information and bureaucratic details accessible to current students. Each department's activity system coincides with the Graduate School system in providing structure for students to make progress towards program completion. However, variation across different departmental systems and how they translated the Graduate School's rules created a sense of inequity for students, who noted that some departments were more supportive of their dissertation work and provided more assistance in navigating the bureaucracy of the university than did the other departments.

References to students' experiences within their departments, with 16.8% of the total conversational turns, focused on concerns about the lack of departmental standards and requirements as represented in student guidelines and handbooks, absence of productive support structures for students at the dissertation stage, issues related to ethics and faculty politics, the nature of relationships and community-building among peers and faculty, university bureaucratic negotiations, and obstacles created by departments.

Resources such as handbooks, bulletins, and Web sites are often used by students, particularly at the dissertation stage, as a preliminary point of communication about requirements, especially as many students at this stage have been off campus for years and are not closely connected to their

advisors and peers who typically serve as primary sources for this information. However, participants often found little other specific information about the dissertation requirements on the Web sites and in the departmental handbooks. Typically, the information about dissertations on these sites consisted only of the Graduate School's three-sentence description quoted previously, along with procedures for documenting the process.

Students consistently noted the lack of any articulated guidelines, procedures, or standards that would serve to foster a positive "mode of belonging" (Wenger, 1998). As Seth noted, "you do get lost in the system once you're past your prelims." Similarly, Alicia noted:

> This is the time that the structure goes away. If there's any structure, you have to provide it, and you do need structure, whether it's with someone else or by yourself is a thing you have to determine. This would be, this is the dropout time because you do not have the structure to carry you any more.

Students often perceived this as implying a lack of interest in or concern about their progress. As Julie noted:

> Well, the department's been really, what should I say, um...remiss in having a structure for advising students...I always was sort of self-policing enough to have accomplished those milestones on time or early. Other people of course successfully elude detection and kind of float along for years and years, and in our department, there are 300 graduate students. I mean, it's easy to get lost in the crowd, and if your advisor's on leave this quarter or on sabbatical for a couple years, you can very easily just kind of slump along.

Students also noted a basic contradiction in the departmental system as intersecting with the Graduate School rules for completing their programs within a reasonable time frame. While the departments were perceived to be concerned about moving students along in a timely manner, participants also noted that once students began the dissertation, they were often ignored because there were no departmental norms or rules associated with the object of graduating students. Julie was critical of the fact that the rules of a system were not made explicit in terms of establishing and working with an advisor:

> There isn't much in there about how you attach yourself to someone on the faculty who can mentor you. There isn't much about other than sort of a cursory bibliography that tells you what people's interests are, and if you know Professor A specializes in this and B specialized in that, you don't have any sense of how busy these people are, how many committees they're already on, when they're scheduled for sabbatical. I guess that's the secret of any institution is how do you make your operating assumptions and your infrastructure visible when you're so near to it, when it's no longer visible to you. How do you put yourself in the place of the person at the doorstep, and anticipate what that person needs to know. And that isn't easy, but our department is doing a very poor job with a difficult task.

Julie's comment about the making the rules "visible" reflect a basic problem in any system in which it is often assumed that participants will acquire these rules on their own, negating the

need to spell out the rules for them. At the same time, when rules are codified, for example, related to limits on the length of the program, then these rules may serve to disenfranchise students. Julie discovered that her department created a new form associated with a limit on the years of T.A. support:

> So I asked the secretary, now tell me what this means? And what they've tried to do is keep you on the 6 years of support. And when I came here, I was not offered any support by the department. I got a job through comp, and comp offers six years of support depending on your performance, so this all seems pretty silly to me. I mean, I've already done all this crap, and I have a sixth year coming, thank you very much, and don't tell me that I'm going to grade Shakespeare papers, I'm going to teach comp and get on my way. Of course, that's not the message here, the message is that we'll tell you what you're going to be doing if you qualify, and that's not a very friendly attitude, again I guess I was spoiled, I came into a program that valued teaching and paid attention to what people were qualified to do, what they wanted to do ... it has really changed.

The form included a narrative section for each year of progress for students to report their work and goals in the program, and also included a space for advisors to sign off on this document. Students in this study believed that the idea of this form seemed like a good one, particularly if it helped the department track its students at the Ph.D. stage. However, Julie interpreted this form not as a positive tracking device or "Ph.D. Progress Form" as it was entitled by the department, but as a way for the department to begin to weed out its sixth- and seventh-year students. Thus, by codifying the rules, the department provided students with mixed messages related to their status within the department. Implementing this new tracking system presumably designed to clarify the Graduate Schools rules for degree completion only further confused and even alienated some students such as Julie. Julie can readily identify a double bind associated with contradictions between departmental practices and Graduate School rules, but has no mechanism for creating a new activity for addressing that double bind.

On the other hand, in contrast to Seth's, Alica's, and Julie's experiences, some students described instances of departments providing more structured, supportive experiences. Zachary commented on a useful dissertation-writing seminar:

> Well, my department had a dissertation seminar that you had to take in your fourth year that I think was very helpful...you kind of write a dissertation abstract proposal and then start doing research on a chapter...and also your second prelim question relates to your dissertation, too. So then your course work and your preliminary exams are related to your dissertation.

Similar to Elena's writing group, the dissertation-writing seminar provided a supportive activity for students in helping them cope with their own double binds associated with deficiencies in departmental support and advising.

Students also described departmental attempts to encourage students to engage in "deep participation" (Prior, 1998) with research throughout their program. Alicia described her ongoing sense of socialization:

> In this department it's really cool because this department runs almost very pragmatic, very Deweyian. We've been encouraged all along to be working toward the topic, title, and the research, so I've done a lot of work that will probably be used in part in my dissertation...but the whole thing is that you're really encouraged to start thinking about your dissertation before you finish your course work.

However, most students in this study perceived departmental procedures and rules as being unclear and ill-defined, particularly at the dissertation stage. A departmental self-study conducted by faculty in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota (Avery, DiBlasio, Graves, & Narvaez, 1998) confirmed some of these students' observations about the inconsistencies and the lack of structure at this phase. A faculty member reported that some aspects of this process, like the dissertation proposal, are a "sloppy and inconsistent process" (p. 7). Additionally, low levels of satisfaction were reported in terms of a lack of mentoring and advising to Ph.D. students, specifically during the dissertation phase.

On the other hand, when rules and guidelines were codified, they were often done so in order to conform to the Graduate School's objects of insuring completion in a timely manner, as opposed to assisting students in completing the dissertation. This reflects tensions between the Graduate School and departmental systems' motives related to fostering completion of the dissertation.

Advisor and Committee

Most of the participants' departments did not have guidelines for advisor relationships beyond the usual Graduate School requirements. The advising system is a very important, tenuous part of the departmental structure for students because it is through their advisors that students connect to the Graduate School and departmental systems. Advisors are typically the sole contact for students during a long period of time when the departments no longer provide support and direction for students. Students form individual relationships with advisors and often describe them in this way, but their ongoing exchanges with advisors serve as the means by which institutional rules and procedures are communicated to students.

In describing the advisor and committee system, students referred to negative and positive faculty advising relationships, negotiations with committee members and institutional advising structures, dissertation feedback activities, and student-initiated activities and expectations of departments and faculty in terms of advising roles and relationships.

Some advisors provided little guidance to students, leaving them to fend for themselves. Paul noted how the university system of faculty sabbaticals and leaves often enforced an autonomous relationship among students and their advisors, forcing them to be more independent in the

dissertation-writing stage. In his case, this was not perceived as positive in terms of his own goals of completing the project:

> To be honest with you, it was a very unfortunate situation for me in that my advisor was not working. She was on leave. She was there to look at the final thing, like when I had the interview questions, she looked at them, things like that. I mean I'm not saying I didn't get any help from her, but unfortunately it didn't work very well for me that she had to do other things…there aren't too many faculty members for the programs in education, and because of that, the advisors are not accessible which could be a factor enough to discourage one from completing their [sic] dissertation.

Many students expressed a desire for more mentoring from their advisors. As Elena noted:

> I haven't had a lot of people sort of show me what I'm supposed to do, or help me learn an area or figure out. Even just consistency in terms of advising because in the first year you don't really have an advisor. Then I got an advisor, and she left, so it's been sort of up in the air. I've been mentoring myself, and then a lot of my work is through my colleagues.

When they do not receive support, they turn to other faculty members or peers. As Nicholas commented, "my real thesis advisor spent all told in the two years that I've been working on this, no more than 30 minutes altogether with me, so this co-advisor has been very important to me in my project."

Students also noted that the advising system failed to provide mentoring of students in a supportive, long-term manner, particularly in terms of the transition from written preliminary exams to the dissertation. Elena described the lack of continuity between these phases:

> I don't think they really guide students, not a healthy way that it's done yet. Part of it is having structure from the prelim to the dissertation stage and what it would look like. Possibly changing how the prelim is done, making it more writing that's more productive and making the dissertation that way, making it more productive rather than a document no one's ever going to read.

Some participants experienced double binds arising from contradictions between conforming to the idiosyncratic practices of their advisors and the gate-keeping Graduate School and departmental rules. On the one hand, to garner their advisor's help and final approval, they want to please their advisors, who may vary in their adherence to or adopt ambivalent attitudes towards Graduate School and departmental rules. On the other hand, they know that both they and their advisor are also accountable to Graduate School and departmental rules and norms, which, if not followed, create accountability problems. For example, Nicholas noted that his advisor, contrary to departmental norms, recommended that he not be concerned with placating the demands of his committee members. He recalls his advisor telling him that "you're in it for yourself here, not for your committee members, and that's helped me, but I know a lot of people who are just pulled one way or the other." Because he was concerned with his committee

members' response to the dissertation, he was caught a double bind of not knowing whom to please, his advisor or his committee members.

In contrast to Nicholas, Zachery found a lot of support from his committee members working in conjunction with his advisor:

> I'd spent a lot of time with two people on my committee who I was very close to and who read all my chapters really closely, and we'd spend a lot of time talking about them and going over time. They really liked my work a lot, so I had two close allies and that helped, and I would sit with down with my advisor. He was just really excited about my work…so it was a collaborative thing. It was also very important because I was able to see it as a kind of dialogic kind of thing that had a specific audience.

And, Molly noted, "If I give him something, it's read in 24 hours; e-mail is answered right away; his readings are so thoughtful and so insightful. I admire how he does things so much, so I've found my interaction with him could not have been better."

However, these positive examples were exceptions to the norm. Participants perceived both a lack of mentoring to the departmental system and a lack of departmental standards and consistency around how advising relationships are formed, again suggesting the influence of the interaction between layered systems. While the advising system, as historically ground in the mentor/student relationship as part of an apprenticeship system, was assumed to work effectively in all cases, there was considerable variation in the quality of advising. At the same time, given this assumption, as well as concerns about academic freedom, there were few specific Graduate School or departmental guidelines related to advising.

As these students described it, advisors and committee members represent overlapping systems that influence dissertation writing. These relationships interact with other systems, such as the Graduate School and the department, to shape students' experiences and production of the dissertation. Students perceived these activities in different ways. Some reported positive interactions that made the object of writing the dissertation easier to achieve. In order to finish writing, students reported that advisors in particular were most influential in this phase in terms of providing them with some institutional agency for them with other, less visible layers of these systems. Others reported negative experiences and contradictions among systems that created barriers to their writing, resulting in confusion, frustration, and even misinterpretation of the objects of these systems. Others noted that dissertation advising assumed less of a priority for advisors given faculty accountability to a research university's larger reward system driven by the object of producing research. Students had little recourse for dealing with the situation, other than for departments to provide more explicit descriptions of the functioning of the system. As Julie suggested:

> Put more of that sort of stuff in a handbook that tells people what to do, when you are negotiating an advising relationship, what kinds of questions you should ask about, not just scholarly interests and all that kind of thing, but what are your plans, are you going to be on sabbatical, going to be involved

> in long-term research that's going to take your time and energy...just a
> better way to know who's doing what...who's good at it, who's good at
> working with students and helping them, mentoring them into these fields.

Julie's suggestion reflects the need for students to at least become aware of how commitments to competing systems shape faculty/student advising relationships, even though they may have little impact on changing those relationships.

Graduate Student Employment

Participants also referred to their experiences in their graduate student employment in teaching and research assistantships, administrative positions, and jobs outside the university. All of the students in this study worked between 75 and 100% time or more during most of their graduate school programs. They described concerns about workload issues and the availability of funding and support for their work during the dissertation phase. Students also referred to ethical issues associated with the weak labor market, boundary negotiations with departments and faculty in students' work-related positions, and students' future goals as professionals in local and national settings.

On the one hand, the participants perceived the graduate student employment as providing them with the financial support necessary for completing their dissertation, as well as the teaching experience necessary for later teaching careers. On the other hand, they perceived their work as creating conflicts with their dissertation research. Additionally, their low salaries meant that they needed to work in the summers or find additional part-time jobs to make a living, creating further time conflicts with the dissertation writing. This was especially a burden for single students supporting themselves and for students with families. As Liz noted, "Wow, what a concept, what would that be, $9,000 per year?...yea, of course, we can live on that with two small children!"

One reason for the low salaries is that some departments have appointment caps (at 50% time), designed to help students find time for their dissertation writing and program progress. Ironically, while these graduate assistantships exist to support them and cover their tuition, students often report that they find it difficult to make it financially on these appointments for extended periods of time.

Departments also capped their assistantships after the sixth year with the expectation that students can complete the dissertations in this amount of time. For students with workload conflicts, these caps serve as a deterrent to finishing the dissertation. As Carrie noted:

> I mean I've been working myself to death, I've worked full time that last 6
> years on top of everything else, you know, so that my child wouldn't have to
> be impoverished, and I feel a certain resentment for doing that in good faith
> and then coming to this 6th year and finding out that I've been sort of
> hoaxed. That this is some maybe intentional or unintentional joke maybe on
> poor people who are trying to get advanced degrees, so that makes me angry
> in light of....I've made real decisions about, I can't play with you tonight, I
> have to do this because then I'll pass my prelims, write my dissertation, I'll

> get this wonderful tenure-track job and you'll be so proud of me, and I'll set a good role model for you. That makes me even more enraged than the other stuff.

Carrie raised ethical questions about the degree to which she was being exploited by the university which, given the weak job market, can hire those who have not completed the degree (Graduate Student Caucus, 1998; Kerlin, 1995; Leatherman & Magner, 1996; Magner, 1997; Loukas, 1998; Schuster, 1998; Taff, 1998). She noted:

> In a nutshell, I think that the university takes in as many grad students as it can, it washes its hands of any ethical responsibility to have them finish, and actually it's in the university's best interest that people stop at the ABD level because they will then become a cheap source of labor very dependent upon whatever adjunct work they can get.

Students were also disturbed by the lack of recognition of and appreciation for their teaching contributions to their departments. They believed that within the university system, their teaching was considered as less important than their dissertation research. For students who valued their teaching, this led them to perceive themselves as second-class citizens. As Elena noted:

> I don't think departments are very aware of how students are marginalized... but I don't really think we're recognized for the work we do as well, so I do think that we feel really under-appreciated because we spend so much energy teaching and there's no recognition of that, and the ones who do get recognized are the ones who publish all the time.

Students also noted disparities between the level of support available in the humanities versus the sciences. Nicholas discovered that graduate students in the sciences are not required to teach and receive extra summer salary from a local company: "It's just incredible, you know, these guys are getting like $24,000 to $28,000 for the school year to be R.A.s on subjects on which they're writing their own dissertations." In contextualizing their own disciplinary field as not being valued financially relative to other fields, these students recognized the undervalued nature of society's attitudes towards the profession they were entering, a further disincentive to completing the degree.

Participants therefore perceived major conflicts between the demands of teaching versus the need to complete the dissertation, conflicts leading to delays in completing the dissertation. Many needed to work extra hours to support themselves and their families, extra work that only further prolonged their dissertation writing. While they valued their teaching, they perceived the university as not valuing their teaching. This led some of the participants to reconsider future work in a research-based university in which research may be privileged over teaching. This contradiction in the motives of higher education related to generating research versus providing instruction for students also affects faculty, particularly beginning faculty seeking tenure. Graduate students are particularly adversely affected because if they do not complete their dissertation, they will not be able to enter into the profession. However, in the humanities, if they do not have a record of effective teaching, they may also have difficulty obtaining a position in a highly competitive market. This creates a double bind for students who value teaching but also

want to complete their dissertation. However, students were not able to address this double bind other than simply acknowledging it as endemic to the larger system of higher education, a system that was unlikely to be open to addressing this double bind.

The Job Market

Participants also referred to the job market as another system shaping their dissertation writing. They mentioned issues related to their job search and labor market frameworks guiding their work at the dissertation stage; prior experiences and preparation such as course work, departmental presentations, and professional conferences; the quality of departmental relationships formed throughout Graduate School such as faculty role models and mentoring, networking opportunities, and peer support; and ways in which they were positioning the dissertation to prepare them for the job market.

As noted in the discussion of adhering to Graduate School rules, participants experienced a double bind arising from the contradiction between writing according to the genre rules of the Graduate School and department systems and writing for publications and conference papers valued in the job market system. Students who successfully negotiated this conflict recontextualized (van Oers, 1998) and translated their dissertation work into genres applicable to conference presentations, job talks, and publications. Other students dealt with this double bind by perceiving the dissertation and the publication phase as separate texts operating in separate systems. As Seth noted:

> I've gotten to the point where I want to get it done for the department first and foremost, rather than the other part of it that I was going to mention which would be the larger possibility of publishing parts of it, or it as a whole, outside of the department. And that is always something else that's in the back of my mind, that it's meeting or will do something in my mind that is publishable.

However, in writing the dissertation, Seth framed his dissertation in terms of future publications geared for the job market: "With the dissertation, it's forced me to picture the kind of writing that might have to get done in the future which I think is a good piece of preparation."

Students who perceived potential employers as placing a high priority on research perceived the dissertation as having more value than did students who perceived their potential employers as valuing teaching. These students addressed the double bind between allegiance to research versus teaching by constructing new transition activities involving job talks, interviews, writing for publication, and conference presentations in which they assumed the roles of researchers sharing their research with future colleagues. They no longer perceived themselves as graduate students caught in a no-win situation, but as operating in a new, alternative activity. As Seth noted:

> There's a goal that's beyond the degree, I think. I can picture myself having to talk about it [dissertation] in a job interview since I was just talking to

> people who were at job interviews this week, and I think one of the voices
> that is over my shoulder as I write is that voice, having to give your 10-
> minute version of it to somebody who doesn't know the first thing about it.

And, Julie perceived herself as starting a new trajectory in academia:

> I've been to many conferences and given many papers on panels with
> interesting places both from here and other places...I have a phrase an
> economics professor said...this isn't the end of your life work. This is the
> beginning of it...it didn't have to be Nobel-prize quality, it just had to be
> done, so that he could go on to other things.

Through preparing for job talks, interviews, writing for publication, and conference presentations, students moved beyond writing only for their advisor and committee to writing within various professional systems involving multiple audiences and alternative rhetorical modes. Nicholas recognized that moving into this new activity after an extended period of time in his graduate program was one way to address his frustration:

> It's been ten years for me. I don't think now it was the smartest thing to do. I
> wanted to learn as much as I could before I hit the job market, but what I'm
> thinking now really is you ought to just get any old, stupid Ph.D. and just get
> on the job market and just continue learning and growing the field itself, as a
> working professional member instead of being left in this like half-assed,
> semi-professional status for so long.

At the same time, moving into this new activity was still very much grounded in the old activity. Students participated in mock job-talks in their departments, received departmental support for conference presentations, and obtained advice on publications. For example, for Nicholas, his final defense served as not only a simulation of future job talks, but also as representing a shift in his role from graduate student to professional colleague:

> I felt that maybe my finishing the defense, having been through the defense
> which was sort of difficult, you know, prepared me to be in that conference
> room with 200 people to answer questions with scholars who'd written books
> on the subject, and without any sense of difference between the three of us
> really. I mean he may really know his stuff, but I wasn't going to let him
> shove me in a corner as part of his bigger parade, and I think that maybe was
> somewhat conditioned by the fact that I've defended, finished, and that I'm
> no longer an apprentice in some sense.

Zachary perceived this shift in role as enhancing his own sense of agency as he came to operate within a different academic system constituting a different role for himself:

> I think what happens in doing the dissertation is you do enter into a peer
> relationship with your professors, and my advisor was very clear that the
> dissertation defense is kind of meant to be a conversation among peers, and
> that there's a sense, I think, and one of the ways the dissertation gets done is
> if you can see yourself not as a graduate student but as a professional peer
> and imagine yourself as an academic, as a scholar, and not as a graduate

> student. So yea, there is a transformation that has to occur in your
> confidence, and partially I think that comes through writing.

In other cases, students were socialized for the job market through their participation in professional organizations that provided opportunities to participate as "scholar"/colleagues, a process of peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998). Molly described her experience of serving on the conference panel:

> I was participating in this seminar, this conference last year, the speech
> communication association, and I thought there'd be a mixture of students
> and junior faculty, and I was the only student. So it was this really funny
> thing where this guy would say, well, we're all professors, we're all scholars,
> and I had to laugh. He looked at me and I said I'm not a professor yet, but
> I'm relying on that ethos. I mean I'm the only person here who doesn't have
> a Ph.D., so it's a funny thing and I came in thinking, ooh, he called me a
> scholar. I'll never forget, that was the first time someone called me a scholar,
> I mean, am I a scholar? Oh, I guess I'm a scholar.

Other students defined their writing primarily in terms of the job market as a way to legitimatize their status given the lack of departmental or advisor and committee support. Elena described her strategy of using a potential position to enhance her status in the eyes of her committee:

> I think one of the reasons I decided to try to get a job was like, if I get a job,
> how many of my committee members are going to say, sorry, this
> dissertation is not good enough, you can't go, we're going to fail you! I feel
> like it's pressure to be applied in the right places, like, you've been training
> me the last 6 years so I can get a job? Well, I have a job now, and you're
> going to tell me my work is not good enough!? That could not happen. I can
> write a mediocre dissertation and be happy with it because I see it as a goal,
> one part of the next goal, but it gives me some flexibility and control with my
> committee.

Students also noted that potential employers were primarily concerned about insuring that candidates would obtain tenure, preferring candidates with publications in addition to the dissertation. As Julie noted:

> It takes so much to get a job these days that people might as well be tenured
> up front. I've heard people say things, not here, that I couldn't compete with
> all the candidates we are looking at, I couldn't get a job with all the
> qualifications we are looking for.

In constructing themselves as agents within a new activity, students began to recognize the differences between the objects and motives of research universities as opposed to other university/community college systems. They received mixed messages from their departments and advisors about the function of their dissertation relative to the tight job market in the humanities. While they were told that they could position their dissertation to fit the demands of a range of different type of jobs, they were also told that they were being prepared as future researchers in tenure-track positions in "Ivy-league" or Division I research institutions.

Students who were not seeking positions in these institutions perceived the dissertation as having less value in their job search, other than as a credential that they simply needed to finish to complete the degree. They also did not perceive their dissertation as preparing them for a focus on teaching in work institutions that differ from the University of Minnesota. These students' perceptions jive with the results of a survey of over 4,114 doctoral students in 27 selected universities representing 11 arts and sciences disciplines, of whom 209 were students at the University of Minnesota (Golde & Dore, 2001). While most of the students indicated that they were prepared to conduct research, half to three-quarters of doctoral students in the survey indicated that they were not prepared for teaching, even though 83% indicated that teaching was a reason they were entering academia. (Fifty-four percent desired positions in liberal arts institutions; 54%, in research institutions, 44%, in comprehensive universities; and only 4%, in community colleges—the latter being the faster growing institution in higher education. Only 58% of English doctoral graduates were teaching in a tenure-track position within ten years after completing the degree. Moreover, across all fields, only 57% held full-time positions and 43% held part-time positions. Despite this tight job market, graduate reported that they acquired little information about nonacademic careers; few reported being encouraged to explore nonacademic options.)

In summary, students seeking positions at research universities were able to build on their dissertation experience to construct new activities and roles in which they began to participate in transitional events as future researchers. However, for students seeking position at universities or community colleges in which teaching was a priority, they had more difficulty conceiving of their dissertation writing as preparing them for their future roles as teachers. These students expressed frustrations with departmental/advisor expectations that they were writing their dissertation for a market they were not seeking. This contradiction reflects differences in higher education systems' competing motives and objects relative to valuing research and teaching. This suggests the need for students to align their motives for writing the dissertation with the motives of the higher education system in which they want to work. It also suggests the need for graduate schools and departments to provide these students with transitional activities such as teaching internships similar to those conference/publication activities provided to students focusing on research.

Conclusion

The dissertation has historically been constructed and treated as an individualized writing experience for students. However, consistent with the concept of genre as social actions and practices (Bazerman, 1997; Bazerman & Prior, in press), the results of this study indicate that dissertation writing consists of a range of activities in different activity systems—the Graduate School, departmental, advising, employment, and job market, each driven by conflicting objects and motives.

An activity theory analysis serves to highlight the ways in which contradictions arise in these systems given their conflicting objects/motives, rules, tools, and division of labor. These contradictions included having to:

- write in format and style consistent with the rules of the Graduate School and department, but finding that this format and style does not easily translate into presentations or publications in a different format consistent with the needs of the job market.

- conform to the practices of advisors, particularly the lack of helpful advising, even though those advisors may not be following the rules of the Graduate School and department, rules which were often not made explicit to students.

- devote considerable time to teaching to acquire financial support, time that detracted from working on the dissertation.

- cope with limitations on the amount and number of years of financial support, limitations designed to encourage timely completion of the degree.

- frame the dissertation to position oneself for employment at a research institution, when students may have been more interested in working at an institution that valued teaching.

Consistent with Engeström's (1987) model of development, coping with these contradictions created double binds in some students. In some cases, these students were able to create new activities designed to address these double binds. To cope with the double bind of having to please one's advisor and/or committee, but not receiving much direction or support, students created their own writing support groups that provided support for peers. Or, to cope with the double bind of having to write in a dissertation format and style according to the dictates of the Graduate School and department while at the same time presenting one's dissertation research in a format and style for the job market, students began participating in conferences and job, an activity that provided them with a transition activity as potential members of the academy.

However, in most cases, students were not able to create new activities that would address their binds. For example, when faced with the conflict between time devoted to teaching for financial support and time devoted to work on the dissertation, they had no way to address that double binds. Frustration with not being able to cope with these double binds created some degree of dis-identification (Hodges, 1998) from the different systems shaping dissertation writing. Some students complained that the rules operating in these systems were often not made explicit, under the assumption that they should be able to intuit these rules on their own. These perceptions coincide with the Golde and Dorn's (2001) survey results, which indicated that one- to two-thirds of doctoral students were unclear about the applicability of their course work, the amount of time they needed to spend with their advisor, funding for their project, and the criteria for evaluating their progress in a program. (Only 14% of English doctoral students were "very clear" about how long they should meet with their advisors.)

Specifically, students highlighted difficulties with the unevenness of structures and policies across their departments, and the Graduate School's lack of protocol for defining the dissertation-writing phase beyond a three-sentence description. All of this suggests that the purpose of the dissertation and its role in engaging students in the practices of the academy— such as becoming a faculty member, conducting research, and teaching in higher education— must be examined at the level of activity systems analysis to identify how these systems' objects and motives shape the dissertation-writing activity. As Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) note, "Openly functioning as a weeding mechanism, the dissertation requirement demonstrates the university's tenacity in clinging to outmoded practice and its refusal to consider the best interests of its students rather than its own needs" (p. 91).

The results of this study also indicate various contradictions between systems operating at cross-purposes to each other. Graduate schools and departmental administrators, advisors, and committee members need to examine policies and practices constituting the dissertation writing experience in terms the conflicting objects and motives creating these contradictions, creating double binds for students. They also need learn from instances in which students collectively created new activities for coping with double binds. Rather than the often therapeutic, individualistic orientation of self-help dissertation survival guides, student advising and mentoring needs to honestly acknowledge the inevitable double binds created by contradictory objects of different systems. Through such challenges and accommodation to these challenges, these systems themselves evolve, creating new objects and motives. Further research needs to examine the forces shaping the historical evolution of these systems.

We reiterate that the results of this study are based on students' interview perceptions of these different systems. These perceptions can be based on misinterpretations or the fact that students may not be aware of the fact that they are operating within a system. Researchers also need to examine advisors', administrators', and employers' perceptions of the contradictions operating in these systems.

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Notes

[1] There remains considerable theoretical debate about the ways in which, or whether, activity systems intersect with or are laminated to each other. In a discussion of this issue on the XCMA listserve, Bill Barowy, defining activity systems as "sociocognitive structures that spans people and things and are conceptual in nature," argues that:

> It is clumsy to describe activity systems as "bumping," "intersecting," and so on, because "activity systems" is how we are thinking of interaction among humans and things…Two activity systems, being different in many ways than, say, two basketballs, cannot "bump" into each other in the same way, and being different than two lines on a paper also cannot "intersect" in the same way. The work to be done in part is to develop the language with which to describe how people who are involved mostly in one form of activity (such as research) come to interact with people who are involved mostly in another form of activity (such as school) and how people can be engaged in one form of activity (such as K-12 teaching) and then later be engaged in another form of activity (such as attending graduate school). When I write shorthand about "intersecting activity systems," what I really mean to refer to [is] an ensemble of situations as the two above. For these two situations, it is helpful to recognize that two genetic elements of activity systems, "people" (i.e., subjects) and "instrumentation" (i.e., artifacts) can participation in one form of interaction at one time, and that at a later time can participate in another form of interaction. So it is shorthand to write that these people and things participate in different activity systems (B. Barowy, personal communication, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001).

Barowy cites the example of Bateson as a researcher conducting research in Bali. Bateson is operating both in the system of university research and in the system of Bali's village life. Because Bateson is only observing the village life without wanting to disturb or change that life, he is primarily operating in the university research system. His

research will have little effect on the village life, but may, with other researchers, result in changes in the university research system through presentations and publications.

In the same XCMA listserve discussion, to sort out the confusion associated with the fact that "activity names the whole, but it also names one of the parts of the whole," Paul Prior posits the notion of a high level "Activity 1 system" as "the total, the whole, the union and disunion of all the things going on" as a "concrete historical practice" (personal communication, P. Prior, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001). He also proposes:

> Activity 2 is a plane that pulls out enduring human projects and their specific sociocultural elaborations; it is an analysis of what is happening from a certain macrohistorical perspective. Leont'ev (78) suggests that all activity 1 is multimotivational (i.e., involves multiple activity 2's). So, he suggests, in the most abstract sense, that if you look at people working on a farm, in a factory, in a store, whatever, they will be implicated in both labor and social relations. I'd argue that, as Goffman suggested, any situation is laminated, with multiple activities co-present, though variously foregrounded or backgrounded. This is one of the reasons why gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, etc. aren't irrelevant in, say, scientific practice. They're always already there. (personal communication, P. Prior, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001)

For Prior, learning of various tools:

> does not move not from activity 2 to action to operation. Learning happens in activity 1 (all analytic levels always simultaneously present, always laminated sociocultural activity systems, with tools/artifacts/conditions being at the core of historical processes of development). (personal communication, P. Prior, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001)

And he notes,

> the historical development of activity 2's, individuals with their goals, and the artifacts/tools of operations are all co-genetic, always developing in association with other activity 2's etc. The historical development of, say, labor relations or of schooling is not insulated from the historical development of race and gender relations, for example. They are co-developing (and here, of course, development doesn't necessarily mean improvement). (personal communication, P. Prior, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001)

Given the multiplicity of different systems and motives, the XCMA discussion also examined the issue of whether an individual has multiple motives through operating simultaneously in different systems. In answering a question posed by Charles Nelson: "Because people can have more than one motive while engaging in work (e.g., survival, pleasure, social influence, etc.), can one person with multiple motives doing the same thing be engaged in more than one activity?", Ricardo Ottoni Vaz Japiassu, notes that:

> Maybe these multiple motives you refer to, could be summarized or reduced to one: the main one. Despite people engaged in an *activity* could, personally, have different motives to be doing it, they would be involved in a very specific socio-cultural object-oriented one. But their *actions* within it, in turn, yes, could have very different *goals.* (personal communication, R. O. V. Japiassu, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001

For Japiassu, "if the "real" activity of a couple is, for example, "to have a dinner" in a very "in" restaurant, the motive of each partner to be engaged in it could be very different one another:

> Maybe for one of them the motive could be "eat and banish hungry" to the other, "watch" and "be watched" in company. Even so, the "real" activity would still be "having dinner." (personal communication, R. O. V. Japiassu, xmca@weber.ucsd.edu, February 1, 2001).