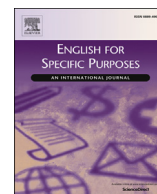


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Dissertation grant proposals as “writing games”: An exploratory study of two L2 graduate students’ experiences



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have examined grant proposals written by faculty rather than graduate students. Little research has focused on L2 students' grant writing challenges, particularly with their dissertation grant proposals. Drawing on Casanave's (2002) “writing games,” this study aims to explore how two doctoral grant writers from two disciplines (biophysics and musicology) enculturate into their discourse communities at an American university. Through qualitative analyses of interviews with students and their grant proposals, I report strategies and problems of the students in four themes: learning how to play, following or bending the rules, deciding whether to play, and identifying who to cite in the grant proposals. I show that understanding grant genre systems formed the major part of the games, where students had to learn certain rules and interpret funding agencies' expectations. Despite multiple challenges, the students played the games through repeated participatory practice, citing important figures' works, and networking with more experienced players of the communities to improve their proposals. The findings reveal that grant writing helped the students to see the big picture of their dissertation projects. This study raises awareness of L2 graduate students' dissertation grant writing practices, and it calls attention to discipline-specific grant writing instruction.

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1. Introduction

Research on the enculturation of graduate-level novice writers into disciplinary discourse communities has highlighted how newcomers acquire genre conventions and disciplinary cultures by interacting with experts and participating in various writing activities (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988; Dong, 1998; Li, 2005; Prior, 1991). To establish membership of a certain discourse community, one needs to acquire “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” (Gee, 1996, p. iii). As a result, learning takes place not only in formal academic settings, such as classrooms, but also in informal settings, such as interacting with experts and peers, going to conferences, and attending workshops (Ding, 2008). Exploring the enculturation process of educational students, Prior (1991) examined how first and second language (L1 and L2) students understood, negotiated, and undertook writing assignments in order to meet their professor's expectations in a graduate seminar. In contrast to formal learning, Li (2005) discussed an L2 doctoral student of physics' socialization into his discourse community through his interactions with texts, the supervisor, and the research community. No matter how learning occurs, academic enculturation means more than passively conforming to authoritative discourses (Haneda, 2009). Using the notion of “writing games” to highlight the importance of writers' agency and the

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contested nature of academic writing, Casanave (2002) showed that students can take a proactive role by selectively appropriating some rules of the community, resisting others, and choosing to avoid certain norms in the system.

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), there is a growing body of research on L2 doctoral writing for course papers (Casanave, 1995; Prior, 1991; Seloni, 2012), theses/dissertations (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007), and publications in particular (Li & Flowerdew, 2007). However, there has been a lack of attention to dissertation grant proposals, a genre that has appeared recently, particularly in the U.S. and other countries such as Taiwan, which follows the U.S. model of doctoral education, incorporating both coursework and research. This study thus investigates how L2 doctoral students learn to write dissertation grant proposals, examining the experiences of two students from two different disciplines: biophysics and musicology. Through the application of Casanave's "writing games" metaphor, this article aims to address the question of how novice L2 grant writers enculturate into their discourse communities.

2. Background to the study

It has to be acknowledged that dissertation grant proposals are not part of the doctoral student's repertoire in all contexts. It is specific to certain education regimes, such as those in the U.S., Canada, or Taiwan. The term "grant proposal" generally refers to a specific text submitted by prospective recipients seeking funding from private/public foundations, federal agencies, professional organizations, and associations for a specific project. In this study, "grant proposal" refers to the students' dissertation-related research plans or proposals required by major funding agencies in order for students to secure funding in the U.S.

Influenced by doctoral coursework expectations, students' need to master the process of writing dissertation grant proposals has become urgent in the U.S. Some doctoral programs, especially those in the physical and biological disciplines, have even begun to recommend that students refer to and apply for grant proposals from major institutions, such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This indicates that students in the U.S. are expected to practice writing grant proposals early and regularly even before they graduate (Ding, 2008; Strickland, 2008). This situation also applies to many students in the humanities and social sciences (Watts, 2006). For example, Hasche, Perron, and Proctor (2009) encourage social work students to make time to apply for dissertation grants because they are important to "potential employers, provide a basis for future work, and prepare doctoral students for the competitive funding environment" (p. 340). More and more doctoral students in the U.S. are expected to participate in dissertation grant writing as a way of selling their ideas, obtaining financial support, and gaining recognition in their discourse community (Dong, 1998; Szelenyi, 2013). The students' writing practices for their dissertation proposal and dissertation grant proposal are thus intertwined.

3. Theoretical considerations

3.1. Writing as a game-like situated social practice

The view of writing as situated social practice is related to the "social turn" in writing studies (Miller, 1994). This shifts away from the view that treats genres as simply textual artifacts and regards writing as a way to master a certain genre through recurrent use of its conventionalized forms (Swales, 1990). The need to go from text to context to undertake a more comprehensive and critical view of discursive practices of writing has been emphasized in recent ESP (Bhatia, 2008; Tardy, 2006) and New Rhetoric studies (Bazerman, 1994). Aligned with the social turn, Casanave (2002) develops the metaphor of *writing games*, arguing that "writing consist[s] of rule- and strategy-based practices, done in interaction with others for some kind of personal and professional gain, and...it is learned through repeated practice rather than just from a guidebook of how to play" (p. 3). According to Casanave, academic writing is game-like because it involves not only the acquisition of certain rules and conventions, but also repeated participatory practice. More crucially, building on Ortner's (1996) discussion of "serious games," Casanave points out that academic writing in postsecondary settings is a fairly high-stakes endeavor that has serious consequences in terms of writers' agency regarding how to play, to what extent to follow or bend the rules, who the key players are that must be reckoned with, and even whether to play. How novices or transitioning professionals experience unfamiliar literacy practices, such as the acquisition of specialist genres by conforming to or resisting certain practices in order to survive and succeed, is the focus of this metaphor. Although Casanave used this metaphor to explore first-year doctoral students' curriculum-focused writing practices in a sociology program,¹ she did not use it to examine contexts in which doctoral students were engaged in their dissertation projects after their completion of coursework; therefore, this study is exploratory in nature with regard to the application of the writing games' metaphor. I argue that this metaphor can be a useful tool for interpreting two doctoral students' experiences of understanding the funding systems as a high-stakes game of securing doctoral funding and the choices they made to improve their grant proposals.

3.2. Research on grant proposal writing

Two approaches to the genre of grants have been adopted in previous studies: rhetorical analysis versus context-sensitive analysis of texts. The former approach has been dominated by Swales' (1990) "moves" analysis to identify genre features and

¹ Casanave's book (2002) contains numerous case studies using the "writing games" metaphor, and does not solely focus on doctoral students.

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