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Mapping Dissertation Genre Ecology

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Mapping Dissertation Genre Ecology

by

Kate L. Pantelides

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of English College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

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**Dedication**

To my boys, Paul and Reilly, who have made me happier than I ever could have imagined...

Paul, your sustained interest and engagement in my work has kept me going, even when it feels like too much. Each day I feel luckier to have found such an incredible partner. I am endlessly amazed and appreciative. Reilly, you have helped me in ways you will never know: managing my time, inspiring me, keeping things in perspective. I hope to always make you proud...or at least fairly often.
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Abstract

Though the pervasive rumor that the “traditional” dissertation persists because of the “I suffered, so they too should suffer” mentality – the professor revenge theory – students are often the ones eager to pin down writing genres so that they can master them. However, hopes to stabilize and thus capture the secret or equation of the dissertation genre are futile, since genres, like language, are alive: rhetorical, evolving, and flexible. Thus, to demonstrate the contemporary context of the dissertation genre, the conflicting perspectives of university stakeholders, the forces working on the genre to enact change, and the process by which genre knowledge develops and transfers in the highest levels of university writing, *Mapping Dissertation Genre Ecology* explores the discourse, both written and spoken, which constitutes the dissertation as a discursive construct – what I call the dissertation genre ecology.

To better understand how dissertations are shaped institutionally, I ask the following questions: How is the dissertation as a genre constituted by various stakeholder groups at the university? How do these myriad accounts contribute to a larger system, a dissertation genre ecology at the university? And, ultimately, how does the dissertation genre ecology affect genre change? Through the use of rhetorical genre theory, my study develops a broad, interdisciplinary conception of genre, one that is not mired in formalistic worries about fixing genre in place. I use the voices of students and faculty from the humanities and social sciences as well as interdisciplinary documents as data for
this project. By examining these discursive artifacts and making institutional tensions explicit, my project has broad implications for WAC/WID literature in transfer and genre studies.
Chapter 1. Shaping the Dissertation Genre Ecology

Introduction

Each semester, dissertating students from across the disciplines furtively walk into the Writing Center, requesting help on the dissertation. They set up numerous appointments with writing consultants, and each time they sit down at the round tables, they seem hopeful that they will ask the right consultant or the right question, and someone will bring the secret book out from a cabinet or hidden compartment – the book unlocking the secret of the dissertation. Graduate students are not alone in this formulation. In my discussions with faculty and their writing concerns for students, faculty frequently cite the dissertation as a primary stumbling block for students, and they frequently commission workshops, perhaps again hoping that the writing consultants may know the magic words to say to graduate students to ease their way into the dissertation writing process. As a graduate student about to join the ranks of these probing, dissertating students, I too began to wonder how the dissertation functioned. I was fascinated by the construct of the dissertation and wanted to better understand how it functioned at the university. Clearly no one believes that one discrete dissertation exists in any discipline, but the fact that it functions discursively in this monolithic way warranted further study.

How is the dissertation as a genre constituted by various stakeholder groups at the university? How do these myriad accounts contribute to a larger system, a dissertation genre ecology at the university? And, ultimately, how does the dissertation genre ecology
affect genre change? To approach these questions, I use rhetorical genre theory as the primary lens with which to examine the dissertation as a discursive construct. Unlike formal conceptions of genre, which attempt to fix it in place and define it primarily by its formal features, rhetorical genre theory looks at genre as a response to rhetorical situations. It looks at the life of a genre, how it grows, changes, and develops. When genres, like languages, stop bending and changing, they become fixed and die. This study looks at the life of the dissertation genre and how it influences university writers. Rhetoric and Composition offers a useful perspective on these questions because it allows us to look closely at the dissertation genre and its relationship with other writing practices at the university to better understand how curricular paths are often aligned independent of considerations of transfer and genre approaches to the classroom.

For decades, scholars have called for reformation of the dissertation (Tronsgaard; Frye; AAU; Moxley; Smith; Golde & More; Council of Graduate Schools “Policy, Numbers”; Council of Graduate Schools “Analysis”; Duke; Patton), and the problems and recommended solutions are eerily familiar across this meta-genre of complaint literature. The dissertation's place in graduate education has long been called into question, and many have urged evolution of the genre without response within academia. However, with the advent of Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD), evidence that it takes on average nine years and significant debt to complete a PhD in the humanities (Jaschik), and a conscious move by many in the academy to purposely redefine the dissertation (Modern Language Association), the discourse has evolved and we find ourselves at a liminal moment: The possibility of actual change. What discursive forces have finally spurred development?
To answer this question, this project maps the discourse, both written and spoken, that constitutes the dissertation writing process – what I will call the dissertation genre ecology. My approach to this project mirrors my experiences as a researcher in the humanities, heavily influenced by methodology in language and social interaction and my experiences interacting with interdisciplinary students and their writing projects in our university writing center. Fittingly, my methodology recreates this interdisciplinary experience in my own pursuit of genre knowledge to WAC/WID literature in transfer and genre studies, an area of research that has frequently examined undergraduate writing, but has not provided extensive examination of transfer at the highest levels of academic composition, in dissertation writing.

Though there are many different versions of what a dissertation looks like and how it functions, for the purposes of this project, throughout my analysis I will refer to the dissertation as shorthand to address the dissertation document itself and the associated genres and meta-genres; I also use this term to mimic the practice by university stakeholders across the disciplines of referencing the dissertation, a construct that has currency within academia. Many refer to the dissertation’s difficulty, its power, and its significance in identity formation. Discursively, the dissertation exists.

Functionally, the dissertation serves a similar communicative purpose within the academy, and thus serves as an institutional genre – one that has “proven effective and endurable” within its institutional context and is “capable of adapting (and influencing) the changing scene” (Paré, Starke-Meyerring, and McAlpine, “The Dissertation” 60). However, instead of trying to pin down what the dissertation is horizontally, as it exists in one particular context, I try to pull apart the notion of the dissertation as a construct,
existing as one, discrete thing, alternatively offering vertical snapshots of dissertation discourse across contexts and stakeholders and mapping the complex inter-discursive relationships that constitute dissertation genre ecology.

Chapter Overview

In this first chapter I begin by offering a preliminary genre ecology thought map to situate my study. This map identifies the primary actors in this study and the forces influencing their interactions within the dissertation genre ecology. Next, I lay out the theoretical and methodological framework for my project: rhetorical genre theory (Miller; Swales; Bazerman; Devitt; Paré) and discourse analysis (Barton; Huckin; Bartersaghi; Swales). Particularly, I address the heuristic genre ecology (Spinuzzi) and consider why this is a useful metaphor through which to examine dissertation discourse. Next, to situate my application of rhetorical genre theory to the dissertation genre, I consider the rhetorical context of the genre through an examination of its brief history of and complaints about its development. Successive chapters provide analysis of written and spoken accounts of dissertation definition from the perspective of different university stakeholders, and I address how these talk and texts interact within the dissertation genre ecology; at the end of each chapter I revise the genre ecology map to account for my analyses.

In chapter two, I compare written accounts of what a dissertation should be and do, interrogating the agent role in dissertation writing. I use Discourse Analysis (DA) to examine three different genres of written data addressing dissertation definition published online: graduate handbooks, award descriptions, and listserv conversations. DA allows
me to examine the marked features of these different genres and offer insight into the values of associated discourse communities. Though each genre addresses dissertation writing, the purpose of the dissertation is different for each actor, and they construe the dissertation as a different document dependent on the institutional discourse that limits and guides their tacit expectations of the genre.

Chapter three provides analysis of student dissertation experiences based on a focus group of interdisciplinary students. Through close focus on their talk, I describe four particular ways that dissertations are constructed in student lives: as arbiter of personal success, as metaphorical construct, as agent of genre change, and as sacrificial text. The invited conversation in the focus group provides an instance of meta-genre talk, which features explicit discussion of the dissertation genre. Meta-genre talk narrates the impact of institutional discourse and outlines recognized genre norms.

In chapter four, I analyze five faculty interviews about dissertation genre evolution. These scholars are both intellectually engaged in institutional conversations about genre change and professionally involved with the mentorship of graduate students. These dual experiences shape their ideas about dissertation genre knowledge and the problem of transfer, dissertations making a contribution to the field, and the process of genre change.

The final chapter uses textual genre analysis to compare genre conventions in award-winning dissertations as deemed exemplary by different institutions, such as the Networked Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), the Council on Anthropology and Education (CAE), the Society for Medical Anthropology (SMA), and College Composition and Communication (CCC). Through microanalyses of these different
sources of data, I map the existing dissertation genre ecology in order to understand how discourse drives genre change. This analysis provides evidence of how diverse the dissertation genre is and why accumulating genre knowledge poses such a challenge for those within the genre ecology.

**Mapping the Dissertation Genre Ecology**

To situate my research, I offer a preliminary thought map (Figure 1) of dissertation genre ecology. Figure 1 attempts to map this discursive system, showing how, in my initial observations, actors, genres, and context are intimately bound by institutional discourse. In this preliminary map, the primary actors in the dissertation genre ecology are students, faculty, award-grantors, administration, media and legislators; my project chapters use these actors to structure my analysis. These actors are affected by institutional discourse, which includes accounts of completed dissertations and disciplinary expectations of what a dissertation can and should be. At the center of this map are the genres and meta-genres that constitute the written and spoken products of the dissertation genre ecology; these include dissertation documents themselves, applications, forms, IRB documents, definitions, complaints, emails, transcripts, and advice. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, and the purpose of my analysis will be to more specifically map this ecology as it exists empirically. I delineate boundaries between actors and forces with either full or dotted lines, depending on their apparent permeability. In each chapter I will update this map based on my findings.
Unlike Clay Spinuzzi, who developed the notion of genre ecology that I adapt here and who definitively maps the genres he sees in the workplace he studies, I use this map primarily as a heuristic to work through relationships between genres within the ecology (“Modeling”). A more formal model is impossible in the broader analysis conducted throughout my project; instead, these evolving figures located at the end of each chapter organize the dissertation genre ecology more generally as institutional practice. Though historically spoken and written genres were generally considered separately, in this study, the two modes are mapped alongside each other and considered simultaneously throughout analysis. This practice is in keeping with Rhetoric and Composition’s interest in not just composition itself, but the discursive processes by
which composition is shaped. Linguist John Swales’ asserts that the two modes are most productively examined together; “A major reason for this has been my current attempt to see genres no longer as single – and perhaps separable – communicative resources but as forming complex networks of various kinds in which switching mode from speech to writing (and vice versa) can – and often does – play a natural and significant part” (Swales, Research 2).

Theory and Methodology

Though the pervasive suggestion that the “traditional” dissertation persists because of the “they did it to me, so I do it to them” mentality (Kemp “How long”), based on my experience working with dissertators in the writing center, in lieu of this professor revenge theory, many students seem eager to pin down the genre so that they can master it. Regardless of hopes to stabilize and thus capture the “secret” of the dissertation genre, like language, “genres have long been seen as metaphorically having lives: being born, growing, and sometimes dying” (Devitt 88). And, also like languages, they can only be determinately mapped once they are dead. Recognizing genres as living things helps to understand how they can at once be both recognizable, because of our prior knowledge of the category, and unique, because of necessary difference within categories.

For all of its usefulness and naturalness – categorizing people, places, and things happens seemingly automatically – genre is sometimes reduced to a “formulaic way of

1 Though there is much diversity across and within the disciplines regarding what constitutes a dissertation, and that ambiguity is the subject of this study, the traditional five chapter dissertation has become a staple of academic insider knowledge, reproduced in the American Psychological Association Style Guide as well as across dissertation advice literature. For the purposes of this study I will continue to refer to the “traditional” dissertation, scare quotes meant to be scary, within the Humanities and the Social Sciences. I will not address dissertation evolution in the STEM fields, which, to a large part, has transitioned towards forms of research articles serving as culminating Ph.D. documents.
constructing (or aiding the construction of) particular texts – a kind of writing or speaking by the numbers” (Swales *Genre* 33). Even throughout Rhetoric and Composition literature, there are multiple narratives detailing the negative implications of genre, and genre itself is often constructed as problem. For instance, Composition scholars Devan Cooke and Darrell Fike, recall the difficulties of writing “nontraditional” dissertations in their field because of the pressures they felt were a result of genre expectations. Despite the insistence that genres are flexible and changing, in critical reflections of their dissertation processes, both consider the “strictures of genre” that “govern[ed] and control[led] their projects,” their diction underscoring genre's normalizing tendency that, in the case of Cooke and Fike, seems to have stifled creativity and innovation. Similarly, Marilyn Vogler Urion describes her own experience recounting her “nontraditional” new-media dissertation with colleagues only to hear that her dissertation would have been unacceptable at their institutions because of its form and content.

However, rhetorical genre theorists respond to criticism such as that of Cooke, Fike, and Urion’s, and suggest that genre is about much more than form: instead, “As a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality” (Miller “Genre,” 165). Definitions that focus on form are based on thinking of genres as products, not socially situated processes. Although there are formal textual markers of genre that serve as useful indicators, especially to genre analysts, rhetorical definitions cast these markers as a result of situation, not prescriptive conventions (Devitt).

Caroline Miller, the widely agreed upon originator of new genre theory, or North American genre theory, extends this perspective, insisting that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of the discourse but
on the action it is used to accomplish” (“Genre” 151). Miller explains that genre is necessary to communicate, to index knowledge so as on which to build. Thus, we can look at genres as sorts of “cultural artifacts” that, through analysis, offer a useful window into institutional processes, values, and tacit knowledge (Miller “Rhetorical”). Instead of inflexible, in order to be sustainable, genres must simultaneously be recognizable as a member of a class and variable enough to differ from other members within the class. This careful balance between tradition and innovation is necessary within all genres, and since genres are entirely dependent on interpretive analysis within discourse communities, community members must have similar enough interpretations to group them as differentiated examples within the same class. This balance keeps graduate students on their toes, familiar enough with the purpose of the dissertation but somewhat unsure of how to perform the genre.

Nowhere is it more important to define genres by their purpose rather than their form than when considering the dissertation:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rational for the genre. This rational shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. (Swales Genre 58)

This definition usefully focuses on rhetorical purpose, and it recognizes that instead of functioning as a discrete equation, genres are comprised of a set of communicative events. As generators of these events, experts reproduce the genre for the apprentice members of the discourse community. The mechanism is such that straying from the
traditional “rational” and “schematic structure” takes conscious effort and true exigency. Shifting focus to think about the function and development of the dissertation helps explain how there can exist both a discursive construct of the dissertation and many different textual versions of dissertations. Accumulated dissertations and the discourse in which they develop are all part of the class of the same communicative event and thus comprise the dissertation. The many discourses, genres, and actors that constitute this particular communicative event makes up the dissertation genre ecology.

Organizational Systems of Genre

Genre sets (Devitt), genre systems and genre constellations (Bazerman), genre chains (Swales), genre repertoires (Orlikowski and Yates) and genre networks (Tardy “Press 1”) are frequent groupings of the communicative events that constitute genre, though these are only a few of the many metaphors used to describe “consequential” genre relationships (Bawarshi & Reiff). For instance, genre chains examine the way that genres link to each other, shaping subsequent discourse. Genre sets emphasize the social activity that produces certain genres, whereas genre systems and constellations focus on the actor/authors of particular genres that are developed by designated communities. Orlikowski and Yates’ notion of genre repertoires encompasses “the set of genres enacted by groups, organizations, or communities to accomplish their work” (n.pg.). Finally, genre networks emphasize how genres themselves are linked together. The successive terms – set, system, constellation, chain, repertoire and network – try to account for the complexity of systematic genre relationships by relying on increasingly ambiguous groupings to set up sequential pathways.
To further account for this relational complexity, genre systems are often mapped within larger activity systems to show how context, text, and subjects interact. Each grouping of genres privileges a different kind of relationship between genres within related communicative events. The aforementioned groupings are useful to examine linear, asymmetrical interchanges. However, the heuristic genre ecology, as forwarded by Clay Spinuzzi, allows for bi-directionality of actors, texts, and utterances within a community tied to a specific communicative event and builds this relational complexity into the model, providing a platform for understanding linkage within and between genres. Tom Erickson sees genre ecologies as a marriage of the concepts ‘genre system’ and ‘genre repertoire,’ offering the best of both worlds by simultaneously showing how a “community or organization can possess (and expand) a set of genres for engaging in collective activity” and be both “[interdependent] and triggering” (n.pg.). Because of the dynamic genre structure of the dissertation writing process, and the interaction between formal genres (applications, forms, proposals) and informal genres (emails, notes, casual meetings), using a genre ecology framework provides a method with which to examine otherwise hidden, taken for granted, institutional relationships.

In developing the theoretical concept of genre ecology, Spinuzzi tries to capture the interaction that takes place with the assistance of technology, interaction that cannot be graphed linearly. His term is influenced by Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber’s concept of assemblage, which describes texts composed or remixed from other existing discourses – certainly useful for thinking about how dissertations develop and function since they “remix” disciplinary conversation that precede their work in an effort to articulate a gap in research. This descriptive approach to discursive systems illustrates
how “unofficial” genres develop, interact with, and sometimes replace “official” genres. An example of this within the dissertation genre ecology is the way email has largely taken the place of official, hard-copy forms as the primary notice of permission for graduate students to move forward in the next stage of the dissertation process. Hard-copy, signed forms are sent in the mail or filed in departmental mailboxes, formal redundancy to follow up the unofficial genre that functions more usefully within the system.

Unlike other genre groupings, genre ecology does not set up a sequential relationship for genres; instead it shows how they are overlapping, flexible, and “intermediational” (“Describing” Spinuzzi n.pg). According to Spinuzzi,

In this framework, genres are not simply performed or communicated, they represent the “thinking out” of a community as it cyclically performs an activity [...] genre ecologies are constantly importing, hybridizing, and evolving genres (and occasionally discarding them), and these dynamic changes in a genre ecology tend to change the entire activity… that dynamism is counterbalanced by a relative stability. (n.pg)

This balance of forces epitomizes the dissertation and its surrounding discourse, and the implications for dissertation evolution are ripe, considering the current purposeful manipulation of the genre by universities and various disciplinary stakeholder groups, usually to change the dissertation form in order to make candidates more marketable. Specifically, using the genre ecology framework for my study helps demonstrate this evolution and the changing relationships between genres within the ecology.
Originally, Spinuzzi developed this metaphor as a heuristic to account for the genres that circulate within technical communication. In attempting to more formally model a genre ecology, Spinuzzi studied genre interaction at a mid-size technical communication company and introduced three characteristics of genre ecologies that are of use for my project: contingency – a trait that describes that there are accidental, non-purposeful connections between genres; decentralization – a trait that describes how the primary communicative purpose of a genre is influenced and regulated by multiple other genres; and relative stability – a trait that describes that while genres are flexible and slowly changing, there is a certain stability within a system that allows users to recognize an example of a particular class (Spinuzzi “Modeling”).

In his particular model of the genre ecology at a technical communication company, Spinuzzi codes genre relationships; they can attach to, categorize and structure, record, “ripple” information to, summarize, and teach about (204). In applying this relational coding to dissertation writing, the following examples apply:

- a major professor sending suggested articles to a student as attachments
- a RefWorks account organizing and structuring student research
- recording a focus group
- a student using a major professor's notes to revise a draft
- writing a dissertation abstract
- describing a dissertation project during an oral defense

Even a brief application of the framework such as this offers an example of the many varied interactions that take place within the ecology. As Spinuzzi notes, the downfall of this particular coding and more formal model of an ecology is that it does not allow for
bi-directional interaction. I try to account for this particular weakness of method by mapping dissertation genre ecology such that it accounts for the way genres interact on each other continuously.

Acquiring Genre Knowledge

To offer greater specificity within my dissertation genre ecology map, I adopt the sub-grouping meta-genre, which takes up discussion of genre as its focus, and the consequence of the discussion can be either to hasten or stymie genre change. Meta-genre is an especially useful place to look to understand how communities translate their “tacit” knowledge into “discursive knowledge,” since meta-genres function as “atmospheres surrounding genres themselves,” shaping and interacting with more formal genres (Giltrow 190, 195). Thus, my project uses the practice of “[e]avesdropping” on meta-genre, conversations about dissertation writing, to elicit descriptive genre distinction (Giltrow 190).

Examining meta-genre helps measure “uptake,” the term Anne Freadman extends from speech-act theory (Austin) to describe the process by which discourse community members index genre knowledge and perform based on their knowledge. In Freadman’s revision of the term, she construes speech acts as genres, and “uptake” refers to the way that genres are related structurally – how they make texts and relationships between actors and texts meaningful (“Uptake”). Uptake is action prompted by the interaction of two texts/utterances/instances of genre. Freadman uses the metaphor of a tennis game to explain the way that uptake functions. Like a tennis game, the ceremony of hitting balls
back and forth, and the balls themselves, only have meaning in the context of the game, and actors know what to expect because of the rules of play (Freadman, “Anyone”).

So, uptake solidifies expected norms and conventions for discourse community members; in terms of written genres, members generally know what to expect regarding length, and what a beginning, middle, and end generally look like. Performance of uptake, or responding a certain way to a typified situation, is the playing out of genre knowledge. This performance requires – perhaps more importantly than recognizing what a genre is – recognizing what is not exemplary of a particular genre (Freadman, “Uptake” 45). This is the quacks like a duck rule of genre: if it looks like a duck, but does not quack, it must be some other type of bird, or perhaps, the bird must be taught how to quack appropriately.

Graduate students’ uptake of the dissertation is complicated by their lack of experience playing this particular language game. Their frequent confusion over the dissertation process underscores a pedagogical problem at the heart of genre theory: how does one teach genre, especially a genre as complex, diverse, and layered as the dissertation? While there are some theories on “how-to,” most genre scholars suggest that gaining genre knowledge is not a straight-forward process. Acquiring genre knowledge within discourse communities is arguably the primary purpose of graduate education, but the many genres with which apprentice members must become familiar can be daunting.

In examining the complex process by which international graduate students develop genre knowledge, Christine Tardy breaks it up into four categories which, she reminds us, do not represent “any kind of epistemic reality,” they merely offer constructs
to examine genre learning: formal knowledge (of form), process knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and subject-matter knowledge (her terms) (“Building” 20-21). Further, [g]enre knowledge development, like all writing development or language development, more broadly, does not occur in simple linear fashion. Rather, learners seem to go through a process of restructuring, so that new knowledge results in qualitative changes to the internal organization of knowledge, rather than simply in the addition of new structural knowledge. (Tardy, Building 24)

Genre learning requires multiple types of learning to occur at different times and in different ways. Thus, the difficulty of dissertation writing, which is not explicitly taught so much as it is gleaned; it is based on knowledge that is enculturated and indexed, and graduate students must slowly be “immers[ed] and induct[ed]” (Parry, Disciplines 40) into the community.

Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin compare genre knowledge to second language acquisition, suggesting that it “requires immersion into the culture and a lengthy period of apprenticeship and acquisition” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, Genre 13). They demonstrate this in their study of “Nate,” a graduate student in Rhetoric and Composition. In this study, Berkenkotter acts as a participant observer researcher, analyzing the development of Nate’s genre knowledge through his personal and academic writing during the first year of his graduate program. Generally, Nate's writing moves from writer-based to more reader-based, a necessary process of awareness graduate students must pass through in order to write the dissertation: a process he must go through to acquire genre knowledge and solidify a place within the discourse community.
Since genre serves a socio-cognitive function, prescriptive genre explanations by expert discourse community members only go so far: there is no substitute for actual participation in the genre system. As Bawarshi and JoAnn Reiff write,

One’s subjectivity is defined in part by one’s relationship to and understanding of the object/motive, and how to manipulate the meditational means in terms of the object/motive. As such, subjectivity and identity are bound up in genre knowledge and performance, as *we are constantly accomplishing ourselves and our objectives/motives* as we enact them through our mediational means.”

(Bawarshi & Reiff 104, emphasis added)

Thus, dependence on the other actors in the system, and real consequences of displaying genre knowledge, are central to this learning process. Because apprentice members “[accomplish] [themselves]” through dissertation writing, the weight of the document has heavy implications for identity formation and sense of self within discourse communities.

Apprentice members of a discourse community must be able to recognize an example of a particular genre – performance of ‘genre knowledge’; identify what characteristics do not belong to a given genre – application of ‘uptake’; and have a sense of kairos as related to employing particular genres because “[p]art of participating in a genre system is knowing strategically when, how, and where to use certain genres in relation to other genres” (Bawarshi & Reiff 91). In terms of dissertation writing, this explains why breaking away from “traditional” format is so difficult, and perhaps harder than it would seem. It requires apprentice members of the discourse community to have knowledge enough of what the genre is to break from convention and do something new. Thus, students must display their genre knowledge, their performance of in-group
awareness (Parry, “Disciplinary”) in ways that break with what expert members of the discourse community have previously done.

The general reliance on natural student acquisition of genre knowledge directly links to the institutional assumption that academic writing skills will transfer across contexts, and dissertators will simply draw from the writing they have completed throughout graduate school to navigate the dissertation. The dissertation process assumes implicit transfer of earlier writing skills, disciplinary knowledge, and discourse community values: the dissertation is institutionally constructed as a natural progression of transfer of dissertators’ skills and awareness. Unfortunately this is not always as seamless a process as the institutional context seems to assume given its official genres – handbooks, forms, and definitions.

Transfer is an unstable term in Rhetoric and Composition, at the moment a concept very much in flux, but a useful general definition of the terms follows: “the knowledge learned in one context successfully applied in another” (Tazcak). Much of the reason for transfer’s instability as a term is its interdisciplinary birth, and the disagreements over the definition of and ability to examine transfer outside of the discipline is replete with conflict. In considering how genre transfer functions in undergraduate writing, Jessie Moore posits: “Without the authentic exigencies of [...] other activity systems, the genres cannot function realistically.” Such observations are useful for understanding why transfer is assumed at the doctoral level and why there are few attempts to explicitly teach genre knowledge; part of the transfer process and the successful performance of genre requires exigency rarely reproduced in any situation but that of the authentic context. Nevertheless, the discipline’s interest in empirically
observing the process of transfer and better understanding why it occurs in some contexts and not others is instructive for me in structuring this study of dissertation writing. In other terms, a dissertation is a successful “recontextualization” (Linell) of a dissertator’s previous composition experiences, and in Rebecca Nowacek's lexicon, an “integration.” According to Kathleen Yancey: “The idea behind transfer is that students are making knowledge, and are repurposing that knowledge, remixing that knowledge, and so forth” (Katzac).

Jessie Moore describes how Rhetoric and Composition has adapted Education scholars Perkins and Salomon's educational terms “low road” and “high road” transfer to describe how transfer occurs in writing contexts. According to Moore, low road transfer relies on a new context triggering practiced habits to facilitate transfer, while high road transfer requires “mindful abstraction” of knowledge from one context to another.” In this schema, dissertation writing requires low road transfer, a purposeful, “mindful” application of one communicative event to another.

Discourse Analysis

As I have demonstrated, genres do not exist in and of themselves. The move that Caroline Miller initiated of a social/interaction understanding of genre, encouraged examination of genres within contexts, in relation to other connected genres that bring attention to the atmospheres in which genres are instantiated, grow, and develop. Genres “are born out of prior texts and retain traces of those texts. This intertextuality not only gives a genre meaning, but also serves as a modus operandi for learning” (Tardy 14). Rhetorical genre theory allows a broader, interdisciplinary conception of genre, one that
is not mired in formalistic worries about fixing genre in place; instead, genre analysis shows the discursive structures that impact the kind of talk that occurs regarding the dissertation writing process, and such analysis helps us understand the institutional limits and consequent documents that develop from such discourse. Discourse analysis is a productive tool to closely examine these connections and to better understand genre change. Ellen Barton reinforces this use within the field:

The object of study in discourse analysis in composition studies is the connections between texts and contexts, with a focus on the repeated use of [rich features] and the associated conventions that establish their meaning and significance in context [...] Of particular note in the area of acquisition is the utility of discourse analysis in studies of the socialization and acculturation of new members of disciplinary communities. (Barton 579-580)

Particularly in Barton’s construction of the method, it is ideal for examining a genre as complex and layered as the dissertation.

Throughout my study, I reproduce discourse in context. In practice, this means that in the interview and focus group sections, I include significant portions of transcript that demonstrate not only what the respondents say, but how what I as a facilitator asked to shape the subsequent response. I number both transcribed materials and extensive sections of written data to orient my readers and draw specific attention to rich features of the discourse, both specifically linguistic and socio-cultural. Though I use shorter quotes periodically, I generally include these larger sections of discourse for analysis to demonstrate that they require close reading and interpretation: such discourse does not represent any sort of implicit truth.
Using genre as a lens for discourse analysis encourages us to take as an object of study both product and discoursal context, examining existing convention, how it is produced, transmitted, and changed. This “expanded notion of genre” (Paré 57) has its limits though; a broad rhetorical view of genre does not mean that genre can be anything. Genre must still have identifiable constraints: it must be limited in order to mean, and my study makes explicit the limits on genre that are developing in response to new institutional contexts. In particular, limits of what the dissertation does not include are placed in stark relief when experimentation occurs. Recent dissertators’ forays into webtexts, born digital dissertations, and creative projects have initiated such conversations and caused students, faculty, and administrators to draw lines in the sand, declaring that certain works are not members of the class of documents included in the dissertation genre.

Genre theory translates to discourse analysis naturally through application of underlying questions about how genre functions to data sets. Swales usefully describes the important relationship between theory and methodology:

theory and methodology represent not so much separate epistemological worlds as mirror images of the same enterprise – that of making useful discoveries. In this way, theory turns out to be what we need to shape and inform our methodologically derived observations and interpretations, while the methodological options that emerge modify the theoretical positioning that we started with. (Research 60)
In his formulation, and certainly its application in this study, theory and method are one and the same. Discourse analysis is a tool, which allows an interpreter to see how genre functions within text and talk.

Proliferation of genres depends on successful genre performances. John Swales describes the work of an analyst as tracing the “regularities and irregularities” of performances of genre to bring a “rhetorical consciousness-raising” to users and consumers of genre within particular discourse communities. Drawing attention to particular performances of genre is entirely functional: to allow discourse community members to employ genre more expertly and consciously (Genre 14-15). Yet Swales warns: “the investigator's role in genre analysis is neither to follow slavishly the nomenclature of groups, nor is it to provide his or her own deductive and introspective categorial system. Rather, the procedures should be to develop sets of a posteriori categories, ones based on empirical investigation and observation, within which eliciting the community's category-labels plays a central role” (Genre 39-40). Since these categories are flexible and created necessarily after genre norms become known within discourse communities, they are by definition somewhat inaccessible to apprentice members.

Though such work – drawing attention to successful performances, regularities and irregularities of dissertation writing – is important and useful, few scholars have used genre theory to examine the dissertation and its associated genres. Attrition has been often studied in higher education (Bowen & Rudenstine; AAU; Golde & Dore), advising relationships too have frequently been examined (Chun-Mei, Golde & McCormick; Lee; Li & Seale), but only recently has genre been applied as a useful lens with which to
examine dissertation writing. In particular, Anthony Paré, Doreen Stake-Meyerring, and Lynn McAlpine have addressed dissertation genre(s) regularly, most recently in 2011 when they noted how dissertation genres have slowly become normalized and stabilized within the disciplines. They observe how “certain similarities in structure, types of argumentation, ways of positioning claims, ways of citing others—as well as regularized social processes involved in the production of a dissertation, such as supervision meetings and exams, […] have become expected, valued, and normalized in a given disciplinary and institutional location” (“Knowledge” 220). Their work underscores the utility of employing genre theory to examine a genre such as the dissertation, a genre so ambiguous, interdisciplinary, and imbued with importance.

In their pilot study of an Electronic Theses and Dissertation (ETD) program, which exposed the fundamental differences in the idea of what a dissertation is/can be at their university, Jude Edminster, Andrew Mara, and Kristine Blair consider how the dissertation fits into the genre ecology of their own English department. In their discussion, genre ecology functions like a confined, local ecosystem – considering how institutional discourse, both textual and spoken, interacts with past discourse and creates context to produce new discourse in the same image. Charles Bazerman calls this phenomenon – this development of a genre ecology (though he does not use the term as such) – a creation of “continuous, social space” (105).

Though genre analysis offers a useful tool for such abstract spaces, John Swales posits that it also poses a methodological difficulty on behalf of the analyst; he writes:
1. Should we privilege the views of the writers (or speakers) of genre exemplars as to the meaning and function of particular texts but also as to the definitions of the genres themselves?

Or

2. should we focus our interpretive spotlight on the responders to those exemplars, the readers or the listeners, and thus give proper stress to the reception histories of those discourses?

Or

3. as a third alternative, does the primary interpretive responsibility fall to the expert, the scholarly critic in literature, or the analysis in rhetoric or applied linguistics?

Or

4. does a corpus of texts (and its analysis) permit us to successfully exclude (most of) the human informants?” (Swales Research 74)

Swales lays out these options to highlight the problem of analysis, suggesting that none of these options are ideal, each one emphasizing a different school of thought that has been delegitimized for various reasons. But such options also highlight the important relationship between theory and methodology implicit in genre analysis. In my project I try to provide space to look at genre from these different perspectives, ultimately all filtered through (3): the genre analyst as primary interpreter – a necessary evil.
The Rhetorical Situation

It would be impossible to understand the context of the existing dissertation genre ecologies without a brief glimpse into the development of the genre, which has undergone significant genre change since its inception. Though the progenitors of the dissertation, disputations and oral defenses, have long existed in education, the first American to receive a formal PhD was Edward Everett, a classicist and one-time president of Harvard University. Everett received his doctorate from a German university, and many Americans followed in his footsteps – ten thousand, according to Nathan Pusey; Pusey describes the allure of the German education as follows: “it was conducted by mature scholars for whom learning involved discovery, and not, as was generally the case at home, by young men of limited experience relying entirely on existing, borrowed knowledge” (48). Thus, the function and practice of the disputation dramatically changed with the German influence. Though my project is not historical, applying the genre ecology framework to examine this transition from oral disputation to written dissertation as the primary requirement of doctoral work would be useful to show how genre slowly evolves based on community practice. As mirrored in the contemporary university, where email has slowly replaced signed, hard-copy forms as the primary mode of communication regarding the dissertation, oral disputations were slowly replaced by written dissertations in the hierarchy of importance. Unofficial genres first mimic official genres, then to eliminate redundancy, genres are replaced when they cease to be meaningful and useful within the genre ecology: this is the life cycle of genre.

In the post-civil war period, many educational reformers were spurred on to transform colleges into universities in order to escape the danger of becoming irrelevant
and “slipping into oblivion” (Lucas 149), much like current conversations that call for purposeful revision of the dissertation in order to remain functional. The transition from college to university is marked by a broad secularization in the university as science became important to higher learning, largely replacing theology as the primary focus of study. This change was seen by many as problematic, since scientific study, especially the largely popular applied sciences, was seen as too practical, too “utilitarian,” and not quite scholarly enough (Lucas 150). Much of the mid-late nineteenth century was devoted to resolving the education identity crisis and defining what a “university” would be going forward. Consensus finally gathered around the notion of a university as an educational setting offering more practical, professional training, greater course offerings and disciplines, and graduate education, of which the dissertation became the crowning document; consequently, “the focus now was to be upon disinterested scholarship and research” (Lucas 177). With this acceptance of the genre solidified, the Association of American Universities was created to oversee further development (Pusey 52).

Whereas the doctorate had not previously been directly connected to a formal course of study, in 1861 Yale awarded the first earned doctorate, and by 1876 there were nearly 25 doctorate-granting institutions (Lucas). In particular, the development of the Johns Hopkins University in 1876 was seen as the final realization of the efforts of educational reformers and American scholars holding German doctorates. By the turn of the century, graduate education had gained sufficient steam, with nearly “6,000 students enrolled in graduate study in the United States in 1900; approximately 250 doctorates were awarded that year” (Pusey 55). Soon, university faculties were required to hold a doctorate in order to teach (Lucas). Thus, the university quickly gained prominence, so
much so that less than one-hundred years after the outcry over the development of the university, Joseph Simons calls the “graduate school of college …the very heart of our educational system and the focal center of our civilization and its continuance” (102). Such hyperbolic rhetoric underscores contemporary concerns about the dissertation, the lifeblood of the university, and, if you believe Simons, the key to our civilization.

Now, Electronic Theses and Dissertation (ETD) policies are again urging genre change. As was the case when dissertations moved from primarily oral examinations to extended written documents, both the purpose of the dissertation and the context in which it develops has shifted. The increasing requirement to publish dissertations online changes the potential audience for the dissertation, the kinds of composition tools that can be incorporated in a document, and the types of research that can be conducted. We are certainly poised for change.

The Problem: Contemporary Complaints about the Dissertation

Regardless of whether or not the dissertation ultimately proves to be a life-changing document for each graduate student that embarks on the journey, it is arguably the one common identifiable expectation of doctoral education, regardless of discipline. Students enter programs knowing that the dissertation looms on the horizon, though “it” is somewhat ambiguous. The other most common similarity of the dissertation across the disciplines is the prevalence of both internal and external complaints. Complaints about the dissertation have a hallowed place and well established tradition in the dissertation genre ecology. In 1964, David Tronsgaard complained that “For the average doctoral candidate, [the dissertation] is a roadblock [...] The dissertation demands an effort that
often seems disproportionate to its value (Tronsgard 491). His colleague, Northrop Frye, sniped that scholars cannot begin their academic work until “they have finished jumping through the hoops and turning Ph.D. cartwheels to amuse their elders” (49) – a skeptical view similarly echoed within contemporary academic circles (PostAcademic; The Chronicle; Higher Ed; WPA listserv) and in the popular media (NY Times).

In the case of the dissertation in the humanities, where “research undertakings are idiosyncratic” (Parry), such complaints have become common-place; however, the exigency that has finally spurred conscious attempts at dissertation redefinition has come in the form of a job crunch, high attrition, and the increasing lack of certainty of opportunity once a doctorate is in hand (Welch et al., Graff, Lunsford, Modern Language Association). A 2008 Council of Graduate Schools Survey places the interdisciplinary attrition rate at 57%, though earlier surveys put it as high as 67% (Bowen & Rudentine) and as low as 40% (Golde & Dore At Cross Purposes). A far-reaching survey distributed in 1999 included 4,114 participants from across the disciplines. At that time, respondents said it took approximately ten years to complete a PhD in the Humanities because of simultaneous teaching requirements and isolating research practices, among other problems. Based on statistics such as this, the Modern Language Association (MLA) organized a Dissertation subcommittee in 2010 to reevaluate the dissertation in the humanities. Then president Sidonie Smith insisted that “we are disadvantaging our doctoral students and impoverishing our doctoral programs if we do not rethink the monograph dissertation” (16-17), because “New kinds of dissertations are not just on the horizon,” they have arrived (18).
Smith’s writing as MLA president and in her current role as past president has a distinct immediacy; she urges those in the humanities to abandon the vision of the solitary scholar plugging away on his dissertation (“proto-first book”) and to replace it with co-authored articles and collaborative digital media projects. Smith recognizes that the implications for changes such as these are far-reaching, and, in fact, this consideration of the dissertation actually began with the MLA advocating change in tenure and hiring procedures. However, it all seems to come back to the dissertation as both the symbolic and practical indicator of the relative health of graduate education.

Though there are “islands of innovation,” it seems that the old-guard of traditional advancement, and consequently dissertation practice, is still very much entrenched (“Researchers” Weller). Smith articulately connects the current state of the dissertation, graduate education, the job market and academic publishing – painting a fairly bleak picture of the humanities should things remain as they are. However, she is upbeat about the possibilities, suggesting that redefinition and abandonment of a nineteenth century version of the dissertation as “the coherent intellectual project of the protomonograph” will hopefully “contribute to the vitality of the new book” (25, 26).

Current MLA president Russell Berman further ratcheted up the rhetoric in his 2011 newsletter, declaring: “It’s time to proceed with a long overdue reform of humanities doctoral programs, not only to meet the current economic realities but also to respond to the intellectual changes of recent decades” (n.pg.). Berman’s comments are a clear and concerted effort to hasten genre evolution. There are hints that such efforts are gaining traction: ETD requirements are taking off across universities, innovative dissertations continually win national awards, and MLA’s survey of acceptable
dissertation formats shows slow, minority acceptance of creative formats such as digital projects, creative nonfiction, and suites of essays (Jaschik). In the chapters that follow, I will closely examine the discursive forces whipping up this academic storm and consequent genre change.
Chapter 2. Meta-Genre: What is a Dissertation Supposed to Be and Do?

Institutional centrality has not translated into clear definition of what a dissertation is supposed to be or do rhetorically, even within defined university stakeholders. Of course, ambiguity is the necessary result of the many different disciplines, methodologies, and institutions within higher education, but in this chapter I suggest that there is more at work than simply local context. By examining different written accounts within the meta-genre of dissertation definition, the tacit assumptions of each group are made explicit, and we can better understand how different institutional actors discursively shape dissertation genre ecology. Genre is a transparent window to consider institutional discourse because of their linked “duality of structure”: “As we draw on genre rules to engage in professional activities, we constitute social structures (in professional, institutional, and organizational contexts) and simultaneously reproduce these structures” (Berkenkotter and Huckin “Rethinking” 478).

I begin with a brief survey of doctoral granting institutions and the kinds of online materials they provide regarding dissertation writing expectations to situate subsequent microanalysis of my local context. I closely examine dissertation discourse within humanities and social science departments at the University of South Florida, a large RU/VH, and then extend the perspective more broadly to national conversations. Instead of a longitudinal study or a broad, extended survey, my close genre analysis helps identify institutional values that are useful as a “complement” to existing longitudinal
data (Nowacek) such as that offered by broad MLA, AAU, and Council of Graduate School surveys. Additionally, offering an in depth examination of my local context provides a map for similar studies of other universities.

To construct this meta-genre pastiche, I compare three written accounts that constitute meta-genre within dissertation genre ecology: departmental handbooks and requirements published on university websites, award descriptions published on program websites, and electronic listserv conversations submitted through email. These three genres of online texts offer formal expectations, as detailed by graduate schools; exemplars, as described by award-granting bodies; and informal discussion, as gossiped about over the proverbial academic watercooler – the listserv. These instances of meta-genre offer “situated language about situated language” (Giltrow 190) – a rich place to reveal explicit values embedded in implicit expectations. I use discourse analysis through close reading of these texts to examine how the dissertation is constructed in accessible, public written discourse. Discourse analysis is a “largely inductive process in which the initial search for what might be interesting should normally precede quantification, coding, or the adoption of some appropriate theoretical model” (Swales 95); it is the process of identifying “rich features, ones that subsequently prove to be valuably illuminating” (Swales 95). My analysis in this chapter employs the following guiding questions:

- How is the dissertation genre constituted in online meta-genre discourse?
- How does online meta-genre written discourse fit into the dissertation genre ecology map?
The Dissertation as Constructed by Departmental Handbooks

Because of its importance to graduate education, it is surprising that, according to the MLA, a shocking number of humanities and language departments across universities do not provide explicit descriptions of the dissertation for their graduate students; in fact, only 33% have “written descriptions of what kind of dissertation is expected of graduate students” (Jaschik). The full results of this provocative study have not yet been released by the MLA, but these findings are based on member self-reports. To augment these findings, I conducted my own examination of the online dissertation materials of select doctoral granting institutions across the US. I alternately selected flagship universities and second and third most prominent universities across the US from each major geographical region. Within each university I limited my analysis to the departments designated within the College of Arts & Sciences (CAS), though I selected both private and public institutions for my examination. I limited my departmental examinations to the humanities and social science departments most commonly found across institutions: Anthropology, English, History, and Philosophy.

Table 1 displays the results of my examination, which includes the kinds of online documents provided by the department for dissertating students as well as the texts that are specifically devoted to discussion of dissertation writing, as opposed to procedural considerations.

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2 Some of the results of this forthcoming study were included in Scott Jaschik’s Insider Higher Ed. article, “Dissing the Dissertation” (9 January 2012), and I learned more specifics about the study through personal communication. All doctoral-granting institutions within the MLA were surveyed.
Table 1. Writing Resources for Dissertators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Documents Provided for Dissertators</th>
<th>Text Devoted to Explicit Writing Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Website: List of Dissertations since 2006; Graduate Handbook: required forms and dates</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: paragraph about dissertation process; Website: Link to Graduate School Resource: “A Student Guide to Preparing Theses and Dissertations,” which details manuscript preparation</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alabama</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: 2 paragraphs about procedure</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: extensive description of dissertation process; Website: Link to Graduate School guidelines for dissertation procedure and manuscript preparation; Description of optional course on dissertation writing</td>
<td>Paragraph about dissertation proposal writing and revisions; Paragraph about dissertation writing timeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: extensive discussion about dissertation writing and procedure</td>
<td>4 pages about proposal writing and dissertation drafting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: Description of procedures, timeline, and limited details of writing process</td>
<td>Description of proposal length and approximate time to write a dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Website: Departmental requirements</td>
<td>Sentence about the length of the dissertation proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas at Austin</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: Requirements and procedures</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas at Austin</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Website: Paragraph that refers students to Graduate School procedures</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas at Austin</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Website: Links to dissertation forms</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Texas at Austin</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Website: Links to the Graduate Studies and Graduate School forms; Paragraph on dissertation procedure</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonybrook University</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Website: Link to Graduate School procedures and forms</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonybrook University</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: 2 pages about dissertation procedure</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonybrook University</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Website: explains required course on dissertation prospectus writing, 3 paragraphs describing dissertation procedure and requirements</td>
<td>3 Sentence regarding dissertation’s purpose, writing timelines, and necessary length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonybrook University</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Website: 1 paragraph detailing dissertation procedure</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: 2 pages on dissertation procedure and necessary forms</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Website: 3 bullets about the dissertation process; Handbook: 2 1/2 pages about dissertation procedure and forms</td>
<td>2 sentences about rhetorical context of dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Graduate Handbook: 4 paragraphs on dissertation procedure; Website: links to forms</td>
<td>1 sentence about prospectus length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Website: 1 sentence about dissertation procedure; PhD Program Checklist; links to Graduate School dissertation procedure and forms</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My findings in Table 1 support MLA’s findings about the percentage of departments that provide information regarding explicit dissertation writing. Whereas MLA surveyed language departments only and asked for self-reported data, I examined social science and humanities departments at different types of doctoral granting institutions. I still found that of the 20 departments I researched, 35% provided at least one sentence specifically detailing dissertation writing or rhetorical context. There are
many interesting trends across this discourse, which I will more thoroughly discuss in regard to USF’s departmental requirements. However, it is worth mentioning a few particular disparate moments in this discourse before considering similarities and further narrowing in on my specific local context.

Of the departments examined, Stanford was the lone university that offered fairly substantial dissertation discussion across departments. In particular, the Stanford History department takes considerable time to describe the importance of the dissertation:

The dissertation is the most important part of a student’s graduate program. The student’s first major effort as an independent scholar, the dissertation usually plays an important role in getting an academic position and is often the basis for future publications. No decision has longer-lasting and more wide-ranging implications for a student’s intellectual development and academic career than the choice of a dissertation topic. (Stanford History Graduate Student Handbook 16)

The excerpt begins clearly, calling the dissertation “the most important part of a student’s graduate program” (line 1). According to the handbook, the dissertation is not only connected to their reputation within the graduate program itself, but the relative quality of the dissertation is connected to students’ future job prospects, book deals, and scholarly identity. There is no indication of awareness of hyperbole in the closing: “No decision has longer-lasting and more wide-ranging implications” on scholars (line 3-4). No pressure.

In contrast to most other programs that identify the major professor as the primary decision-maker and facilitator of the dissertation process, candidates in Philosophy at UT Austin are required to set up meetings for their committee and are largely in charge of
timing and procedural decisions. At Stonybrook, doctoral students in the English department are also encouraged to be in charge of their scholarly trajectory by keeping an updated version of their proposal at all times to be ready to apply for awards. In addition, the student must ask each member of the committee to sign a reader contract, which details when and what will be read. Committee members may make the decision to read individual chapters at different times during the dissertation process or simply read the entire draft before the defense; however, the contract makes this reader plan clear.

My examination of these same departments within CAS at the University of South Florida further bears out MLA’s findings that many departments do not publish any guidelines for dissertations, and, unlike students at UT Austin, they instead leave the entire process up to the discretion of the major professor; this practice has mixed success across the disciplines (Acker & Hill; Lee; Knox et al.). In the following, I select excerpts from the departmental handbooks that, by detailing dissertation expectations, buck the troublesome trend outlined by the MLA.

In accordance with a SACs requirement, the USF Department of English includes the highest level of detail in regard to the dissertation document. In the 35 page handbook for graduate students, there are five pages dedicated to dissertation guidelines and procedure. Two sections specifically concern the writing of the dissertation, whereas the primary discussion addresses committee formation, related forms, and procedural issues. According to the handbook, the dissertation must be “at least 150 pages long, exclusive of bibliography,” the only quantifiable measure to identify what sets the document apart from other graduate composition (25). At USF, dissertators are encouraged to confine the literature review, a staple of traditional dissertations, to the prospectus, as opposed to the
final dissertation document itself. The reasoning for this change is the following:

“Incorporating the literature review into the prospectus rather than into the dissertation is designed to facilitate the publication of the dissertation as a scholarly work” (25). This progressive choice is not representative across the disciplines at USF.

Unlike any other CAS departmental handbook, within the English Graduate handbook appendix there is also a two page rubric detailing what entails receiving a grade of “Pass Plus,” “Pass,” “Pass Minus,” or “Fail.” The rubric awards significant contributions in “Primary Content,” “Critical Thinking,” and “Writing.” A “Pass Plus” dissertation “Develops detailed coherent discussion of a relevant, original, and astute critical problem” (USF English Department 32, emphasis added). This insistence that the project matter to the discipline at large, that it is an “astute” area of study, divides passing and failing compositions. Additionally, the dissertation must “dialogue,” as opposed to parrot or summarize, with the critical disciplinary conversation. And, as is repeated throughout the handbook, the dissertation must “[make] a significant contribution to scholarship” (32). The rubric suggests that a truly successful dissertation bends the discipline to his or her will, as opposed to buckling beneath the weight of outside scholarship, finally mastering the community language and history sufficiently to add something new that matters in disciplinary language that is both recognizable and articulate.

In Anthropology, the handbook offers two options for the dissertation: “[1] An internship[…] carried out over at least two semesters (or equivalent) [or 2] An independent research project, more on the model of traditional doctoral programs in anthropology” (38, emphasis added). Though there is significant discussion surrounding
the procedures, the only details about the document itself are that “The dissertation reflects the student's ability to delineate, investigate, and analyze an *appropriate* topic of inquiry in a professional manner” (30, emphasis added). The discussion of project options assumes definitive, prescriptive genre form and function; it also assumes that students understand how an extended internship differs qualitatively from a “traditional” project in Anthropology. The actual written document is not addressed to any extent in the handbook’s consideration of the dissertation. Perhaps the emphasis on a student’s need to find an “appropriate topic of inquiry” explains the absence of further dissertation discussion. By the time a student has arrived at the point of dissertation writing, s/he *should* know what is institutionally appropriate and how the process must be conducted.

Unlike Anthropology, the history department provides great detail about the development of the dissertation, including idea generation. Though the Major Professor is identified throughout as the purveyor of all primary knowledge regarding the dissertation process, in terms of the project idea’s inception: “The Major Professor is not responsible for identifying and setting up the research project; the major responsibility lies with students” (13). Further discussion emphasizes the writing process, reminding students that “A Ph.D. dissertation in History takes minimally a year to write after what is typically a full year dedicated to research […] Students should not assume that because the Major Professor has approved a draft, that the other members are “rubber stamps.” They may suggest substantial revisions, and time is needed to respond” (3). This mention of a timeline makes the History department’s dissertation discussion distinct from others within CAS. Such an explicit reference is scant in the discourse surrounding dissertation expectations. Additionally, the history department’s account continually delineates
writing and procedural responsibilities: what the student must do, what the major professor will do, and how the committee functions.

In this brief reading of CAS dissertation discourse, perhaps what is more compelling than what is actually written is what is absent: any mention of the dissertation document in Philosophy or Communication. These disciplines rely on the major professor to translate her own knowledge of dissertation procedure and process to the student, a reliance which requires expert discourse community members to break down their implicit genre knowledge into component parts. They also fall back on assumptions about student genre knowledge, that “certain similarities in structure, types of argumentation, ways of positioning claims, ways of citing others—as well as regularized social processes involved in the production of a dissertation, such as supervision meetings and exams […] have become expected, valued, and normalized in a given disciplinary and institutional location” (Paré, Starke-Meyerring & McAlpine, “Knowledge & Identity” 220). The graduate school website itself has no mention of the written dissertation document beyond directions on how to submit an electronic thesis or dissertation and format it correctly for ProQuest. English, Anthropology, and History are the departments within CAS that spend the most time on the dissertation, in terms of pages dedicated, but their focus is primarily procedural: how to form a committee and how to communicate with them, what form to select and where it must be filed. For a document so singular, amorphous, and discipline-specific, the absence of explicit writing expectations is certainly marked.

The USF handbooks consistently reference “appropriateness”: a shell (D. Smith) to encapsulate the idea, the style, and the scholarship that dissertators must employ to
reveal a level of academic propriety. This need suggests that the dissertation is largely
evidence of a graduate student’s ability to read the discipline well enough to glean what
is appropriate and astute; this solidifies student membership within the academic
discourse community and relies heavily on institutional assimilation, successful transfer,
and uptake of genre knowledge. Of course, the implications for breaking such rules of
propriety are devastating for graduate students: failing the dissertation, remaining ABD,
and drowning in debt (and shame). The other frequently repeated phrase that details the
dissertation’s function, a rhetorical move not generally repeated in this particular set of
genre ecology, is the admonishment that the dissertation “make a significant contribution
to the field.” Though this phrase appears across the disciplines, it is rarely explicated. For
students, it raises more questions than it answers. However, the simple quantity of text
dedicated to logistics outweighs this perfunctory, ambiguous reminder about the purpose
of the dissertation within university departments. In Christine Tardy’s terms, the graduate
handbooks emphasize formal knowledge and subject-matter knowledge, but leave
process knowledge and rhetorical knowledge – often the province of Rhetoric and
Composition – largely untouched.

Though I do not suggest that USF is representative of all institutions, this case
study is useful to examine the challenge of teaching genre knowledge. English attempts
to quantify the project by offering a designated length. Anthropology attempts to define
the alternative forms by offering prescriptive models. History uses time to quantify
dissertation projects. Yet, each handbook fall back on shells, tacit expectations of the
dissertation process, and the ability of the major professor to help the student process this
information. The example of USF departmental handbook discourse helps explain the results of the MLA survey and the disappointing graduation data within the humanities.

The Dissertation as Constructed by Exemplars

In contrast to USF graduate school departmental focus on procedure, award-granting bodies emphasize the function of a successful dissertation above all else, and they attempt to quantify the mysterious, but all important “significant contribution to the field.” I examined the application materials of outstanding dissertation awards, both at the local level, at the University of South Florida, as well as at the national level, at two of the largest national award granting bodies within the social sciences and the humanities, the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS)/ Mellon. At USF, The Outstanding Thesis/Dissertation (OTD) Awards are intended to recognize

1 those USF graduates who have demonstrated exceptional performance during their graduate careers at USF and whose thesis or dissertation has resulted in significant impact to the discipline at the National level. Theses and Dissertations submitted for these awards should represent those that are considered to be in the top 2% of their specific discipline …and have resulted in “creative works” that were derived from the thesis/dissertation research. (website, emphasis in original)

Though the departments themselves rarely have printed expectations for what the dissertation is intended to accomplish or what it should look like, the OTDs dictate measured precision – that the winners are within the top 2% of their discipline (line 4). As demonstrated in lines 1-3, the award description also associates a high-quality
dissertation, one defined as having an impact nationally, with excellence as a student, an association that is not always born out in reality. Being a good student does not always naturally transition to the independent work required of the dissertation process. The description reinforces the important identity-formation work that the dissertation achieves for apprentices within discourse communities.

Unlike the departmental handbooks, the OTD descriptions do provide quantifiable benchmarks for what truly makes a research project outstanding, one worthy of reward: creative works derived from the dissertation. According to the OTDs, this includes, but is not limited to, published articles, conference presentations, and received grants and awards. In addition to demonstration of “creative works,” the award candidate must provide a Nomination Form and a Nominating Letter, as well as a “Letter of Impact from a relevant professional outside the student’s committee that addresses the impact of the thesis/dissertation to the discipline,” and a “Statement of Impact/Scope […]” written by the candidate […which] should address in detail WHY the research is significant (upper 2% of the field) and has or will have a major impact on the discipline at the National level. The candidate should also address the originality, innovativeness, and methodological sophistication of the thesis/dissertation research” (website, emphasis in original). Here, a significant contribution gains further definition specificity (within the “upper 2% of the field”), a benchmark that is clearly not accomplished by each dissertator asked to “make a significant contribution to the field” with the dissertation project. The focus on newness, on “originality” and “[innovation]” is balanced with a need for a level of comfort within the discipline, expressed in a “methodological sophistication.”
The USF awards are meant to mirror the values espoused by national award-granting bodies, and USF award recipients are automatically entered into national competitions once they have won at the local level. National award materials reinforce and extend USF OTD criteria. While the awards reward contemporary scholars, the purpose of these awards, generally, is to pave the way for future successful research, to, as Adam Gamoran, an award committee member, describes, “serve as models of high-quality research within their disciplines for others to follow” (n.pg.). In their reflections on successful proposals for the NaEd/Spencer Doctoral Completion Fellowships, the readers expand on the quantifiable aspects of a successful dissertation, and they attempt to articulate the *je ne sais quoi* that constitutes a “significant contribution.” Gamoran identifies the necessary components of a successful dissertation as originality, rigor, relevance, contribution to disciplinary knowledge, and clarity of expression (n.pg.).

Though originality is listed at the top of each award description as the most essential component, in narratives describing winning dissertations, the most important aspect seems to be how it is grounded in what has come before – a conflict between advice and practice that manifests elsewhere in the dissertation genre ecology. Gamoran quickly prefaces his emphasis on the importance of originality with the following: “Of course, this [emphasis on Originality] does not mean it comes out of nowhere [...] but that it brings a fresh perspective whether the topic is brand new or has been addressed many times before” (n.pg.). In this way, originality is directly connected to academic propriety: it must follow certain guidelines and must be original only after appropriately reformulating the past, but descriptors of successful dissertations do not foreground the necessity of appropriate genre knowledge, it is largely assumed, or as illustrated above,
included in a preface. While purporting to value originality above all else, this account functions more as an admonishment that graduate students must successfully perform genre knowledge of the disciplinary community than that they must by necessity add something new.

Since the OTDs and national awards are interdisciplinary, they rely significantly on the notion of the dissertation genre, as opposed to many different disciplinary dissertation(s), and they settle on what they consider universal aspects of success. As evidence of this interdisciplinary tolerance, Gamoran notes that because "rigor" itself is interdisciplinary, it takes many forms. He cautions that “rigor” does not have to equal “quantitative methods,” though it is frequently used as “code” for this methodology. The dissertation is a discursive construct repeated throughout, and it functions as a touchstone for actors to describe and define the social function of the doctoral process. Of course, the award committees do not come to clear agreement on what the dissertation genre is, and they confront the complexity of awarding interdisciplinary awards, acknowledging the necessity of relying “on the expertise of a multidisciplinary group because not only does knowledge differ by discipline, but so do the ways of knowing and ways of communicating knowledge of each discipline” (Moje). This preface embraces the difficulty of the process, but of course, each year they prevail in the face of disciplinary expectations influencing dissertation writing.

The readers all emphasize the importance of clarity of writing, which they associate with clarity of thought. Gamoran writes: “Each [award-winner] lays out [the] argument in plain terms, using technical language as appropriate but without excessive use of jargon that clouds its meaning. While the ideas are often complex, the language is
pointed and concise” (n. pg.). This clear connection of cognition and composition has institutional implications for dissertators, and this association circulates within dissertation genre ecology. Gamoran’s discussion again draws on student awareness of academic propriety, knowing when to employ specific disciplinary terminology and when to draw on “plain terms”; this is no small feat for many dissertators, eager to prove their fluency in disciplinary discourse, not realizing that fluency within the discourse community includes knowing when to code switch, hold the jargon, and be “pointed and concise.”

Gamoran’s colleague, Elizabeth Birr Moje, extends this consideration of audience propriety, explaining: “Studies that communicate beyond their disciplinary domains are not only more likely to win awards (or be recommended for funding), but they are also more likely to have an impact on the field and on learning wherever it occurs. Indeed, it might be argued that what makes an exemplary dissertation exemplary […] is the study’s ability to communicate to a diverse group of readers, a quality that suggests greater likelihood for the study to have an impact in the world” (n.pg.). Here Moje underscores the importance of a successful dissertation to do something, to make an impact beyond the text. These awards are about the future, about offering spring boards for scholars to succeed, gain national recognition, and provide broad impact. Clearly such advice invokes a vastly different audience – an interdisciplinary, engaged audience – than the disciplinary audience assumed in the handbooks. This subtle shift in assumed audience suggests slow genre change. If a dissertation is read by a disciplinary committee, language expectations are very different than that for an award committee, an online audience, or a document, as described by the award grantors, which will have broad
national impact. As Moje articulates, the best dissertations are ones that can “communicate to a diverse group of readers” – this suggests a very different dissertation purpose than that expected by more narrow disciplinary readership.

Similarly, ACLR/Mellon readers consider these four elements when selecting outstanding dissertation award honorees:

1. The potential of the project to advance the field of study in which it is proposed and make an original and significant contribution to knowledge.
2. The quality of the proposal with regard to its methodology, scope, theoretical framework, and grounding in the relevant scholarly literature.
3. The feasibility of the project and the likelihood that the applicant will execute the work within the proposed timeframe.
4. The scholarly record and career trajectory of the applicant. (sic)

These four criteria balance practicality: will the student accomplish his/her goal? And, will this dissertation matter? The four categories largely reproduce the values in the USF and NaEd OTDs, with an interesting caveat. The first successful characteristic emphasizes the two seemingly most important aspects of a successful dissertation, “originality” and “significance.” However, ACLR/Mellon weaves a marriage of the two audiences implied but not explicitly stated in earlier award materials: the dissertation must “advance” the discipline, but it must also be original and significant generally; it must extend outside of the field (criteria 1). Though Moje introduces this goal of a successful dissertation in her narrative discussion of the awards, the ACLR/Mellon guidelines are the only ones that state this explicitly as a requirement of the award.
Criteria two does not quantify “quality” as do the other award descriptions. Instead, this description merely lists the important components of the dissertation genre: “methodology, scope, theoretical framework, and grounding in the relevant scholarly literature.” “Quality” also does not measure “originality,” as in the departmental handbooks and other awards discourse, and this absence mimics the implicit values in earlier awards discourse that value “grounding in the relevant scholarly literature” above all else. The latter two criteria introduce a new measure of project success, the “likelihood” that the author will have a thriving academic career. Though this requirement is similar to the evidence that derived “creative works” provide, this intangible measure of the student herself is noteworthy.

For the most part, the dissertation means different things discursively to departments and award grantors. According to written USF departmental discourse, the dissertation is procedural; it is signing forms, creating committees, and obeying established timelines. What the dissertation does practically is implied – it allows students to graduate and move on to their careers, having successfully made a “significant contribution” to the discipline. However, there is no explication of what “a significant contribution” entails, and there is no consideration of audience beyond the major professor who, at least in the USF history department, is the sole purveyor of information regarding the somewhat mysterious document. For award grantors, the dissertation is inspirational – it facilitates creative works outside of the project itself and spurs national disciplinary action. The descriptions of dissertation awards are implicitly self-referential, suggesting that projects and authors receiving the award’s stamp of approval must make a name for themselves and, by extension, the award. Ultimately, the relationship is based
on the financial transaction: the awardee receives funds and must consequently develop appropriate creative works derived from the project. There is one apparent functional contradiction, however, between the award-grantors and the departmental standards examined here, the impact/contribution to discipline and beyond.

Although it largely goes unexplained in my small sample of meta-genre discourse, the insistence that the dissertation “make a significant contribution to the discipline,” is the sole descriptor of the function of the dissertation within departmental discourse; these findings support MLA’s broader findings. The verbatim repetition of the “significant contribution” renders it clearly important, but essentially meaningless. Such insistence underscores the importance of appropriately accumulating genre knowledge. Students must be able to contribute a “timely” project, demonstrating that they have an awareness of the kairos of their particular field and can act on this knowledge. The award-grantors also repeat this requirement, giving it further shape and definition, insisting that “significance” places a research project within the top 2% of a discipline. However, national contribution seems somewhat at odds with success within the discipline, a place where necessary specialization frequently renders a project unrecognizable to outside readers.

*The Dissertation as Constructed Through Gossip*

The question of the dissertation’s purpose and place in academia circulates in numerous venues outside of departments and award-granting agencies – outside the formal university itself. Over the 2011/2012 winter holidays, the question surfaced on the Writing Program Administration (WPA) listserv, an active digital space for discussion
within Rhetoric and Composition. I have labeled this particular genre gossip because of its informal nature and the superficial “degree of mutual knowledge and trust [presumed] between parties” in this venue (Goldsmith “Constituting” 106); this particular genre of talk is also reminiscent of Stephen North’s concept of lore, disciplinary stories that, though informal, shape and impact the field. The label gossip is not meant to denigrate the forum or discount its importance in the genre ecology; on the contrary, this instance of meta-genre discourse is, unlike the two genres I previously examined, naturally occurring talk about dissertations not primarily intended to teach genre. Online conversational genres such as listserv discussions are increasingly interesting territory for genre theorists. Tom Erickson’s work on CMC offers a useful taxonomy to understand the life of a particular conversation thread. In examining online conversational genres that constitute the genre ecology of his workplace, Erickson identifies three “ecological properties”: “global pull,” which describes what drives users to the system generally; “topical pull,” which describes how particular conversations engage users; and “conversational impetus,” which describes how likely a user is to stay engaged with a particular conversation based on context.

The impressive topical pull of one particular conversation on the WPA listserv regarding dissertation definition is indicated in Table 2.0. The global pull of the WPA-listserv itself is the gossipy way that academic issues are addressed. The conversational impetus is easily measured by Table 2.0, which shows how long the conversation lasted and how it changed name as interest seemed to drop off. Further genre analysis of the conversation itself explains how these factors function within the dissertation genre ecology. It is also important to note that users engage with the conversations on the WPA
listerv differently because of the method with which they receive messages. Of the 3,577 current WPA listerv subscribers, 948 (26.5%) receive posts once a day in “digest” form (Barry Maid, personal communication). So, only a quarter of subscribers see the data aggregated as Table 2 does; the majority of users receive messages as they are composed.

The conversation that I address continued for an entire week in various forms: the initial thread was directly followed by a transitional thread that surfaced midway throughout the conversation. In total, there were 87 messages regarding the first question and 18 messages responding to the second version of the question (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread title</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Messages #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to finish your dissertation?</td>
<td>1/9/12</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to finish your dissertation?</td>
<td>1/10/12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to finish your dissertation?</td>
<td>1/11/12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to finish your dissertation?</td>
<td>1/12/12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to finish your dissertation?</td>
<td>1/13/12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well related was your dissertation to your prof. life post PHD?</td>
<td>1/13/12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well related was your dissertation to your prof. life post PHD?</td>
<td>1/14/12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well related was your dissertation to your prof. life post PHD?</td>
<td>1/15/12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well related was your dissertation to your prof. life post PHD?</td>
<td>1/16/12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial question thread began on January 9th, 2012; it was titled “How long did it take you to finish your dissertation?” and is reproduced in its entirety here:

1. Inside Higher Ed has an article reporting on discussion about the dissertation in the humanities: [http://ow.ly/8mKbi](http://ow.ly/8mKbi)
2. The article leads with the fact that the average student takes 9 years to get the diss finished. That fact didn't hit home for me till I read the next
Richard E. Miller, an English professor at Rutgers University's main campus in New Brunswick, said that the nine-year period means that those finishing dissertations today started them before Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Kindles, iPads or streaming video had been invented.

Yeah, in 9 years quite a bit can change. So I’m wondering how long it took some of you to get the diss finished. Do the details in that article ring true for you and the students in your programs?

Traci Gardner

Gardner begins with a citation (lines 1-2) that is followed by a summary (lines 3-4), a reading narrative (lines 4-5), a quotation (lines 6-9), and then she transitions to her ultimate question (lines 10-12), asking for personal connections to the article. The opening statistic shocks and puts the academic “crisis” into stark relief, and Gardner further builds the crisis, by pulling out the piece of the article that “hit home” for her – “that the nine-year period means that those finishing dissertations today started them before Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Kindles, iPads or streaming video had been invented” (lines 7-9). Essentially, technology functions in dog years, and the unstated implication is that dissertations that take nearly a decade to complete are old and outdated. The cultural landmarks of Web 2.0 underscored the problematic nature of the dissertation for Gardner, and, given the clear topical pull of her thread, a significant population of users on the listserv as well. In the lexicon of the more formal meta-genre discourse examined earlier in this chapter, Gardner questions what “significant contribution” dissertators can make to the field when their work is just too old. Instead of
stating this cold suggestion, Gardner takes a softer tack, turning the dramatic statistic into a request for academic show and tell.

Although this is a highly academic musing, her tone and diction – “Yeah, in 9 years quite a bit can change” (line 10) – underscores the purpose of the listserv, to be an informal space for casual discussion of formal academic concerns. This highly stylized mix of formal, informal, casual, academic requires sophisticated genre knowledge, and successful discussion on the listserv solidifies membership within the discourse community. Apprentice members frequently confess to reading the listserv before contributing; for instance, consider the preface to a thread regarding ESL administration: “Hi Folks, I've been lurking on the list for a little while, and this is my first time posting” (“ESL Coordinator”). Gardner’s appropriate tone and her casual approach to a formal request for evidence-based perspectives suggest her comfort within the space. Her question gives way to definitions of what the dissertation is and what it should be, and the discussion highlights some of the dissertation discrepancies – as described by departments and award-grantors.

On January 12, 2012 Alex Reid responds to Gardner’ question. His response is 62nd in the chain of response. I have selected Reid’s response to examine because he takes time to summarize the previous ideas addressed in the thread and produces a pattern of response replicated throughout the larger discussion, a rhetorical move often repeated mid-way through long conversation threads such as this:

1 Marcia, I agree with what you’re saying here, and I think this perspective is in line with several views offered in this thread in suggesting that there are many reasons why

3 doctoral students take 5 or more years, after their exams, to write their dissertations or
just end up ABD. My wife is ABD from her lit phd because she found her committee so
difficult to work with and the general culture of the program so toxic. It's sadly not an
unfamiliar story.

But I think this NSF report and the MLA business is a different issue. This is not about
judging students. It's about evaluating programs and perhaps the general culture of
English/humanities phds. I would like to be able to meet prospective graduate students,
look them in the eye, and say, we will give you a 5-year TA-ship and many of our TAs
complete their dissertation in 5 years, so it's reasonable to expect that you can as well.

However we define the dissertation, I would argue that it should be a text (in whatever
media) that can be reasonably composed in two years by the typical, full-time doctoral
candidate. Or more importantly that we might rethink the preparation we give students
leading up to their dissertation writing phase, as well as the support network they have
while writing. Ultimately these will be local matters though I think we can benefit from a
national conversation about what seems to be working.

best, Alex

Like other responses, Reid begins with agreement and summary of the argument
thus far (lines 1-4). Then he transitions to a personal anecdote, offering individual
reasons for scholars not finishing the PhD and gesturing to larger institutional reasons for
lack of completion (lines 4-6). Next Reid moves to the meat of his post, defining the
dissertation’s function and offering suggestions for revision. Though Reid cites both a
personal reason, his wife’s committee, and an institutional reason that his wife did not
complete her doctorate, a “toxic” program, he focuses on the institutional angle in his
advice on how to redefine the dissertation. In fact, he turns the discussion by taking
accountability away from individuals entirely, positing that it is “not about judging students. It’s about evaluating programs and perhaps the general culture” (lines 7-8). His suggested changes are aimed at making the process more “reasonable,” particularly in regard to timely completion. However, reasonable is a word not usually employed in discussions of the dissertation process, and, in fact, many posters that argue that the timeline is just fine, suggest that writing a dissertation is not grounded in reason. Instead, it is an extended intellectual process, and the pain, thus the learning, is the reason.

Reid cites faculty accountability as a reason to support purposeful genre change. He describes wanting to “be able to meet prospective graduate students, look them in the eye, “and let them know that they have a reasonable chance of success (Lines 9-10). Implicitly, graduate student failure reflects poorly on faculty, and large-scale, disciplinary difficulty calls into question institutional purpose. In line 12, Reid suggests that the problems associated with the dissertation are related to definition, and he gestures toward expanding acceptance of what a dissertation is and can be in regard to form. Though Reid touches on this briefly, he cites that “more importantly” (line 14), students need significant assistance accumulating genre knowledge so that they can be successful in their ultimate performance of this knowledge. Somewhat strangely, after describing these institutional problems in depth and suggesting institutional reform, Reid backs away from these critiques. Ultimately, Reid concludes that, though these problems are institutional and should be discussed widely, they must be handled “locally.”

Whereas Reid’s post offers better support as a way to redefine the dissertation, some other frequent suggestions are harnessing new media opportunities and looking to other disciplines for a model. In the 104 messages that respond to Traci Gardner’s
original question, repeated rhetorical moves constitute a genre norm in terms of listserv post form: Scholars begin with an acknowledgement of the something said in a previous post, and then there is a turn to disagreement or extension of the aforementioned point as embodied in Reid’s account. Beyond individual posts, the accumulated thread itself has an interesting life: it starts with something very different than what it becomes. Within the chain of response, periodically there is a repeated claim, a breach in the discourse which is corrected either politely, bluntly, or purposely ignored; in these latter instances, the discussion goes on without recognition. Ultimately, what seems to make the greatest impact in terms of changing the tone and focus of the discourse are a few, limited, what I will call “transitional posts,” that successfully turn the conversational tides. In Erickson’s framework, the conversational impetus is such that these posts require little energy on the part of its audience and thus sustain their life in the thread.

In this thread, there are numerous attempts at turning the course of the discussion, but there is only one “transitional post” that is successful and has a topical pull sufficient to draw users – I am measuring success in this case as a change in the thread title. On January 13\textsuperscript{th}, four days after the discussion began, Marcia Ribble posted her eleventh post within the thread, and she offered a new question for the group, “How well related was your dissertation to your professional life post PhD?” Ribble’s post is included below:

Fred,

What you’ve said brings up something I’ve long been a bit curious about. I wonder how many of us have written anything in our dissertations even remotely connected to the work we end up doing in our jobs post PhD. Connected to that is the question of whether we were "allowed" to choose our own topic or given a topic by our committee, or some portion thereof.

Marcia
Ribble’s question asks posters to make a practical connection between dissertation work and professional work. To answer this institutional question, she solicits individual answers. Although this question is embedded within her post and does not have a question mark, this invocation is accepted as a legitimate turn, and the members involved in the previous discussion transition to the new thread, tailoring their answers appropriately to consider this new emphasis.

The implication in her first question – “I wonder how many of us have written anything in our dissertations even remotely connected to the work we end up doing on our jobs post PhD” (lines 2-4) – is that dissertations in Rhetoric & Composition are not aligned with professional work, especially because the field is so young and many scholars did not actually write Rhetoric & Composition dissertations. The second question (lines 4-6) also implies rigidity within programs, questioning how much student freedom is “allowed” in programs. Ultimately, Ribble’s questions theorize that dissertations in Rhetoric and Composition are not aligned with professional work and do not serve a professional function in terms of content study; however, clearly following the genre expectations of tone and style on the listserv, Ribble embeds her argument, opening up her post to questions and invited anecdotes.

Like Ribble, David Schwalm also attempts to turn the discourse on January 13th, positing:

1. The traditional dissertation seems to have become an all-disciplines default exercise that has become increasingly inappropriate. It may well be out of sync, as Fred notes, with “the nature of how knowledge is made in our field.” Thus it becomes [a]“symbol”
2. of a student’s readiness for full participation in the club rather than “evidence” of readiness. Symbols tend to be laden with hazing and hoop jumping. What constitutes
Like Ribble, Schwalm’s question has no punctuation to mark it as such, but “What constitutes evidence of readiness is a much more interesting question” (lines 5-6) offers a new, practical turn in the discourse. Though Schwalm follows the form of previous posts – he begins by quoting a previous post and attempts to extend the discussion – his request for information is ignored. The tone of the post differs from Ribble’s: it is overtly critical, whereas Ribble’s only implies trouble. Schwalm draws a distinction between the dissertation functioning as a symbol instead of evidence, seriously drawing into question the dissertation’s place and purpose in the field. In the sea of tepid criticism that marks this particular WPA thread, Schwalm’s pointed critique stands out sharply, warning of practical answers to the questions tossed around. However, this interest is not picked up, and Schwalm’s response is ignored in lieu of Ribble’s question.

The fact that Ribble’s suggested topic change is adopted instead of Schwalm’s signals what is valued on the listserv. Though much of the initial thread’s discussion focused on the importance of appropriately preparing students for the dissertation process, when asked to concretize this issue, posters had nothing to contribute because the conversational impetus of offering specific solutions is too great. Instead, Ribble’s institutional question linking the dissertation with what comes next, one that asks scholars to include personal anecdotes, requires little effort on behalf of the audience. Ribble returns us to MLA’s point, that the dissertation is connected, symbolically and practically to the general health of academia. Such discussion and the recognition of these
implicit rules helps define what meta-genre looks like within the dissertation genre ecology, it underscores the purpose and function of definition discourse, and it highlights the difficulty and effort necessary for action beyond complaint.

**Conclusion: Contributions to the Dissertation Genre Ecology**

As venues, graduate handbooks, award descriptions, and listserv conversations constitute genres in themselves, complete with norms, expectations, and certain recognizable elements that mark them as members of the class. These three sources contribute to dissertation discourse ecology by offering distinctly different versions of what the dissertation is and should be, each signaling the disparate goals and values of the particular institutional actor. So, I pause to consider how these accounts construct dissertation ecology.

- How is the dissertation genre constituted in online meta-genre discourse?

The departments examined within the College of Arts and Sciences at USF are motivated by a need to communicate procedural items to students. Thus, their written accounts of the dissertation chronicle what, where, and when forms must be submitted. The award grantors are motivated by a desire for awarded dissertators to live up to their academic promise and thus shape national conversations and research. In their writing, the institutional mandate, to “make a significant contribution” gains meaning and measure. Thus, they constitute the dissertation as a document that does something for an audience outside of the home discipline. The different voices on the listserv are unified by a desire to preserve the institution that they represent, to produce successful graduate students and redefine the dissertation in ways that make graduate education more
responsible, but there are no plans for action developed. In fact, when action is called for or when overt reform is recommended, the author retreats or is ignored. There is tacit recognition that listservs are for talking, for defining, for sharing personal anecdotes, for filling out an academic ethos, but not for doing. For the listserv, the dissertation is a problem to be mused about; it is constituted as a collage of different personal experiences and institutional inequalities.

- How does online meta-genre discourse fit into the dissertation genre ecology map?

Although these constructions of the genre emerge in different contexts – two are explicit, fairly prescriptive accounts of how a dissertation must be produced, and the latter is an invited discussion that gives way to suggestions about genre reform – each offers a provocative window into dissertation meta-genre discourse. For students, the handbook is often the first information they receive about the dissertation, whereas the award documents are most likely read by dissertators knee-deep in the process. Unlike these websites, the listserv is more focused on a particular disciplinary identity within the humanities; however, it also has a broad readership beyond graduate students, and the discussion, though not tailored to them, is often read by lurking dissertators, constructing professional ethos and building genre knowledge.

As such, these accounts of the dissertation occupy an important role within the ecology, each further specifying what the dissertation entails and what it means, whether that is centered around signing appropriate documentation and meeting deadlines (within handbooks), making good on a financial transaction (for awards), or gauging the health of graduate education at large (on the listserv). These connections emphasize Spinuzzi’s
notions of contingency and decentralization within genre ecologies, which demonstrate how genres are impacted by each other sometimes accidentally, and disparate genres exert influence on others without drawing direct connections. Figure 2.0 maps this discourse within the ecology, emphasizing how meta-genre acts on the dissertation genre. In this figure, I have focused entirely on how meta-genre influences the dissertation.

![Figure 2. Meta-genre Influences on the Dissertation Genre Ecology](image)

Each account relies heavily on presumed shared knowledge of the genre and traditional assumptions of what a dissertation must be. Based on this written discourse, the primary function of the dissertation is to make “a significant contribution,” but this empty admonition takes on different purpose across the three accounts. For dissertators
relying on handbooks, the notion that their work must make a contribution is the only explanation of what a dissertation must do for others – they know what it is supposed to do for them, and the handbooks are full of how to complete the PhD procedurally. The notion of a significant contribution in terms of award guidelines asks students to consider themselves in the academic hierarchy and judge their worth in relation to their peers. The listserv posters question whether the “significant contribution” produced by the dissertation is an indicator of later professional success; most posters seem to think the two contributions are not aligned, and thus, the dissertation is frequently not a legitimate contribution to the discipline but a procedural gateway into the field.

These micro-analyses of the meta-genres surrounding the dissertation text reveal the discrepancy between the stated values of dissertation writing, and perhaps more importantly, the implicit expectations associated with the genre. Examined together, these three genres demonstrate the gap in explicit attempts to teach genre knowledge as revealed by the MLA survey, the characteristics of contemporary genre writing valued by various university stakeholders, and the recognition by faculty that there is a problem. To clarify, the implications of these findings are not that handbooks and dissertation definitions should prescriptively detail what a dissertation entails in the particular discipline – this would certainly be impossible and counterproductive. However, more explicit discussion should be dedicated to the particular rhetorical context of a dissertation and what it should do in a given program. Genre-based consideration of the rhetorical moves a dissertation must make and the intellectual space it must embody would be helpful to clarify the process for graduate students. The forms and process are undoubtedly important, but the sole focus on these elements leave graduate students often
floundering, as will be made clear in the next chapter. Chapter three will address how advice such as that detailed in this chapter impacts dissertators.
Chapter 3. Dissertating Student Experiences with Writing

Dissertation Writing Epigram

1 S: Yeah I think that [the dissertation’s] pretty […] a lot of people outside of academia
2 don’t see it as this (.2) they see it as the ivory tower (.2) they don’t see it as this (.2)
3 Shakespearean (.2) stab each other in the [back
4 G: [hahaha
5 D: [Y:es

This excerpt is a brief but dramatic moment of talk from a focus group I conducted of dissertating students’ writing experiences, which offers an invited instance of spoken meta-genre discourse. This initial excerpt comes from within a discussion of the dissertation’s function. In describing the struggle she has had writing her dissertation, one respondent, Sally (denoted in the transcript as ‘S’), accounts for the apparent difference between the way “they,” outside of academia, and “us,” those of us within the academy, perceive the dissertation. In lines 1-2, Sally posits that outside of academia there is a vision of the dissertation as glamorous, highly privileged pleasure. In contrast, she describes the grim, bloody reality of dissertation writing as Shakespearean (line 3). This chapter explores graduate student perspectives on the dissertation writing process such as these, mapping their place within the dissertation genre ecology. In examining these accounts, my purpose is two-fold. I ask the following questions:

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3 See Appendix A for a transcription key.
• How do student considerations of genre constitute the dissertation genre?

• Where does this meta-genre talk fit within the dissertation genre ecology?

Though graduate students write dissertations, are the ones for whom the writing struggle is most acute, and are most implicated in conversations regarding genre change, their voices are notably absent from discussions about dissertation development and change. In this chapter, I take into account how doctoral student experiences – both their struggles and their successes – contribute to the dissertation genre ecology and affect change.

There are six students in this focus group, all of whom come from different home departments within the social sciences and humanities. Although each student has an entirely different dissertation project, the entire group uses/used qualitative methods as part of their research project. I recruited these students from a self-selected population of students that attended a Dissertation Forum offered in the summer of 2011 by the Writing Center in collaboration with the library and the graduate school. The forum invited an interdisciplinary mix of students to attend two days of workshops, seminars, and individual writing consultations. The purpose of the forum was to breed a sense of community among interdisciplinary doctoral students and allow them to learn about the dissertation process from professors, support staff, and each other. Thus, all of the students in the consequent focus group had sought assistance outside of their department and committee, and these six students were eager to further discuss their experiences when I invited them to participate. After accepting my initial invitation, I corresponded with students individually regarding an appropriate time to meet. In our meeting, I described the purpose of my study and explained and distributed the Informed Consent Document (See Appendix B).
The purpose of this small sample is to offer a window into dissertating student experiences; though specific experiences vary by discipline and particular context, the focus group data provides information about the institutional discourse of the dissertation process, and thus shows the constraints on student writing. Though the focus group offers an instance of invited talk, it provides “insiders” explicitly discussing how they “acquire and strategically deploy genre knowledge as they participate in their field’s or profession's knowledge-producing activities” (Berkenkotter & Huckin “Rethinking” 477). As such, this focus group situates the process of dissertation writing, offering a window into genre-in-action.

In the following, I present excerpts of the hour-long focus group discussion and analyze these interactions using Discourse Analysis (DA). My transcription and analysis is highly influenced by DA traditions in genre analysis in Rhetoric and Composition (Barton; Huckin; Thompson), but I’m also cognizant of how these traditions have largely been adapted from language and interaction in Communication studies (Haspel & Tracy; Bartesaghi). I transcribe using an intermediate level of detail in order to capture interactional features of the discussion such as overlapping, pauses, and laughter. This kind of analysis encourages close examination of actual talk, which allows me to make explicit the often taken for granted institutional constraints that guide discourse. Additionally, by transcribing spoken discourse as it occurs without “cleaning up” conversation to rid it of pauses and other various discourse markers, I examine the transcript as talk influenced by the particular context in which it occurs, in this case, responses that are shaped by the focus group schedule that I authored (Wilkinson). After
my transcription and analysis, I developed a posteriori categories to organize the
discussion and describe student concerns addressed in the focus group (Swales Genre).

In order to keep the identities of my focus group participants anonymous, I have
redacted information from the transcript that specifies their home department, project
details, or faculty members. I have numbered each line in the transcript in keeping with
most DA practice to specifically reference particular moments in the transcript for
analysis. Both in the transcript and in my analysis, I refer to respondents by pseudonyms,
represented in the transcripts by first initials. My use of gendered pronouns is based on
my knowledge of the actual focus group participants, five of whom are women, and one
of whom is a man.

Within the transcript, ‘G’ represents the group, which often seems to respond
together, laughing or offering sympathetic support as deemed appropriate. Though there
is difference within the “group,” and I do not wish to suggest that they have the same
response to all comments, sometimes individual voices are indiscernible when a joke
elicits laughter or a sad story invites sighs and empathetic agreement. In this way, the
designate ‘G’ serves a transcription necessity, and in my analysis such responses
attributed to the group reveal expected responses that signal “appropriate,” “polite”
reactions to group talk. As the facilitator of the group, my questions and comments are
denoted with ‘F.’ Although I prepared a focus group schedule (See Appendix C)
(Wilkinson), I began the discussion by encouraging participants to not feel hemmed in by
my questions and to instead let the conversation go wherever they were interested.

I have selected four excerpts that address four different constructions of the
dissertation: as arbiter of personal success, as metaphorical construct, as agent of genre
change, and as sacrificial text. I begin each section with the excerpt itself, which usually includes both my question as the facilitator and student responses. I continue with an examination and interpretation of the transcript excerpt, and I follow with an analysis of what each particular account offers in terms of a better understanding of dissertating students’ experiences with genre. Finally, I consider how graduate student talk shapes the larger dissertation genre ecology.

Dissertation as Arbiter of Personal Success

The first excerpt, produced below, takes place early in the focus group discussion and addresses how students negotiate notions of personal academic success as related to their particular writing experiences.

132  F:  Um do you think that the advice that you’ve gotten (.) has it differed on the source (.2) depending on the source that gives it to you?
133  D:  Other um students or people have who have just recently finished have given the advice about you know just get it done the best dissertations a done dissertation just (.2) get through it and then people (.2) you know faculty (.2) oh enjoy the dissertating process and uh and that’s like an oxymoron to me like (. ) I am not enjoying any part of this [just hm that might just be me haha I
139  R:  [oh that’s so sad I’m sorry to hear that
140  D:  I just want [to get done and it uh
141  R:  [I’m sorry to hear that because I kinda a um I kinda have the opposite feeling (.2) about it that I guess if you look at it as a task (.5) and you don’t have any passion for the subject (.2) you know I I uh I wouldn’t be in a situation like that (.2) and so I am enjoying it=
144  D:  =yeah
146  R:  Uh finally after getting through some initial anxiety about it (.5) some real anxiety about it (.) um (1) you know I’m just enjoying the journey (. ) I really am I’m just I feel like I’m learning new skills (. ) I’m learning how to be a researcher and it’s it’s with that attitude toward it (.) it makes me feel better about it (.3) about the task (.) you know (.2)
because I feel like I’ll come out of this with some skills and so- some competences that
have what I want (. ) but the passion drives me I like I like the topic
And I think part of it is is like (.2) I lo:ve my topic
D:  But I think the issue comes with (.2) the committee (. ) the committee who does not like
you o:r you know (.5) they don’t give feedback or they don’t want (. ) like one thing (. )
when you’re done with all three chapters, send it to them and then there’s no feedback
at all

I begin this excerpt of the focus group conversation by eliciting dissertation-
writing advice students have received during their process, and I encourage them to
consider the source of the advice (lines 132-133). Although Diane responds to the initial
question with a cliché, explaining that students told her to just get through the
dissertation, that, “the best dissertation’s a done dissertation,” in line 138 she pauses
briefly, and the tone of her response quickly changes as she turns to advice she has
received from faculty. She calls the suggestion that she might actually enjoy the
dissertation process an “oxymoron,” and declares that the entire process has been
miserable. However, before Diane can finish her complaint about the process, Ray
overlaps her account, talking over her dissatisfaction and holding the floor with his
response. His overlap is condescending, attributing her negative experience to a lack of
engagement. Ray suggests: “I guess if you look at it as a task (.5) and you don’t have any
passion for the subject (. ),” you won’t be successful (lines 144-145). Ray offers a pause
after this declaration, 0.5 seconds, allowing the critique to sink in before following up
with further judgment about appropriate relationships between students and projects.

Ray continues his account of what it takes to have a productive dissertation
experience, suggesting that in order to “[enjoy] the journey” (line 149), one must
approach the process with the appropriate attitude (lines 150-151). In this response, Ray
outlines his idea of the purpose of a dissertation: to give new skills, to teach how to be a researcher, and to offer institutional competencies (lines 149-152). Ultimately, Ray associates a level of success in these goals with personal engagement and the level of “passion” that “drives” project completion (line 153). The implicit, not so subtle suggestion of Ray’s account is that Diane’s negative experience can be attributed to her lack of passion for her topic.

After Ray completes his turn of talk, Diane quickly returns to her project discussion, defending her experience against what she reads as Ray’s accusations. She corrects him in line 152, emphasizing that her unhappiness precisely stems from the fact that she “like (.2)[loves]” her topic, the pause highlighting her correction of Ray’s implied insult. She quickly turns to what she names as the focus of her problem, “the committee who does not like you” (lines 156-157). The question’s initial elicitation quickly turns to a disagreement over what it takes to be successful – a discussion with meaty consequences. Throughout her explanation, Diane pauses after listing each cause for her lack of success, trying to get the reasons right in light of this face-threatening attack by Ray. Interestingly, although Diane and Ray clearly disagree with each other, they offer tacit agreement midway through each other’s accounts; their agreement underscores their acceptance of how a polite disagreement is supposed to take place (Brown & Levinson).

However, instead of accepting the accusation of personal failure Ray suggests, Diane shifts the blame for her difficulty onto her committee, the one that does not like her and does not send her work back within a timely manner (lines 158-159). Here Diane introduces an important motif within dissertation discourse, one that circulates in many
conversations – including those addressed in the previous chapter – that within the dissertation process, there are numerous factors outside of student control. For many, this is one of the most frustrating elements of the process.

I selected this excerpt because it introduces a tense question among the participants that comes up repeatedly in the focus group: why do some students have positive experiences with the dissertation process while others struggle? In Diane’s account, she details her difficulty with the dissertation writing-process, and Ray quickly tries to find an answer to her problem. His solution is to blame the difficulty on Diane, and her answer is to attribute the trouble institutionally, to a “committee who does not like you” (lines 154-155). This disagreement in largely addressed in higher education attrition studies (Golde and Dore).

By eliciting this particular clichéd advice, “to enjoy the dissertating process” (lines 136-137), I as the facilitator introduce a discourse which functions to divide students into successful, happy dissertators, and sad failures. Ray reinforces the function of this advice by overlapping Diane’s complaint about her experience with “Oh that’s so sad I’m sorry to hear that,” aggressively emphasizing her missed opportunity to “enjoy” the dissertation process (lines 141, 138). Here, how you write is connected to who you are, and having the right “attitude” and “passion” is discursively aligned with personal success, academic worth, and overall goodness. Thus, the moral failings of being a dissertator who does not enjoy the experience piles on top of the literal fact of the writing struggle.

Ultimately, Ray’s advice to Diane boils down to a recommendation about genre. Had she a better understanding of what a dissertation entails, of what kind of passion a
topic should elicit, she might have a better go of it, and she might be more personally successful. This “culture of blame” (Parry, Disciplines 33) that identifies problems with the dissertation primarily as a result of some sort of student “lack” (S. Gardner 104) is pervasive in higher education. Both Ray and Diane identify themselves in relation to their projects, but they assign success/failure in different places:

One’s subjectivity is defined in part by one’s relationship to and understanding of the object/motive, and how to manipulate the meditational means in terms of the object/motive. As such, subjectivity and identity are bound up in genre knowledge and performance, as we are constantly accomplishing ourselves and our objectives/motives as we enact them through our mediational means. (Bawarshi & Reiff 104)

Bawarshi and Reiff’s delineation of the relationships between genre knowledge and subjectivity is useful for reading the interaction between Ray and Diane. In this account, Ray manipulates his version of dissertation success in a personal way, implicitly suggesting that his relative enjoyment and passion for his topic has allowed him to be successful. Throughout this talk (lines 148-153), he repeatedly considers how he is personally developing as a researcher, making consistent use of the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ throughout.

On the other hand, Diane disaffiliates from the difficulty of dissertation writing, attempting to generalize her experience for others; as others have observed (Haspel and Tracy; Fairclough; Pantelides and Bartesaghi), in tense situations pronouns can function in myriad ways: to claim, to sympathize, or to distance, as in this instance. Diane employs the second person, switching mid-sentence to emphasize what happens to a
dissertation once it is out of your control: “I think the issue comes with (.) the committee (.) the committee who does not like you” (lines 156-157, emphasis added).

Unlike Ray’s eager claims on his project and his willingness to identify himself as a researcher and expert, Diane’s difficulty with the process prevents her from taking responsibility, and she is quick to ease the burden of trouble onto the shoulders of others.

The source of their disagreement can be read as what Cheryl Geisler identifies as the problem of elite, academic expertise, which seems to require all the stars to be aligned. Once a problem is introduced, such as “the committee who does not like you,” it prevents an individual from navigating successfully between expert and novice communities. As Geisler describes: “Real expertise thus seems to require a tacking back and forth between […] worlds, a movement like Alice though the looking glass where, on either side, the world seems to be the same, but not the same” (250).

The polite, but tense interaction between Ray and Diane shows how advice circulates within dissertation genre ecology and how it impacts dissertators. Clichés are repeated by students and faculty, and they serve to either cause friction, for dissertators whose experiences differ from what a dissertation experience is supposed to be, or for dissertators whose experiences are aligned with the advice, these clichés serve to solidify the notion that these students are on the right track. Consequently, positive/negative experiences of dissertators seem to impact the extent to which writers identify as experts, responsible for their project, and whether or not they accept the dissertation as indicator of personal success.
It’s an endurance contest

[A rite of passage (.) Ok.

We have had a few people just drop out of uh my [program

 Cause they just couldn’t deal with the pressure. And they got through classes (.) They all got through classes you know? But they (.) and some through comps (.) it’s just

research is really challenging (.) so I want to say it’s a self directed learning project

It’s very odd. You’re on your own it’s gone from coursework from being social learning to being singular learning

Isolated?

Isolated. More feeling isolated than past (.) And it’s your own project (.) so it’s not like anybody else’s (.) and I know people who have done (.) dissertations (.) who have literally had (.) um (.) like a great dissertation they could follow that was similar (.) but mine is so different that I’m writing it completely off the top of my head (.) and it’s completely my work (.) and that has been more difficult cause I don’t even have somebody I’m sitting next to that is similar that I can talk to about my ideas except my professor (.) so (.) I think that’s been (.) what I’ve had to

I think it’s a learning process (.) This is a learning document (.) it’s

I would say besides all of that because I agree with all of that (.) I see it as a representation of what you want hopefully to spend the rest of your life researching (.) so (.) for me (.) I tried to find a really big question (.) and then find the really beginning questions to that and that’s my dissertation so that (.) so when I graduate and go on to apply places I can say well this is what I did but this is where I see it taking me so besides the learning opportunity I see it as kind of like your (.) like your badge of honor

[Okay okay yeah

like your access card or something like that [Here is showing you

[Uh huh

that I can research it and I want to do for (.) for my life (2)
J: Mine was just a stretch
F: Yeah?
J: Yeah (.) I’m I’m still not sure that I understand everything that I talked about you know ha
G: [haha yeah? haha
((unintelligible agreement and laughter))

As asked to define the dissertation, the group begins by throwing out tried and true maxims for what the dissertation represents, “an endurance contest” and a “rite of passage” (lines 316, 318). These clichés are met with loud, overlapping group laughter, but the light tone is quickly complicated by Sally’s addition in line 322, highlighting the “pressure” of the dissertation process and explicating what specific kind of “endurance contest” the dissertation constitutes (line 324). She reports that drop-out students in her program were able to handle the entire graduate student load except for the dissertation. Mary quickly adds to Sally’s formulation of the dissertation as markedly different than the rest of the doctoral student experience, commenting that the research is “challenging” (line 327), particularly because the work is self-regulated. She explains, “You’re on your own it’s gone from being social learning to being singular learning” (lines 329-330). Thus, the group collaboratively constitutes dissertation writing as difficult, as a test of endurance that one must take on individually, and as a practice entirely different than coursework – not the natural progression assumed by the dissertation process.

Mary stays focused on the notion of the dissertation as an entirely individual project, describing her feelings of isolation, a word I introduce in line 331 to describe her account. She suggests that unlike other students, who reportedly have a dissertation model to follow, she is truly alone, and she must develop her project “off of the top of [her] head” (line 339), disregarding the assertion in the written discourse examined in
chapter two that originality comes second to a firm grounding in disciplinary literature. The discussion quickly moves from repeating clichés to more in-depth consideration of what it means to complete a dissertation. Within this excerpt, Kelly’s response is the most developed and idyllic. Her definition of the dissertation offers an astute, thoughtful approach to the process, describing how she selected a research question with a broad scope so that later on the job market she “can say well this is what I did but this is where I see it taking me” (line 344). Thus, in closing her account, she returns to the original format of the conversation, offering a cliché to represent her idea: the dissertation as “access card” (line 347).

As the only focus group participant who has successfully defended and completed the dissertation process, Jan wraps up the definition discussion with humor, labeling her experience a “stretch.” In contrast to Kelly’s sincere account – that completing the dissertation process will allow her to proceed with research that she wants to do “for (.) for my life (2)” (line 349) – Jan jokes that she is not sure that she even understood everything she wrote about in her project. This dramatic difference, between the earnest, painful metaphors produced by the dissertators, and the light humor Jan offers, emphasizes the difference between their positions: the eager doctoral candidates, and the successful PhD. In this interaction, the tone of the discourse quickly changes for the respondent with “access card” in hand.

The participants offer both process and product metaphors, all of which orient around dissertation writing and its consequence. The comparisons are loosely divided into physical metaphors and more literal process analogies. The more abstract, physical metaphors – the endurance contest, the rite of passage, and the stretch – invoke the
dissertation as something important to do. Though the metaphors have to do with accomplishment, they are not entirely optimistic; there is also the association of having to get through something unpleasant – more like a root canal than summiting a mountain. The accreditation metaphors – the badge of honor and the access card – construct the dissertation as representative, acknowledging that the writer has done something difficult, something worthy of passing into a privileged community. More literally, the self-directed learning project and the learning document highlight the idealized, oft stated purpose of the dissertation: to teach students how to be researchers. These metaphors emphasize the taken for granted pedagogy of the dissertation: through writing and researching you learn how to be a writer and a researcher – genre knowledge is acquired through action. In this construction the dissertation is not a professional document but a jungle-gym, a space for novices to play at being experts.

In the short exchange that begins this excerpt, the group ‘G’ acts like a Greek chorus, orienting to the clichés and agreeing to their representation of the experience with loud, repeated laughter, familiar genres of speech appropriate to the particular conversation moment. As Berkenkotter and Huckin describe, “Because it is impossible for us to dwell in the social world without repertoires and thank-yous [...] we use genres to package our speech and make of it a recognizable response to the exigencies of the situation” (“Rethinking” 482). As a demonstration of such social understanding, the group is quickly silenced when Mary introduces trouble by describing her feelings of isolation at the hands of her dissertation project. To borrow Gail Jefferson’s terms, the group is ‘laugh-receptive,’ but they recognize that as soon as something is at stake in an utterance – S's reminder of the possibility of failure and Mary's claims of isolation –
laughter is inappropriate. However, at the end of the excerpt, when the trouble seems to have passed and Jan lightens the mood once again with her admission, “I’m still not sure I understand everything that I talked about,” the laughter resumes and the group eagerly moves on. This knowledge of the game, the norms associated with genre writing, including meta-genre concerns, demonstrates successful uptake of genre knowledge within the group.

Within this discussion, as in Excerpt 2, clichés are repeated to and by students, and their discursive impact is palpable in interactions such as these. In this excerpt, the clichés function to represent shared experience and provide maxims to allow those of disparate experiences to relate, to put convenient words to a complex process. The conversation constructs a notion of the dissertation apart from concerns about disciplinarity and form. What is perhaps as interesting as the descriptors used to define the dissertation are the ways to describe what it is not; in concluding this discussion thread, Mary posits: “when I started this I was like (.) I don't think I can write a dissertation I don’t think I’m quite that smart (.2) umm and I realized it’s not about being smart any more (.2) [it’s] about being there and doing the work that gets you there” (lines 728-731). Mary’s declaration further explains the physical metaphors that surface in response to a request for dissertation definition. In constructing the dissertation for these graduate students, brains are not the primary requirement for success: work is – thus the focus on physicality in metaphors of the process. These constructions of the dissertation complicate the binary often created in scholarship on dissertation supervision, which constitutes the dissertation as “either a training exercise or an original contribution to
scholarship; the student an apprentice to a faculty member or an independent scholar; the goal scholarly creativity or speedy completion” (Acker and Hill 484).

Throughout the focus group discussion, the construct of genre is either initiated by students, as in Excerpt 3, or introduced in my questions, as in the following excerpt. In response to a question about whether or not the dissertation genre is changing, there are disparate responses. In this first portion of the excerpt, the dissertation form is constructed as the focus of the problem with difficult dissertation experiences.

*Dissertation as Agent of Genre Change*

527  K: I definitely do see a changing (.). I know traditionally it was the five or six chapter uh (.).
528  written document (.). and in our department they are (.). scuse me (.). starting to go
529  toward the um (.2) three articles=
530  F:  =hmm
531  K:  which is really cool I’ve said (.). you know those of us who have been there we keep
532  change over
533  G:  haha
534  S:  So they a:re? Doing that?
535  K:  They are changing
536  G:  Ah Hmm mmm
537  R:  [That’s what I hear
538  K:  [In our department it’s an option to
539  R:  Try [different things
540  K:  [Yeah. I think it would be beneficial for students like you’re saying now I think was
541  look at ferrr a-applying is look at how many article do you [have
542  S:  [right I mean the dissertation
543  (.). I might as well just (.2) torch it (.). it’s just like
544  K:  Yeah, Yeah
545  S:  [It’s not worth it
546  K:  [Yeah Yeah (.). You should be able to design some project where you’re guaranteed to
547  have three different publications instead of writing this huge monstrosity of a paper=
548  S:  = right
Kelly offers this account detailing how, in contrast to Sally’s woes, her department provides the option for students to write three articles instead of the “[traditional] ...five or six chapter uh (.) written document” (line 527-528). Kelly further suggests that it’s students who have brought about change in her department (lines 531-532). Sally is surprised to hear about Kelly’s experience since it differs so starkly from hers. As opposed to Kelly's positive enthusiasm for the “cool” things her department is doing, Sally is disheartened by both her job prospects and the fact of her dissertation. She declares it so worthless, she “might as well just (.2) torch it” (line 543), pausing to find the correct violence with which to do away with her dissertation since it is not in line with what will actually get her hired: published articles.

Kelly sympathetically agrees with Sally, adopting her negative portrayal of the “traditional” dissertation. Instead of the traditional format, Kelly suggests that students within Sally’s field should be able to “design” a project that aligns with job requirements. Her construction is rosy, describing a potential project that is “guaranteed” to produce publication (if only) (lines 546-547). Though there are numerous overlaps in this transcript excerpt, in this particular instance in which Kelly overlaps Sally’s complaint and defeatist talk (lines 545-546) with a suggestion of formal genre change as a solution to Sally’s problems; the overlap functions as a supportive doubling of talk. Kelly excitedly talks over Ray’s attempts to contribute, trying to maintain the floor and finish her discussion of positive dissertation practice in her discipline in an effort to cheer up Sally. Overlapping Sally’s mournful, “It’s not worth it,” Kelly paints a dissertation fiction to empathize with Sally’s difficulty. This works in contrast to Ray’s overlaps in this
section (lines 537 & 539), which function as failed attempts to join the conversation more dynamically.

In this interaction, the problem seems to be that format is not aligned with realistic function. MLA’s contention that the dissertation genre must evolve (as discussed in chapter one), so that they can make graduate students marketable as opposed to just debt-ridden, is tied to concerns such as Sally and Kelly’s. Kelly’s department is so progressive and “cool” because it purposely ushers in genre change. Interestingly, though its format is described as drastically different than the “traditional,” the group still orients to a three article project as a dissertation. Thus, the complaints about form implicitly reify the dissertation as having a recognizable social function divorced from what it looks like. Such discussion throws into question what constitutes a dissertation. The fact that an interdisciplinary group can have this conversation reinforces the dissertation’s status as an institutional genre. Interestingly, everyone orients to a similar purpose for the dissertation and accepts different forms as similar members of this particular communicative event. Excerpt 4 reveals deliberate (invited) discussion about genre change and attributes evolution to two different sources: student interest (line 531) and market necessity (lines 540-541).

Whereas Sally and Kelly construct the format of the dissertation as problem, the following continuation of the excerpt offers the opposite view, describing traditional dissertation format as the answer to potential writing struggles.

647 D: I think another way that it’s changing (.) and I don’t if any other departments are seeing
648 this but in ours (.) umm digital literacy a:nd multiliteracies is really (.) you know been in
649 and taking over and they’re starting to have conversations about (.2) along other (.)
650 genres and like other formats video or digital dissertations rather than the written word
651 (.) and so nobody has actually <done it yet< but there is talk about different people (.)
talking about ummm (. ) like qualitative video and (.2) doing different video montages
and stuff to compile their data and ummm to analyze and instead of writing it up (. )

...  
R:  But you know (. ) there’s a lot of talk about there (. ) about technology and and
scholarship (. ) just a lot of lot of stuff out there (. ) and other universities are doing some
very innovative things and (. ) and you know (. ) it is changing I believe (. ) at least
anecdotally from what I see (. ) that that universities and programs and things are
allowing different kinds of ways of doing what we what we do (. ) so (4)
J :  Yeah (. ) there is always going to be a dissertation (.2) there is not going to be a (. ) a play
or er (.2) a video
G:  Ah ha ha ha
J:  If it was one of the options given to us (. ) I don’t know if we had chosen to do that
R:  [Right Yeah
J:  [We accept it I don’t know
R:  [There is for me always would be a dissertations too (. ) and the more structure the
better (.2)
F:  Hmm mmm
R:  You know these (. ) at least at least for me (. ) Mr. Practical guy right? Mr. Hands on right?
(.2) Though just the more structure the better so I like the five chapter dissertation (. )
you know uhhh (. ) and it’s funny (. ) the more I mean you get into it and you <start
thinking like that> (. ) you start thinking in five chapters

In this portion of the excerpt, Diane introduces new-media alternatives of data collection and
project format, describing how “digital literacy and multiliteracies is really (. ) you know been in
and taking over” (lines 648-649). Although she introduces these options as viable, she quickly
backs away from them, explaining that projects like these – “digital dissertations,” “qualitative
video,” and “video montages” – are just talk in her department, and “nobody has actually done it
yet” (lines 650-652). Thus, alternative formats seem to be a sort of dissertation urban legend:
someone knows someone whose cousin’s girlfriend developed a digital dissertation.

In his account of this “talk” about “technology and and scholarship” (lines 675-676), Ray
reinforces the urban legend status of alternate forms, as far as his experience is concerned.
Though he acknowledges that there are “different kinds of ways of doing what we what we do” (line 679), he trails off, pausing for 4 seconds, a significant amount of time in this focus group talk, signaling his difficulty to come up with other ways of “[doing] what we do.” His reluctance to subscribe to an open view of format paves the way for Jan’s assertion in the next turn of talk, that “there is always going to be a dissertation” (line 680). She continues, joking that there “is not going to be a (.) a play or er (.2) a video” (lines 680-681). In response to Jan’s joke, at the expense of Diane, the group laughs, effectively constituting the digital dissertation as a unicorn: a mythical animal dreamed up in academic discourse. Clearly Jan is skeptical about dissertations assuming alternate forms. Further, she suggests that were she given a choice to veer from the “traditional” form, she would not be interested.

Ray quickly agrees with Jan’s formulation of alternative forms as problematic. He overlaps Jan’s declaration of the traditional dissertation as a stable, unchanging form, offering – “the more structure the better” (lines 686-687), implicitly suggesting that a different form equals no form. In his further explanation of why the traditional five chapter dissertation is a useful institutional standard, he describes its reliable nature that, for a “Mr. Practical,” “Mr. Hands on” guy, is ideal. Here, as in other places within the dissertation genre ecology, Ray ties together thought and form, positing “you start thinking in five chapters” (Line 692), which, the group is left to assume, is a good thing.

In this portion of the excerpt, genre change is directly attributed to technology, spurring different forms and ways of gathering research data. Ultimately, however, the primary force of change implicitly identified is discourse. For Kelly, Diane, and Ray, it is “the talk” that has truly made an impact on genre change. Even for Jan, who cannot
conceive of a dissertation taking the shape of a play or a video, she acknowledges that
discussion of such options has impact.

Although discourse is the one agreed upon force of change regarding genre
evolution, the definitions of the dissertation vary here. In the beginning of the excerpt,
Kelly introduces the possibility of a three article project serving as a dissertation; in
sympathy for S, she also offers the possibility of published articles functioning as the
dissertation. However, in Jan and Ray’s consideration of the dissertation, they both
confirm that “there is always going to be a dissertation” (lines 680, 686), meaning that
there will always be a traditional, written dissertation. Ray especially seems to find
comfort in this notion. For someone “practical,” as Ray purports to be, there is assurance
in knowing that for such a weighty document, there is something determinate: form.
These findings offer useful understanding of how the dissertation functions for different
students and how genre is variously constituted. Some students are eager to embrace
alternative forms of the dissertation, recognizing the dissertation as a primarily social
process. These students are encouraged to open their perspective of what a dissertation is
and should be by the realities of the job market and difficulty fitting their methodology
within a “traditional” dissertation. For these students, genre definition is spurred by
function. They embrace rhetorical genre theorist’s insistence that decisions of form and
style are created by the particular rhetorical context as opposed to the other way around.
Others primarily define the dissertation as a format, one that delineates a way of thinking
and provides some solace for a project with so much unknown. It is interesting that this
focus on formal structure as a defining characteristic of the dissertation follows so closely
on the heels of their discussion that positions the dissertation as something primarily
symbolic. Based on the focus group participants, graduate education has prepared these students with varying degrees of success to write a document they have never written and will never write again.

_Dissertation as Sacrificial Text_

994  M: And I want to go to the airport and [have myself paged because I
995  G: [Hahahahaa ((loud laughter and extended clapping))
996  M: I have to have it (.) because they’re always saying what are you doing this for? To have
997  myself paged at [airports
998  G: [hahaha
999  M: [So I want myself paged at airports (.) So I’ve created
1000  G: [hahaha
1001  M: I’ve created one goal (.) You got to do it when you leave USF right? So there are certain
1002  goals that I (.I I visualize them (. )everyday (. )everyday I walk into the building and I
1003  think (. )okay they’re going to into that room and they’re going to call me back in (. )and
1004  they’re going to say (. )Dr. Smith please enter this room (.) And I want it (.) and there are
1005  people who ask me what my goal is to do with it when I get out (.) and I don’t know (.) I
1006  just now want it (.) I’ve got the goal (.) I just now want it (.) I want it to be done (.) I want
1007  it to have it (.) and then I can move on with my life (.2) umm umm and hopefully doors
1008  will open (.2)so for me it has been surrounding myself with uh a major professor who
1009  helps me visualize that (.) that that this is going to happen you’re going to this this and
1010  this and this is where you’re going to get there (.) umm my husband and my son have
1011  been my cheering section (.2) so I tell people you have to have everyone on board with
1012  you (.) because there have been nights where (.) I didn’t get to say goodnight to my son
1013  (. ) there have been nights where (.) uh (. )I didn’t see my son from the time that I woke
1014  up until the time that I went to bed (.) so (.) i-it’s (.) there are things that you’re going to
1015  sacrifice and it’s worth it (.) because it is an investment in yourself (.) and in your family
1016  (5) sorry (1)

This final moment of talk comes from the end of the focus group. I asked the respondents to reflect on their process and consider what advice they might now give to others. In the
midst of short suggestions, Mary offers her advice: to have a goal beyond the dissertation, though it need not be professionally oriented. For her, it is to “have myself paged at airports” (line 997). The group responds to Mary’s comment, laughing for extended periods (lines 995, 998, 1000), but she continues through the laughter, developing her advice further. She turns to fantasizing about the moment that she is invited back into the room after her defense: “they’re going to say (. . .) Dr. Smith please enter this room” (line 1004). Although this turn of talk begins with a joke and laughter, as she continues, Mary constitutes the dissertation process as a sacrifice. She explains that once she is finished, she “can move on with my life” (line 1007), but for the time-being, her life is on hold.

The account grows even more serious as she lays out what kind of sacrifice it has been for her; she describes missing time with her family, but concludes: “it’s worth it (. . .) because it is an investment in yourself (. . .) and in your family” (line 1015). Her equation for success, and making the sacrifice worthwhile, is to have a goal, determination, a good major professor, and people supporting you. Mary closes her extended turn of talk with brief silence (5 seconds) and an apology, acknowledging that her advice differed from the other respondents in length and tone. Unlike other accounts in the transcript, Mary is not focused on the job market or future research, she even jokes that the entire reason she is getting her PhD is to have herself paged at airports. In Mary’s account, the dissertation seems to be an end in itself.

Mary’s reasons for moving forward in the dissertation process, and her hopes that “ummm and hopefully doors will open” (lines 1007-1008), certainly differs from other students in the focus group by construing the dissertation in this way, as simply a race to be run. However, earlier conversation reveals similar constructions of the
dissertation as an end, not a stopping point on the way to somewhere else. Though the larger and oft stated purpose of the dissertation is to be a gateway (there I go using metaphors again) to a professional career, students embroiled in the process quickly change perspective, only able to see their way to the end. A funny goal, such as the possibility of being paged as “Dr.” at airports, replaces possible ideas of what comes next, as a sort of defense mechanism.

Conclusion: Contributions to the Dissertation Genre Ecology

There are some true advice gems sprinkled throughout the focus group transcript: to invest in wine – “a lot of wine” (line 1065), to focus on having yourself paged at airports (Lines 996-997), to “not be afraid to ask for help” (lines 1092-1093), and some well-weathered clichés are tossed around: the dissertation as a “rite of passage,” an “endurance contest,” “a badge of honor,” etc. All of this advice and clichés circulate within the dissertation genre ecology, allowing students to orient to an idea of the dissertation and serving as a barometer with which to judge their experiences. To use my own metaphor, for these students, the dissertation is a slippery monster; as soon as they try to tie it down – with form, with length, with experience – it slips away from them. To understand the implications of this meta-genre discourse, I return to my initial guiding questions:

- How do student considerations of genre constitute dissertation discourse?

Genre constrains what can be thought of as a dissertation. Within the focus group, the potential of different formats – three articles, videos, etc. – are considered and lauded by some and laughed at and discarded by others. Largely, student willingness to embrace
alternative formats is based on relative writing success and consideration of future prospects. Change is constructed as purposeful, and clinging to traditional structure is purposeful. This ambivalence in regard to genre format evolution underscores the problems associated with MLA’s recommendations to “[reconceptualize] the doctoral dissertation because it is the place to start an entire reconceptualization of the humanities doctorate. Expanding forms of the dissertation will have an impact on how we think about course work, writing and composing projects, pedagogical training, professionalization, and advising” (Smith “Rethinking” 29). Students are torn on whether or not to gamble on form when they are not sure what it is like to write a “traditional” dissertation.

The interdiscursive nature of genre is clearly represented in this focus group in the way advice is fluidly picked up by students and passed on to others. Further, advice seems to sit in judgment of a dissertator’s identity as it is connected to writing success. Perhaps the most marked aspect of this conversation is the clear attribution between personal and academic success – no doubt a problematic association given the disappointing graduate rates. What is more interesting is how this connection persists in the face of such significant complaints about the dissertation process and well-publicized attempts to affect genre change. Further, these dissertators found that a written dissertation is not proof of intelligence but merely stamina.

Clearly, the dissertation functions as an institutional genre because six students from across the disciplines can come together and discuss “it” because it serves a similar enough, recognizable function across the university; this is the quacks like a duck test of genre. When pressed, the details of these various dissertation projects no doubt differ, but
functionally, they all quack, and the group happily orients to a notion of the dissertation, ultimately finding comfort in the shared experience. Of course, each student accounts for the dissertation's worth and their relative success differently, and close analysis helps suss out such nuance.

- Where does this meta-generic talk fit within the dissertation genre ecology?

Finally, I return to my larger project, mapping dissertation genre ecology. Figure 3.0 offers a redrawn map that includes the meta-genre concerns addressed in this focus group. In contrast to chapter one's theoretical map, figure 3.0 emphasizes how institutional discourse functions differently in regard to form and function. Additionally, I have adapted “Actors” to highlight the people and forces most recognizably impacting dissertators.

![Figure 3. Mapping Students Within the Dissertation Genre Ecology](image)
The person, the context, the document, and the institutional discourse act on each other simultaneously, reproducing, revising, and constituting the genre in their discussion and action. The students describe how definitions of the genre, how writing recommendations, and how eliciting outside advice have impacted their writing. Also, this interaction emphasizes the nonlinear relationships between genre and actors. They give and receive advice, change it as seems appropriate given their experience, and they introduce new comparisons into the discourse, such as the academy as bloody Shakespearean tragedy. They all orient to a notion of dissertation as genre though they allow for difference within. So, I will hazard a definition based on these student experiences of writing: The dissertation is a difficult discursive process through which one learns; though the project is highly individual, other actors within the discourse community exert control over the process, rendering dissertators subject to (and sometimes helpless in the face of) larger institutional expectations.
Chapter 4. The Influence of Faculty Within the Dissertation Genre Ecology

“Seeing interviews as peculiar conversations may lead us conversely to regard conversations as peculiar kinds of interviews” (Kress & Fowler).

Though Rhetoric and Composition has long used interviews as legitimate, qualitative data sources, many scholars, including those in the field, have viewed interviews as potentially problematic given the positionality of the interviewer. Such fears come from different places. Some concerns are based on postivist notions of the kind of simple source data that interviews generate. Concerns of many social scientists, especially conversation analysts (Sacks, for example), are based on the extent to which interviews shape the discourse co-authored in an interview and question the use of such data, especially when it is presented as a kind of respondent truth. Further, because of the collaborative, cooperative nature of interviews, this research methodology itself has long been a subject of study for social scientists.

The divide between those who view the interview as a straight-forward site for data collection “designed to access informants’ lifeworld experiences in a structured manner” (Sarangi 64) and scholars who view the interview as an interpretive site of study is known generally as the resource/topic dilemma (Zimmerman and Pollner, qtd. in Sarangi). Some find the methodology so problematic that they try to avoid it completely, arguing that instead of asking for versions of personal truths – inaccessible by definition
– researchers should use discourse analysis to interpret naturally occurring speech and behaviors.

Karen Tracy and Jessica S. Robles usefully structure the problem of interviews, but rather than decrying their use, they provide a productive method for interpretation:

The research interview [...] no matter how “conversational” it may seem, is rather different. There is, after all, the matter of the tape recorder; the researcher, furiously scribbling notes; the knowledge that someone may take down something one has said, and bind the statement to the respondent in a fact-like fashion.

Respondents, therefore, treat their own responses more carefully than in everyday conversations. They know that what they say will be taken down and become hard to un-claim later. By virtue of their “on the record” character, interviews increase people’s awareness of their own and others’ identity groups, institutional positionings, and what a person of their category ought (ought not) to be saying.

Reflecting about question formulations in light of this issue is one way to improve the design of interviews [...] Keeping an awareness that face concerns are invariably shaping how questions are formulated and responses designed will improve the quality of interview interpretations. (Tracy & Robles 196-7)

In this formulation, interviews do not disrupt or damage data, they shape it – in my view, in interesting, useful ways. Particularly for the interviews that I conducted with faculty members, this “awareness of [...] what a person of their category ought (ought not) to be saying” is productive and ties to the kinds of answers my interview questions were designed to elicit. Since the purpose of this chapter is to better understand how faculty
constitute the dissertation as a discursive construct and thus contribute to the dissertation genre ecology, it is helpful for them to perform their faculty identities in our interaction.

As a discipline, Rhetoric and Composition has not been as worried about how interview questions necessitate specific answers as our colleagues in the related social sciences. Though researcher ethics and positionality have been examined extensively (Bishop & Zemliansky; Bishop; Enoch; Kirsch & Sullivan; McKee and DeVoss; McKee and Porter; Mortensen & Kirsch; Notrh; Tasker & Holt-Underwood), the methodology has taken a central place within the discipline’s go-to methodological frameworks. Like Tracy and Robles, I am not concerned that an interviewer impacts the talk generated in an interview; instead, I see it as a natural, unavoidable, and interesting product of qualitative research since “language is not [...] a transparent channel or conduit to reality outside the activity/text” (Sarangi 66). As such, I took Tracy and Robles’ advice in structuring the interviews that I conducted, and in the following excerpts, discussion, and analysis, I consider my role as the interviewer and how I contribute to the data.

*Interview Protocol*

In order to better understand how the important stakeholder group, faculty, impact the dissertation genre ecology, I selected five scholars interested in genre, dissertation-writing, and the profession as it is impacted by changes in scholarly publishing: Carol Berkenkotter, Gerald Graff, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Richard Miller, and Anthony Paré. Initially, I contacted each scholar by email, explaining my project, my interest in their research, and extending an invitation for an interview. In subsequent communication, I shared my dissertation summary and IRB informed consent document (see Appendix D)
with each participant and found suitable times to speak via Skype. Gerald Graff was unavailable to speak via Skype, so he submitted answers to my interview questions through email. Unfortunately, direct transcript data from my excellent interview with Anthony Paré was destroyed, so I’ve included my notes from our interaction in the following analysis.

Though I developed a standard set of questions for each interview (Appendix E), I customized interviews based on each scholar’s particular area of expertise. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30-50 minutes. After asking permission of each participant, I audio-recorded our Skype sessions with both Audacity and a hand-held recorder. I initially selected CamStudio as a method for recording, but this software was unreliable.

**Interview Participants**

Carol Berkenkotter’s primary research interests are genre studies and the rhetoric of science and medicine. She has been particularly influential in shaping North American Genre studies, and her collaboration with Thomas Huckin, *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power* is one of the foundational texts for the subfield. Berkenkotter received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Iowa and is currently a professor of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her most recent work addresses blogs as emerging genres ("Carol Berkenkotter").

Gerald Graff has been an enormously important influence on English studies for the past few decades. He received his Ph.D. in English from Stanford University and since then has held prestigious academic appointments at the University of New Mexico,
Northwestern University, and, most recently, The University of Illinois at Chicago. His impact has extended from American Literature to English education, to Composition, to the profession more broadly. He is perhaps most well known for his theory of teaching the conflicts and his texts describing this approach (“Gerald Graff”).

Kathleen Fitzpatrick is currently the Director of Scholarly Communication at the Modern Language Association, on leave from an appointment in Media Studies at Pomona College. Though her primary interest is in Digital Humanities and her recent works include the digital scholarly network MediaCommons and Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy, her impact on English studies is far-reaching. Fitzpatrick received her doctorate in English from New York University (“Planned Obsolescence”).

Both Fitzpatrick and Richard Miller, a Professor of English at Rutgers University, were part of the MLA Working Group on the Dissertation initiated in 2010. They presented their findings at three successive MLA conferences, and different members have written extensively about the work group. Miller has published in areas concerning literature, teaching, and the profession. He most recently received quite a bit of attention for an MLA presentation where he reminded Writing Studies scholars how, after potentially nine years of graduate school, many dissertation projects are archaic as soon as they are completed. Thus, “his current research concerns “the end of privacy” and how education is being changed as a result of the proliferation of hand-held devices that enable instant publication and global distribution of anything that can be seen or heard” (“Richard Miller”).
Last but not least, Anthony Paré is a genre studies scholar in the Department of Integrated Education at McGill University. Paré’s particular research interest is doctoral education and the dissertation’s place within this preparation. He has published extensively on this subject, and his most recent collaborative book-length work is entitled *Writing (in) the Knowledge Society*, which features in-depth examinations of dissertation-writing research ("Anthony Paré").

*Dissertation Genre Knowledge Acquisition and the Problem of Transfer*

The dissertation is positioned in most discourse as an outlier, a distinct genre that, institutionally, is structured as a bucolic pathway, but in practice is instead an overlapping system of one-way streets and high-speed interstates. Transfer at the graduate level is complicated by this discrepancy between the way the dissertation is supposed to develop – as the natural progression of a capstone project to a graduate education – and the way it functions – as a gap after the more clearly structured requirements of coursework, seminar papers, and qualifying exams. To discuss the difference between the kind of transfer that occurs somewhat naturally during the course of an education program and the more advanced kind of transfer expected of work such as the dissertation, Jessie Moore describes how rhetoric and composition has adapted Perkins and Salomon's educational terms “low road” and “high road.” According to Moore, low road transfer relies on a new context triggering practiced habits to facilitate transfer, while high road transfer requires “mindful abstraction” of knowledge from one context to another. In this framework, dissertation writing requires high road transfer, a jump from aggregating and making sense of knowledge to adding new knowledge.
When asked how they view how transfer functions in dissertation writing, Gerald Graff (GG), Carol Berkenkotter (CB), and Kathleen Fitzpatrick (KF), each had different accounts of how this process moves forward. In the following exchange my questions and comments are designated as ‘K,’ for Kate:

1 K: How do/should students learn how to write a dissertation?
2 GG: The same way they learn to write any expository/persuasive prose

Graff concisely describes the expectation demonstrated by most graduate curriculum, that genre learning is generally consistent and successfully scaffolded. The common corollary is that students will successfully transfer their knowledge of writing contexts with which they are familiar to new areas; in her examination of transfer in writing classrooms, Nowacek calls this successful transfer, integration. Thus, in Peter Linell’s related framework, a dissertation is a recontextualization of a dissertator's previous writing experiences.

In contrast to Graff’s description, Carol Berkenkotter describes the trap students often fall into by simply assuming that their knowledge will transfer without making a concerted effort to understand genre expectations:

1 CB: But too often what students don’t understand is that it is a genre (.) and there are very specific genre moves (.) and the best thing they can probably do is take a look at ((laughs)) dissertations of students who have successfully (.) ha (.) graduated and gotten their Ph.D. (.) so they can reverse engineer the dissertation and see how it’s put together. See the parts of the dissertation and (.3) see the different parts of the dissertation and figure out what’s in the different parts of the dissertation (.) because they essentially have to find some kind of map (.) or some kind of structure they’re [following.

10 K: [right

11 CB: The one thing they can’t do (.) which many students do (.) including myself when I was
writing my dissertation is to begin writing an introduction and then just write and write
and write and write and write and write what you think is a dissertation and ending up
with 150 pages and giving it to your advisor who can’t make any sense of it whatsoever
because you haven’t followed the genre moves. It’s one of the most codified kinds of
writing there is. You know other than the journal article [...] That’s the wisdom that I
have based on my own experience. My own terrible experience of having written about
150 pages giving it to my advisor and then getting a very cryptic note back from her
that said ‘the statue isn’t out of the stone.’

K: ‘The statue isn’t out of the stone.’ ((laughs)) Wow.

CB: And then she just you know she just said it’s all wrong from beginning to end So

K: [That’s hard to hear

CB: Well she must not really have been able not thinking in terms of genre of telling me

what to do

Berkenkotter suggests that students should consciously examine the genre before diving
into a dissertation project by seeing what has come before and “reverse engineer[ing]”
such work in order to be successful (lines 3-4). Otherwise, students tend to just “write
and write and write and write,” attempting to essentially invent the dissertation without
knowledge of the rhetorical moves that they must enact to make an audience recognize
the project as a member of the class of documents named dissertation (line 13).

Berkenkotter puts herself in this camp of unknowing students who learned the hard way
that her work was not successful. In this way she recounts the experience of some
students in the focus group, and certainly a number of students with whom I have worked
in the Writing Center who have been told, in so many words, “I can’t tell you what a
dissertation is, but I can tell you that what you have is not it” – in the words of
Berkenkotter’s advisor – “The statue is not out of the stone” (line 19).

Berkenkotter’s comment adds further detail to Graff's assertion that dissertation
writing is much the same as how students learn to compose on other genres: they “write
what [they] think is a dissertation” (line 13). Students approximate the genre based on what they have accumulated as apprentice writers in their respective discourse communities. Further, Berkenkotter describes that many graduate students, and she includes herself in this construction, do not have assistance in going farther than approximation of the genre because some faculty members do not have the pedagogical tools – “not thinking in terms of genre” – to help their students free the statue from the stone. As discussed earlier, this is also a product of the natural difficulty of expert members of a discourse community walking back their experience to understand the questions and perspective of apprentice members.

In the following excerpt, Fitzpatrick builds on Berkenkotter’s construction, working through the multitasking dissertations are meant to do for graduate students attempting to mark themselves as full members of a discourse community. She introduces additional considerations that complicate dissertation completion:

1  KF: I’ve seen them going through the process and seen them (.) these were mostly graduate students in cultural studies who are attempting to take that step from the exams in which they’re responsible for learning everything that’s happened and they’re demonstrating that they have learned everything that’s happened in the field up to [this point

2  K: [(laughs)] right

3  KF: Into a project into which they’re being expected to make their own original contribution (.) to what’s going on in the field (.) and that transition can sometimes be really difficult because it’s not something that graduate students really do

4  K: right

5  KP: I mean there are some moments in a seminar paper when they do (.) but it’s always backed up by a ton of authority (.) but that moment of suddenly having to step out and be the authority (.) Um (.) can be a little daunting.

6  K: yeah

7  KF: But at the same time (.) one of the sort of things that people complain about dissertationese is that it’s overly footnoted it’s too hemmed in by the authorities
In Fitzpatrick’s construction of the difficulty with transitioning from graduate coursework to writing the dissertation, she cites that the primary hurdle is that of role-reversal, “having to step out and be the authority” (lines 11-12). However, she adds that taking on this role is not straightforward and must be balanced with a demonstration of exhaustively knowing the field, thus the complaint about “dissertationese” being “overly footnoted” and “hemmed in by the authorities” – two things she argues it must be to counter the coming out of a new, mature scholar (lines 15, 18). This move approximates the impossible task of, as Fitzpatrick aptly puts it, “learning everything that’s happened and [...] demonstrating that they have learned everything that’s happened in the field” (lines 3-4). Here Fitzpatrick illustrates the difficulty of developing a dissertation because it does not represent a simple transfer of earlier rhetorical moves; instead it asks writers to do something entirely new.

**Making a Contribution to the Field**

As I addressed in Chapter two, one of the few universal admonishments regarding dissertation purpose is that it make a significant contribution to the field. In these five interviews, I posed this question, attempting to define what the contribution might mean to faculty members conscious of the nature of change in the profession. In the following,
Gerald Graff considers how, in his extensive career, this notion of the contribution has evolved.

K: In your view, what must a dissertation accomplish?

GG: Enter the conversation of the field and, ideally, change it in some way.

K: Have your ideas about the function of the dissertation changed from when you entered graduate school to now?

GG: When I started (50 years ago!) the “contribution to knowledge” model was dominant—i.e., add your little brick to the edifice of knowledge – but it was breaking down, fortunately, and giving way to a more conversational model – find something in the conversation in your field that you can challenge or add to.

Here Graff offers a more nuanced version of “contribution to the field,” suggesting that it need not necessarily produce new knowledge, but that it will ideally have some sort of tangible impact (line 2). He further describes what he sees as the process by which the requisite contribution has changed, suggesting that it used to be much more concrete – you had to add something to the conversation (lines 5-7), but now you can alter the conversation through disagreement, transition, etc. This notion of “joining the conversation” is certainly pervasive, but as close examinations of outstanding dissertations in Chapter five suggests, frequently a “contribution” is viewed more literally as a direct addition of new knowledge.

In the following interview excerpt, Berkenkotter extends Graff’s formulation of measuring a dissertation’s contribution to the field not by what it is, but by what it does. Below, she poses two transactional answers to the question, “what does a significant contribution to the field entail?”
K: What does a dissertation have to accomplish? What is a significant contribution?

CB: Well ((laughs)) Ok (.) Let me give you an appropriate answer

K: ((laughs)) You can answer however you want

CB: The appropriate answer would be if it’s going to make a significant contribution to the field you can tell because there’s going to be uptake (.) right?

K: Right

CB: People are going to start citing the writer and if the writer is publishing sections of the dissertation there’s going to be references to those as well as the dissertation [itself]

K: [right

CB: And that’s not unusual to see citations to a dissertation (.) especially when a field’s changing very very quickly (.) so I would say an indicator of importance or significance is what is called uptake (.) that’s sort of a popular term or when people respond to something

K: Right

CB: the simple answer is when the advisor and the committee approve it and sign that slip of paper [((laughs))]

K: [Yeah (.) The practical piece

Both of these answers are reminiscent of ideas floated by students in the focus group and areas addressed by written dissertation definitions addressed in Chapter two:

Dissertations have made a significant contribution when they elicit action, either on a large-scale through uptake within a field, or locally, by being accepted by a committee. The first answer (lines 4-5) suggests that the knowledge economy separates meaningful dissertation projects from the rest of the pack, but of course the phenomenon of uptake is more complex than this, and certainly less democratic. ETD policies provide greater access to dissertations, but the difficulty of filtering problematizes the possibility of uptake of a dissertation. Berkenkotter's latter, more sheepish response, that a dissertation has made a significant *enough* contribution once a committee signs forms, is perhaps most relevant in terms of the impact faculty make on the dissertation genre ecology.
Though she’s joking, in her response Berkenkotter indirectly references her role as faculty, recognizing that there are appropriate and inappropriate answers for such actors. However, both of her answers are entirely practical: uptake cannot be faked and is ultimately the best arbiter of whether something matters to a discipline. Yet, the second answer – that a dissertation is complete when the forms are signed – is reflective of departmental discourse that I examined, which also suggested that dissertation completion is entirely a product of appropriate and timely signatures. Berkenkotter’s notion that a dissertation can be more than a dissertation (lines 7-13) – that it can matter so much to a field that it becomes quickly cited signals the idyllic opportunity of a dissertation – to truly provide new knowledge, knowledge that not only enters the field, but also, in Graff’s words, “change[s] it in some way” (line 2). Conversely, it also signals what a dissertation usually is: an amateur work that often does not get cited or change the field.

Finally, Miller offers the most explicit answer to the question of what constitutes a significant contribution, suggesting the emptiness of the construct, as identified in Chapter two.

1 K: ‘a significant contribution to the field (. ) what does that mean right now? (2) what does that mean in your department?
2 RM: I would say that that phrase has always been a fiction
3 K: Yeah (. ) Yeah
4 RM: That was a fiction that was much easier to maintain before the advent of the internet (. ) you could say there was something called the field (. ) and you could say that that area had contributions to it that were able to be differentiated (. ) and there were things that (. ) as a representative of that field you could talk about with authority what a significant contribution is.
5 K: Right

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I don’t think that in the humanities (.) that standard is remotely credible any more (.). The internet makes it clear that any area that you would like to demarcate as a field is actually a host of fields (.). Uh and they’re discontinuous (.). They’re all overlapping (.). It’s a wonderful Venn diagram. [...] So I view that shared language as symptomatic of that tradition of trying to surround work in the humanities with the sort of cloak of scientific objectivity (.). When it has never been the work of the humanities to do that and it’s the failure of the humanities to articulate what they actually do.

Miller’s comments are usefully put in conversation with Graff’s, arguing that a “significant contribution” does mean changing a field; however, a field is impossible to define because the humanities are not easily bounded, especially as a result of the internet (lines 11-13). His determination that a significant contribution “has always been a fiction” (line 3) is born out in the written discourse examined in Chapter two. Miller insists that this measure of a dissertation’s impact is a farce since it attempts to treat the kind of contribution that the humanities provide with the kind of contribution that the sciences provide; for Miller, this is a useless comparison, and one that will always place the humanities in a weaker position (lines 14-17).

The Process of Genre Evolution: Next Gen Dissertations

I initially became interested in Fitzpatrick and Miller’s work because of their participation in the MLA’s Working Group on the Dissertation. The purpose of the group was to reimagine the dissertation in the humanities and suggest possibilities for improving candidates positions on the job market. From my understanding, this working group developed out of a prior working group tasked with suggesting revisions to the tenure process. Since the impact of electronic media, and especially its role in changing the monograph’s centrality in the tenure process, are directly related to the development
of a dissertation, or protobook – the link between the two groups was natural. In our
discussion, I asked Miller and Fitzpatrick about their experiences with the MLA working
group and questioned the other interview participants about their thoughts regarding
purposeful genre change, such as that recommended by the MLA.

In describing the way the MLA working group came together, Miller explains the
following:

1  RM: I think it’s a nation-wide problem of assessing the value-added in any graduate program
2   (.) so I think [Sidonie Smith] was really interested in this and very open to reimagining
3   various ways people could do dissertations um (3) and she invited me on board with this
4   working group because of my work with the digital and trying to rethink different ways
5   of doing scholarship (.) and you know we (.) as a group we met for two years and um
6   wanted to come up with a document um (.) that would spur (.) um departments uh to
7   have a serious conversation about this (.) um (2) but it’s a it’s a funny thing because uh
8   (3) the academy is by its very nature is a conservative force
9   K: Right
10  RM: So in a sense you might say (3) starting this year people could do uh (2) a dissertation
11   that was uh the designing of a wordpress site but then had an archival [function
12   K: [Hmm mmm
13  RM: and had some extended reflective essays (1) and housed a lively discussion of x topic and
14   that would be a dissertation (2) the terror that that idea strikes across the profession
15   is that somehow you would be producing students that weren’t marketable
16  K: Right
17  RM: So when we presented about this issue at the MLA last year um the response (.) which
18   was one we got both times we presented about it (.) really as soon as the presentation
19   finished they were saying (.) um the only people who can change this are the ivy leagues
20  K: Hmm
21  RM: Everybody follows the Ivy leagues (.) So if Harvard’s gonna step up to the plate and say
22   this is a dissertation then all the little smaller entities will follow (.) but if you had a
23   rogue institution declare a willingness to do an alternate form of the dissertation would be
24   aaa (.) what’s clear is that whatever the dissertation is is a figment of the profession’s
25   imagination (.) um there’s a sense that the conversation’s never even going to begin.
Here Miller both describes the exigency for creating the MLA working group and also introduces what he sees as the dismal inevitability recommendations of the kind the working group offers are frequently met with. Though Miller’s suggestions that it is important to move the dissertation genre forward are certainly warranted, what he does not consider here are the genre constraints that surface regardless of desires for progressive movement. What would make a wordpress site recognizable as a dissertation to an academic audience? Which of the rhetorical moves that Berkenkotter cites would be repeated in such a project? Unfortunately (and fortunately) a genre cannot simply change, it must evolve because of discursive forces, and it must respond to the needs of a community while maintaining a semblance of its rhetorical features. A prescriptive designation of what a genre should be does not signal what it will be for a large audience.

Below, Fitzpatrick presents what will most likely be the driving force behind dissertation genre change – realities of both the job market and the importance/possibility of publishing a first book based on the dissertation:

1 KF: Through Sid Smith’s working group on the future of the dissertation at the MLA (.)
2 thinking about what the dissertation is becoming (.what should be (.what it means
3 (3) what it means in a field in which fewer and fewer first books are getting published
4 K: Right
5 KF: For us to be requiring as a capstone exercise of a graduate career this thing that’s (.)
6 supposedly like the prototype of the [book
7 K: [Right right (.If you’re not going to have a book
8 (.why write a book?
9 KF: [Right
Here Fitzpatrick describes the disconnect between requiring a final academic project that seems to no longer be representative of the professional sphere for which it is meant to prepare a student. In the excerpt that follows, Fitzpatrick explains why the disconnect seems to persist, regardless of disciplinary awareness of a changing landscape for the field. Below she describes the MLA working group survey of MLA departments and the results that came out of their study:

KF: One of the things that struck me as most interesting (.) in the results was (.) this sense among (3) graduate advisors (.) I mean they were mostly directors of graduate studies at the programs that we talked to (.) that the the they on one hand had this sense that things were changing and maybe they should start opening up possibilities for digital dissertations and things like that (.) while at the same time feeling um (2) what (.) what Kathy Woodward characterized as a sort of anticipatory [remorse]

K: [Hmm mmm]

KF: About their sense of that if they advise graduate students to do something other than write the standard 300 pages linear argument dissertation (.) that they were going to destroy their possible chances on the job market (.) and destroy their future career.

K: Yeah

KF: And that that sense that (2) again that anticipatory remorse (.) I couldn't possible advise my students to take a chance on the dissertation because it will hurt them

K: I don't want to throw them to the wolves [because because

KF: [exactly exactly. When (.) in fact (1) we find that graduate students that are doing more innovative work (.) um (.) with their dissertations (.) and particularly when they’ve had to fight for that more innovative work (.) where they’ve had to convince the faculty around them that this is the right way for the project to go (.) um (.) have the potential to get that work sort of pulled out of the pile (.) to see that something different here (.) that this is a scholar that is taking a risk (.) who will bring something new and exciting into a department (.) and (.) not universally of course (1) but those kinds of scholars tend to do (.) well.

Fitzpatrick effectively rebuts the “anticipatory remorse” (line 6) or “conservative force” (line 8), which, according to Miller, is frequently demonstrated by graduate faculty. The
unfortunate reality is that long, traditional dissertations are not doing many favors for those in the humanities, and, as Fitzpatrick cites, many that make attempts at innovation are ultimately successful. Innovators seem to be rewarded for their genre-evolving efforts with jobs, accolades, and the necessary chutzpah to survive an academic career that comes with fighting for programmatic change.

I have to wonder if the anticipatory remorse that Fitzpatrick describes goes beyond worries about throwing graduate students “to the wolves” (line 14) and preemptively mourns the potential loss of the monograph as a goal for which junior faculty must strive and the associated centrality of the dissertation/protobook in the graduate experience, an experience so close to most faculty, regardless of whether the experience was positive or negative. All of these reasons focus around a kind of pervasive fear associated with anything outside of the “300 pages linear argument dissertation”; there seems to be instead something comforting and safe about sticking to tried and true genre expectations, even if reflecting these norms signals the work of an amateur within the discourse community.

Dr. Berkenkotter, unaffiliated with the MLA working group, displays more skepticism about the potential impact of such overt attempts within the Humanities to change the dissertation genre in order to make job prospects for dissertators more favorable:

1 CB: As far as I know it’s never worked because (.) um faculty tend to be more conservative.
3 K: Yeah
4 CB: And (.) And yeah (.) faculty tend to be more conservative and I think that faculty at state schools tend to follow the pattern of faculty at universities and people who often get their Ph.Ds at universities are teaching at state schools so (.) they bring their traditions to state schools so (.) I think that’s pretty typical (.) It’s going to be glacial [((laughs))]
Throughout this brief exchange, Berkenkotter and I both laugh because we orient to her familiar account of the slow pace of change in academia – the “glacial” pace (line 7). The earlier listserv conversations that I examined as well as Fitzpatrick and Miller’s comments provide some explanation for why faculty are conservative in this respect: they are reluctant to ask their students to be guinea pigs and they frequently aren’t familiar with successful models that have pushed dissertation genre boundaries. Though, perhaps global warming is coming to the cold, ivory tower: Berkenkotter suggests that graduate students may end up leading the way because of their knowledge of multimodal tools, as they have in many aspects of teaching and pedagogy. As I sum up in my comments (lines 12-17), though overt attempts to spur genre change may not be ultimately successful, natural inclusions of multimodal tools and content may urge the development of more progressive forms, features, and contexts for the dissertation genre.

**Conclusion: Contributions to the Dissertation Genre Ecology**

Considering these scholars’ comments, and particularly taking those of Richard Miller’s to heart, I have revised my dissertation genre ecology map. Here I have made the graphic unbounded because it seems that purposeful genre manipulation, such as that
attempted by the MLA, the affordances of technology, innovative experimentation by
students, and research of multimodal source texts, invites the dissertation genre ecology
to spill out of its institutional limits. This unbounded map also demonstrates why the
dissertation document itself seems so unapproachable for many dissertators – it is
impossible to wrap one’s arms around it because it does not definitively exist in any one
space.

As noted by these faculty, there is a clear misalignment of institutional
composition pathways and assumptions about the nature of transfer at the doctoral level.
Genre approaches to graduate composition are rare, and these scholars have seen the
impact. The notion of the dissertation’s purpose within graduate education was something
of a punch-line in these conversations, particularly the notion that a dissertation must
make a significant contribution to knowledge was construed as a vestige of another time
and another discipline. The fact that this is still such an important descriptor of the
dissertation’s purpose is evidence of the humanities trying to be something it is not and
participating in the long-gone fiction that university disciplines exist in independent silos,
generating new knowledge for themselves alone. Particularly in relation to this latter
point, the concept of the genre ecology is productive for breaking down these arbitrary
boundaries and conceiving of the dissertation manner in the way it actually functions.

Finally, these faculty members were circumspect about the future, hoping for
change but not counting on it. They were also divided on the way that genre change
might be enacted. Even those involved with the MLA panel seem to be somewhat
skeptical of what can be accomplished by way of purposeful attempts at genre revision,
given the seeming reluctance of stakeholders, especially the “conservative” group of
faculty who so distinctly impact the dissertation genre ecology. It seems that potential for change is now in the hands of students themselves.

Figure 4. An Unbounded Map of the Dissertation Genre Ecology
Chapter 5. Dissertation Exemplars: The Role of Texts within the Dissertation Genre Ecology

In the preceding chapters, I have examined meta-genre accounts of dissertations from multiple standpoints, student constructions of dissertation meaning and function, and faculty perceptions of the dissertation as a construct: all discourse that functions within the larger dissertation genre ecology to shape dissertation documents themselves. These different accounts offer frequently conflicting versions of what a dissertation must accomplish, and they encircle the dissertation document as a sort of clouded atmosphere, complicating transfer. Transfer is largely assumed as a natural progression from earlier graduate writing opportunities to this, arguably, most important graduate writing project: the dissertation. In this chapter, I turn to textual analyses of dissertations to analyze how this rhetorical context in which they are created impacts them as institutional artifacts. Of the various evils necessitated by genre analysis, this final chapter falls into Swales’ third category, whereby the “primary interpretive responsibility fall[s] to the expert, the scholarly critic in literature, or the analysis in rhetoric or applied linguistics” (74). For this analysis, I have selected 14 award-winning dissertations to examine the forms and selected features reinforced and recommended by award grantors. Then, I closely examine two of these dissertations, 2010 and 2011 winners from the field of Rhetoric and Composition. To situate this study, this chapter begins with a findings survey of past genre analyses. I then consider how Electronic Theses and Dissertation (ETDs) policies
have impacted many of the findings of these studies and recommend further research given current changes in audience.

My sample size and methodology is reflective of similar past genre analyses of theses and dissertations largely conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Swales; Bunton; Paltridge; Dudley-Evans; Hasrati & Street); such exhaustive surveys have not since been undertaken. These broadly interdisciplinary, internationally conducted analyses largely disproved the widely-held assumption that dissertation form was simply extended research article. Although “traditional” dissertations frequently mimic section format of research articles, these studies suggested that there are distinctive parts of dissertations incongruous with genre expectations of research articles: specific, detailed methodology sections (Swales Research 114), metadiscourse and expansive conclusions (Bunton “Meta” “Conclusion”), appropriate hedging/preface, argument structure, citation purpose, and apprentice writers’ signals of disciplinary knowledge (Parry; Swales).

In addition to structure, genre analysts also considered the rhetorical placement and function of citation, suggesting that citations are not just part of a “reward system” but are instead multifunctional, and placement is meaningful (Paul). For dissertations, citations are often a rich site of identity work, and they frequently serve to demonstrate, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick noted in Chapter four, “[that students] have learned everything that’s happened in the field up to this point.” Insecure research practices are often flagged as a site of particular difficulty for dissertators. Because of this concern, an entire industry has built up around providing dissertation writing and research advice to graduate students.
Unfortunately for students, in his 2002 examination of dissertation advice discourse, Brian Paltridge identified significant discrepancies between these books’ stated purpose – to offer specific dissertation writing suggestions – and their actual practice – general advice about dissertation process and research question development. Paltridge posits that the disconnect was the result of restricted access to actual dissertations and writes that advice books are severely limiting when considering the actual writing of a dissertation, though they can be helpful for navigating the research process. Some scholars suggest that expert members of discourse communities sometimes exploit lack of genre knowledge that is a consequence of the restricted nature of dissertations (Bhatia), both in the physical sense that Paltridge identifies and the larger sense of the naturally slow process of genre acquisition. Though Partridge’s study is only ten years old, the landscape now is drastically different, and dissertators can pour over as many dissertations as they like, usually in electronic versions. The notion that dissertation access is restricted is certainly a thing of the past.

In fact, most of the extensive studies of dissertation structure occurred at the beginning of the ETD movement, before it became a requirement at many institutions. Thus the notion that dissertations have limited access is no longer pertinent. Further, the process detailed in previous studies described the dissertation experience as primarily linear; Swales’ 2001 study of dissertations suggests that since “the final stages of progress to a doctoral degree [are…] serially ordered, they can be considered as a chain” (100) – a finding incongruent with the recent experiences of dissertating students and mentoring faculty members. ETDs and increased online communication have dramatically impacted the dissertation “tradition” in terms of access, audience, and
process. However, though the movement itself has been examined extensively (Lang; Lippincot and Lynch; Fox; Moxley; Walker & Moxley), the impact on the genre has not been studied since this became a staple of graduate programs.

The Impact of Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Programs

Whereas once dissertations were perhaps only read by students and their committees, with the transition to ETDs, they now have the potential to reach an audience of literally millions and influence what “counts” as part of the dissertation genre. For instance, Virginia Tech's ETD was accessed by 2,476,833 unique visitors in 2011 and received 8,079,866 hits (“Digital Library”). Moxley calls the choice of some universities to not offer this scholarly access to such a broad audience, a “lost opportunity,” since archived, print dissertations are rarely accessed. As evidence, compare the ETD statistic above to the print circulation statistics in the four year period from 1990-4: only 3,967 of the 15,335 approved theses and dissertations that were authored during the time were checked out of the library (Moxley 61, “Universities Should”).

In coordination with Virginia Tech, University Microfilms (now Proquest), and the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) jumpstarted the ETD movement in the 1990s with the hope of introducing cultural change to the dissertation genre and process by incorporating “scholarly content that employed images, sound, datasets and databases, interactive software components, and other enrichments to traditional, primarily linear text” (Lippincott & Lynch 7).

A 2008 study found that most institutions with ETD programs had their initiatives spear-headed by the library, often in partnership with the graduate school. The study also
found that the primary reason that institutions seem to oppose ETD initiatives is the idea of “prior publication,” in that once the dissertation is available online, publishers will not publish it as a monograph. According to Lippincot & Lynch, other reasons include “concerns about adequate technical support and general disinterest to change” (10). Lang suggests that the worries over electronic publication are overblown and have distracted from the core issues of the dissertation’s larger purpose in an academic career and the changing nature of knowledge in a digital media age.

However, many are upbeat about the opportunities that ETDs provide. For Janice Walker and Joseph Moxley, the notion of how dramatically ETDs can alter readership and the overall approach to writing the dissertation is limitless. They ask: “How would our conception of the dissertation change if it were to include not only the product of the student’s research but the process as well? That is, what if readers could trace the project from inception to publication and, perhaps, even extend the research by adding comments of their own?” (112). This model is more reflective of the writing and research process in some of the sciences where articles and raw data are frequently shared before print publication. In many of the sciences, Physics – for example, a work is not considered published until it has passed through the peer review process, and works often exist online “unpublished” for long periods.

Perhaps most importantly, the traditional dissertation structure is fairly inconsistent with postmodern notions of authorship. As Jude Edminister and Moxley explain, “This structure continues to follow closely an empirical model of research – a model in which the “reality” under investigation speaks for itself and assumes the role of univocal authorship. The text is merely a transparent window through which a stable
reality may be viewed” (96). When confronted directly, most scholars in the humanities, and many in the social sciences, do not conceive of scholarship functioning this way. ETDs offer writers the opportunity to more realistically reflect the contemporary nature of interdisciplinary scholarship by

- including external links within the text [to foreground] the polyvocal nature of scholarly work[, reify] writing as a network of texts (Bolter, 1991, p. 23)[,] and [efface] the univocal assumptions underlying traditional readings of scholarship.

Electronic text allows readers far greater flexibility in navigating a text for specific information-essentially creating their own text-and thus, [providing] a means for graduate students to successfully reach more diverse, perhaps more interdisciplinary audiences. Color images, streaming video, animation, and sound files extend the representational limits imposed by the single mode of text so prevalent in dissertations. (Edminster and Moxley 96)

However, while ETDs offer greater access, space is limited, and both the nature of the dissertation and scholarly consumption must change as a result.

As the current “publisher” of most ETDs, many cite Proquest as one of the primary forces in heralding dissertation change, and it is the target of many complaints regarding ETD transitions. However, their involvement in the dissertation ecology has long been established. According to the ProQuest website, they “have been publishing dissertations and theses since 1938. In that time, we have published over 2 million graduate works from graduate schools around the world. We have over 700 active university publishing partners, and publish more than 70,000 new graduate works each year.” Of course, during most of this relationship, dissertations could only be accessed
through microfilm or interlibrary loan, and it was not until 1998 that the first dissertations were published online as part of university guidelines (“Princeton’s Online Dissertation”).

At the University of South Florida, the ETD policy was enacted step by step. USF had long coordinated with Proquest, originally archiving paper copies and saving them on microfilm; at that time, students could order official copies of their dissertations from Proquest. In 1997, Moxley chaired the USF Task Force on ETDs, an interdisciplinary group which encouraged USF adoption of an ETD program (Moxley “ETDs”). In 2001, the graduate school piloted their ETD policy, and students were invited to submit their work electronically; these theses and dissertations were subsequently included in the online USF library database. Fall 2002 was the first semester of required ETD submission, and by 2003, all theses and dissertations were submitted and archived electronically. However, the “big change was really the advent of USF Scholar Commons, which then made all ETDs much more accessible as they could then be found with various web search engines” (Dr. Peter Harries, personal communication). The USF Scholar commons archives student work – in the form of undergraduate honors theses, masters theses, and doctoral dissertations – alongside faculty scholarship from across the disciplines. This side by side inclusion elevates student scholarship, since the entire purpose of this institutional repository is to act as a “‘a digital preservation system” and showcase for an institution’s research output” (“Scholar Commons”). The USF Scholar Commons includes 21,779 items to date, has had 1,536,140 full-text downloads since it launched in 2011, and there have been 1,060,127 downloads in the past year (as of 2/13).
Clearly, the resource is actively utilized, and student dissertations are no longer simply languishing in library stacks.

Like at USF, ETD initiatives are often introduced slowly to students, and much of the fanfare occurs behind the scenes. Many graduates simply follow the rules for publication and graduation outlined by their respective graduate schools, but at some institutions there is significant pushback. One particularly vocal, organized reaction against an ETD program was by the Princeton History Graduate Association in 2011. In response to Princeton’s inauguration of Dataspace, their “own digital depository for the permanent electronic archiving of work produced by the Princeton University community” – a space that would make dissertations immediately searchable and accessible via all internet search engines – the student association authored a white paper written to the Princeton University Community (“Princeton’s Online Dissertation”).

Citing Proquest policies, other university ETD policies, and a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article warning of university presses’ refusal to publish books that have previously been published as online dissertations, the authors request a reconsideration of Dataspace’s unlimited access to student work. They argue that since “The change of medium has changed the system […] we would like to minimize the potential damage associated with that change” (“Princeton’s Online Dissertation”).

Though some of their complaints are unsubstantiated – libraries will soon “come to see Proquest subscription[s] as a substitute for purchasing first books”⁴ – their most persuasive complaint pertains to the impact on the genre of research they can undertake as a result of the clash between open resource ideals and copyright restrictions. Since

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⁴ Though this worry circulates anecdotally, there is no explicit evidence to suggest that this is the case. Libraries are indeed reducing their holdings overall, but there has been no correlation made between ETDs specifically and reduced monograph acquisition.
much of their work is archival, they “encountered difficulties in obtaining copyright clearance from the archives they accessed because DataSpace and Proquest require far more extensive publication permissions than archives are normally willing to grant without charging substantial fees” (“Princeton’s Online Dissertation”).

While this is a frightening possibility, especially for graduate students doing archival research, the Princeton Graduate History Association only offers anecdotal advice against making one’s dissertation available online based on one professor’s personal interactions with publishers (Cassuto). The most comprehensive survey of publisher’s attitudes towards ETDs is Joan Dalton and Nancy Seamans’ comparative 2000-2001 study, and their findings contradict the students’ worries. Dalton and Seamans designed their study in response to internal findings at Virginia Tech, which suggested that although 100% of alumni who had participated in their university’s ETD process “found no resistance from publishers,” a significant majority of students chose to limit access to their ETD (248). In order to better understand if student anxieties about the ETD process were warranted, in 2000 Dalton surveyed 200 book and journal editors, both non-profit and commercial presses, and, in 2001, Seamans distributed a similar survey to 148 book and journal editors. Dalton and Seamans found that the notion of “prior publication” differed significantly across the disciplines; the physical sciences were the most open to online draft submission, considering only peer-reviewed manuscripts actually “published,” and the medical sciences were most particular, suggesting that any access to a manuscript on the internet warrants prior publication.

In comparing their 2000 and 2001 findings, Dalton and Seamans found that survey respondents shifted from 9-15% when asked if “Online theses or dissertation[s]
widely available through a web-based archive” constituted prior publishing. The respondents were also asked “When is a submission from an electronic dissertation acceptable?” In 2000, 4% of editors answered that such a manuscript would be rejected under all circumstances, in comparison with 2% in 2001. Further, editors answering that such manuscripts would be considered on an individual basis rose from 19-29%, and editors saying that such manuscripts would be welcome for submission dropped from 47-33% (265), suggesting that just within the span of a year, publishers were beginning to better understand ETDs. Additionally, the extended comments signaled that editors always expect dissertations to be significantly revised before submission, thus alleviating some of the worry of previous publication.

Though Dalton and Seamans’ findings suggested that ETDs did not largely constitute prior publication, the worry clearly continued to circulate. In their recent (2013) examination of this issues, Ramirez et al. observe that “[p]erceptions and fear, not data, inform many graduate advisors’ and graduate students’ decisions to restrict access to their ETDs” (4). Their article’s publication itself reflects their practice of standing up to such fears and the positive approach to open scholarship that follows: though as yet “unpublished,” this article exists in a pre-pub form on the journal’s website until it is completed and “published” in May 2013. Digital publishing makes such hard deadlines and notions of publishing increasingly fuzzy – productively so. Ramirez et al.’s study updates Dalton and Seamans’ work, providing a thorough, more recent examination of publisher attitudes towards ETDs now that the practice has taken hold across the US.

The 2013 survey was similarly exhasutive as the 2000-2001 survey. Of the 746 total journals and university presses surveyed, there were 128 responses total. All survey
respondents held leadership roles in their respective journals or university presses.

Overall, the study authors found that 45% of editors declare that “revisions of openly accessible ETDs are always welcome for submission,” and 27% said such works would be “considered on a case by case basis[...]. Only 4.5% of all respondents indicated that they would never consider an ETD for publication” (8). Generally, journal editors were a bit more welcoming of ETDs than editors for university presses.

Ramirez et al. did notice some troubling trends, however. They found that editors associated with a journal with a respectively smaller mean annual circulation size (3,550) and university press directors associated with a press classified in the smallest AAUP range, Group 1, based on annual sales ($\leq 1.5 million) were more likely to indicate that their enterprise would never consider an ETD for publication. (10)

As with the 2000-2001 study, the suggestion that all dissertations, regardless of their publication status online, need significant revision before they can meet the quality expected of a journal or university press, was the pervasive answer in the extended responses to the survey. In particular, one university press director elaborated on the importance of quality, saying “whether in hard or electronic copy, we expect that the dissertation be completely revised before we will consider a manuscript. We do not consider the dissertation to be the equivalent of a book. It is student work; a book is professional work” (qtd. in Ramirez et al. 11). Essentially, these editors suggest that worries about prior publication are a bit naive, considering the extent to which a dissertation must change before it can be considered for peer-reviewed publication.

Although there were frequent assertions that there is no real difference in their estimation
between a print and electronic dissertation regarding pre-publication worries, editors raised some provocative complications to the implications for authors of ETDs: the possibility of self-plagiarism and the problem of subsequent anonymity in peer review.

Regardless of whether or not the Princeton history graduate students’ worries over ETDs were founded, in response to the white paper, Princeton University agreed to most of the student association’s requests. Now, like many top-tier universities, students at Princeton can choose to embargo their dissertations for two years with the potential of renewal through both Proquest and Dataspace as long as they have the written support of their committee and the graduate school (“Ph.D. Publication”). Clearly students are caught in the tension between new publishing policies and research realities.

In stark contrast to the Princeton History graduate students, many students are tussling with their universities over policies restricting online formats. Increasingly digital-born dissertations – dissertations that do not and cannot exist in hard copy form because of their structure and multimedia elements – are being authored and subjected to university policies that are not quite ready for them. Case in point: in 2006, a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Virginia A. Kuhn, remained in graduation “limbo” after successfully defending her dissertation but unsuccessfully attempting to submit her digital dissertation, complete with multimedia elements that were cited but did not have permission granted from the original copyright holders (Monaghan). Kuhn refused to request permission for these elements, arguing that “[if] you ask for permission, you’re screwed because you imply that you legally need it [...] I’m doing all that’s incumbent on me legally to establish fair use” (Monaghan).
After waiting a semester to find out whether or not she would be granted her degree, the dean said “that the institution would award Ms. Kuhn's doctoral degree on the basis of having formulated a “‘first pass’ solution to the issues raised by it. She had ‘clearly earned’ the degree [...] so the university would “not wait until all issues are finally resolved”” (Monaghan). Both the Princeton history students, Kuhn, and students like her, are struggling with the changing realities of dissertation form and the consequences of that change, and university policies are struggling to catch up with these new opportunities and set appropriate limits.

In reflecting on her struggles to publish her born-digital dissertation for a workshop for the “Digital Dissertation Depository” (D³), an organization which examines the genre of “born-digital dissertations,” Kuhn describes how it was imperative for her to develop a digital dissertation because people “write” in images now (“Workshop”). Kathi Gossett and Carrie Lamanna are conducting a longitudinal study of dissertators, like Kuhn, who are developing multimedia dissertations, to better understand the kind of support/reaction students receive institutionally for such projects. The first phase of their study included a survey and interviews detailing the constraints graduate students self-identified as impacting the structure of their projects (Figure 5). The respondents cite the strongest influences in descending order: Graduate College, Department, College, Unsure, Proquest, Library, and Registrar (Gossett).
Figure 5 Gossett's Influences on Doctoral Students

Such an image is useful in promoting the notion of a dissertation genre ecology as opposed to a sequential path to the dissertation, a genre set, or a genre chain. Based on these early findings, it is clear that students are distinctly aware that actors outside of themselves and their committee exert significant influence on the documents that they develop.

The Study: Dissertation Exemplars

It is in this hornet’s nest of change that I examine interdisciplinary outstanding dissertation awards and the impact of the current institutional climate on the dissertation genre. I analyzed 14 recent, award-winning dissertations. The dissertations had won one of four different Outstanding Dissertation interdisciplinary awards: those distributed by the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), the Council on Anthropology and Education (CAE), the Society for Medical Anthropology (SMA), and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCC) (The James Berlin Award). I selected these awards because they were interdisciplinary (each award
recognizes outstanding research from more than one discipline) and contrasted each other in terms of the types of research and writing they rewarded. Although most disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have a primary professional organization, most of them only recognize outstanding research completed by current scholars in the field; few are tailored specifically for dissertation work. I limited my search to the last four years in order to draw from a large enough pool but ensure that these dissertations were impacted by recent changes in university policies regarding ETDs. Some of the award-winning dissertations recognized by these awards were not electronically available since they were under embargo, so I limited my analysis to dissertations immediately available online. My further reason for this choice is that my primary interest is in dissertations impacted by expanded audience as opposed to those who have put off the implications of ETD policies through embargoes.

Of the four awards I examined, the NDLTD Innovative ETD Award is the most interdisciplinary, but also the most focused on evolving the dissertation genre. The mission of the NDLTD as an international organization is

1. through leadership and innovation, [to promote] the adoption, creation, use, dissemination and preservation of electronic theses and dissertations. The
2. NDLTD encourages and supports the efforts of institutes of higher education and
3. their communities to develop electronic publishing and digital libraries (including repositories), thus enabling them to share knowledge more effectively in order to
4. unlock the potential benefits worldwide. (NDLTD.org)
Whereas the aforementioned Digital Dissertation Depository’s purpose is to study the emergence of digitally-born dissertations, the NDLTD’s purpose is to house ETDs and educate the academic community about their potential.

The organization distributes multiple awards each year, but the requirements for the outstanding dissertation award are as follows:

1. ETDs submitted for this award must represent student efforts to transform the genre of the print dissertation through the use of ETDs. This award recognizes innovative use of software to create “cutting edge” ETDs. The application and integration of renderings, photos, data sets, software code and other multimedia objects that are included in the document will be considered as part of the innovation of the work. (NDLTD.org)

The primary measure of quality for this award is the level of innovation and “cutting edge” nature of the dissertation. Unlike previous awards examined that listed a “significant contribution to the field” as the primary marker of excellence, the larger purpose of this award is to spur genre evolution and “transform” print dissertation norms. The NDLTD is also distinct in its self-awareness about their role as a mechanism for genre change and purposeful promotion of certain conventions.

In contrast, CAE “awards dissertations that represent outstanding interdisciplinary research in Anthropology and Education,” and their evaluation guidelines are as follows:

1. The issue addressed in the study bridges the theories and practices of anthropology and education.

2. The author-researcher applies anthropological methods and concepts in handling and reporting data thoroughly and insightfully.
3. The study is of high quality and makes an important contribution to the field. \textit{(sic)}

This award promotes applied work, grounded in theory (standard 1). The second standard shows the importance of dissertators successfully demonstrating disciplinary genre knowledge. An outstanding CAE dissertation must demonstrate in-group awareness of “anthropological methods and concepts” – shorthand for expert understanding of this discourse community. The familiar, final standard, that the dissertation must “[make] an important contribution to the field,” repeats the empty directive most dissertators receive upon embarking on the writing process. By the time a dissertator has completed her work, she has hopefully gained awareness of the meaning of this placeholder within her discipline through assumed natural transfer imparted through the writing process.

The MASA Dissertations recognize research that is judged to be a significant and potentially influential contribution to medical anthropology. Dissertations are judged on the basis of: (1) scope and excellence of scholarship, including ethnographic research; (2) originality of subject matter; (3) effectiveness and persuasiveness of arguments; and (4) writing quality.

Dissertation research of exceptional courage and difficulty is given special consideration.

Even though both of these interdisciplinary awards originate in Anthropology, they reward very different kinds of research from significantly different fields. As Table 3 shows, The CAE mostly awards dissertations in Education, with some recipients herding from Anthropology and Linguistics. Because of the nature of research rewarded by the SMA, many of the award winners’ dissertations are embargoed. However, the one
recent MASA award winner that made her work widely available was in Anthropology. Her dissertation, *Composite masculinities: Aging, illness, erectile dysfunction and Mexican manhood* seems to meet the latter criteria of the MASA award, which notes, “Dissertation research of exceptional courage and difficulty is given special consideration.” In this way, the MASA award reflects the NDLTD’s commitment to rewarding dissertators that take a chance, a rhetorical move not generally supported within the dissertation genre ecology, but, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick noted in Chapter four, such innovation often pays off for dissertators in the form of multiple job prospects and positive professional notoriety.

The MASA award description begins with the requisite nod to a dissertation that makes an “influential contribution” to the field, but, unlike many descriptions, further details what this contribution must include. The SMA explains that a significant contribution within medical anthropology is generally ethnographic in nature and, to be “significant,” must offer something new to the field. The third and fourth standards emphasize the importance of effective writing – writing that will ensure that this important contribution is successfully communication to its audience.

The CCCC James Berlin Memorial Outstanding Dissertation Award is perhaps the most general of all in its description. In addition to listing the necessary documents included in an application packet, they provide the following description of what the award honors: “a graduate whose dissertation improves the educational process in composition studies, or adds to the field’s body of knowledge, through research or scholarly inquiry” (CCCC). The conciseness of the statement and the fuzzy requirements for winning – “[improving]” or “[adding]” to the field – reinforce the kind of genre
knowledge required of dissertators and the assumption that such knowledge is acquired during the dissertation-writing process.

**Table 3. Award-Winning Dissertations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Dissertation Title</th>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T. Dimov</td>
<td><em>Short Historical Overview and Comparison of the Pitch Width and Speed Rates of the Vibrato Used in Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin by Johann Sebastian Bach as Found in Recordings of Famous Violinists of the Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries</em></td>
<td>NDLTLD 2012 Winner</td>
<td>D.M.A Musical Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. C. Giraldo</td>
<td><em>In planta characterization of Magnaporthe oryzae biotrophy-associated secreted (BAS) proteins and key secretion component</em></td>
<td>NDLTD 2012 Winner</td>
<td>Ph.D. Plant Pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. M. Stack</td>
<td><em>The Relationship of Parent Involvement and Student Success in GEAR UP Communities in Chicago</em></td>
<td>NDLTD 2012 Winner</td>
<td>Ph.D. Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. D. Kennedy</td>
<td><em>Evaluation of the City of Woodstock’s Outdoor Smoking By-law: A Longitudinal Study of Smokers and Non-Smokers</em></td>
<td>Innovative ETD Award</td>
<td>Ph.D. Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. N. Booker</td>
<td><em>Learning to get participation right(s): An Analysis of youth participation in authentic civic practice</em></td>
<td>Anthro. ODA 2009</td>
<td>Ph.D. Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Lashaw</td>
<td><em>The ethics of optimism: Progressivism sensibilities in the era of 'The racial achievement gap'</em></td>
<td>Anthro. ODA Finalist2009</td>
<td>Ph.D. Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z. Zakharia</td>
<td><em>Languages, Schooling, and the (Re)-Construction of Identity in Contemporary Lebanon</em></td>
<td>Anthro. ODA HM 2009</td>
<td>Ph.D. Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Kulkarni</td>
<td><em>Motivated to overcome: An ethnographic study of a college preparatory charter school for low-income youth</em></td>
<td>Anthro. ODA 2010</td>
<td>Ph.D. Anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. J. Fulford</td>
<td><em>Writing Across the Curriculum Program Development as Ideological and Rhetorical Practice</em></td>
<td>James Berlin Award 2011</td>
<td>Ph.D. English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Fels</td>
<td><em>The Vernacular Architecture of Composition Instruction: What the Voices of Writing Center Tutors Reveal About the Influence of Standardized Instruction and Assessment</em></td>
<td>James Berlin Award 2011 HM</td>
<td>Ph.D. English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. M. Wetzl</td>
<td><em>L2 Writing in the L1 Composition Course: A Model for Promoting Linguistic Tolerance</em></td>
<td>James Berlin Award 2012</td>
<td>Ph.D. English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. C. Menck</td>
<td><em>Recipes of Resolve: Food and Meaning in Post-Diluvian New Orleans</em></td>
<td>NDLTLD 2012 winner</td>
<td>PhD Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Features of Award-Winning Dissertations

After a preliminary reading of the award-winning dissertations, I noticed rich features that were consistent with those examined in earlier work on dissertation structure, and, on the other hand, I observed some features indicative of new trends in dissertation discourse. I developed inductive categories to compare these dissertations based on my readings and attention to rich features. Table 3 lists the author, title, award granted, and degree completed; this table provides a point of reference for the subsequent tables that examine more specific genre features of these works. It also provides an overview of the diverse fields of research being awarded for outstanding dissertation scholarship.

Table 4 uses the dissertations listed in Table 3 and categorizes them based on the number of pages, basic organizing structure, and number of references. I selected these categories because they stand out as universal features of the dissertations that I examined. Though these markers are not all objective measures of a dissertation, they lend themselves to quantitative examinations. I adopt the descriptions of structure from the categories identified in Paltridge's study of dissertation advice book discourse, though they are certainly not exhaustive. Both empirical studies and popular advice seem to agree on these basic forms as the most frequently employed methods of organizing dissertations: traditional-simple, which features a primarily Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion (IMRD) structure (Swales) with few sub-headings or deviations; traditional-complex, which utilizes numerous branches off of a traditional IMRD framework; topic-based, which organizes chapters around distinct ideas, but the document still functions as a whole; and compilation of research articles, which links
independent articles in one document, though they do not depend on each other for overall coherence (Paltridge).

Table 4. Award-Winning Dissertations’ Organization, Numbers of Pages, and References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Pgs.</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Refs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T. Dimov</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>traditional - simple</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. C. Giraldo</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>compilation of research articles</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. M. Stack</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>traditional-simple</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. D. Kennedy</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>traditional - simple</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. N. Booker</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>traditional-complex</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Lashaw</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>traditional - simple</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z. Zakharia</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>traditional - complex</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. M. Garcia Sanchez</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>traditional-complex</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Kulkarni</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>traditional - simple</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. A. Wentzell</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>topic-based</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. J. Fulford</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>traditional-complex</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Fels</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>traditional-simple</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. M. Wetzl</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>traditional - simple</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. C. Menck</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>traditional - complex</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4 demonstrates, the 14 dissertations range in length from 138-375 pages, and the structure of the dissertation does not seem to be connected to length in this small sample. The page mean is 257, and the median is 248, far beyond the quantitative measure of 150 + pages frequently laid out in departmental dissertation discourse. With regard to references, there is greater disparity; the number of references range in number between 31-427, where the lowest and highest numbers seem to be outliers, and the other reference lists cluster more towards the median of 113. The mean for this data set is 146. Even the dissertations that incorporate innovative technologies and structures are fairly easily categorized within the structures that Paltridge introduces and fall towards the median in regard to page length and number of references. Of the five outstanding
dissertations awarded by the NDLTD, three of these were traditional-simple, one was traditional-complex, and one was topic-based. Interestingly, all developed coherent, unified texts throughout their extended document, and three in particular seemed to closely adhere to “traditional” structure, perhaps as a counterbalance to their more innovative content.

Table 5 (see abbreviations in Appendix F) lists the sections by which each dissertation is divided, any extra-textual material incorporated in the project, the methodology of the project, and the authorial stance. Like the measures examined in Table 4, these categories also seem to be universal of the 14 dissertations, but these more qualitative comparisons provide a window into how some dissertators are innovating.

Though these dissertations range in discipline, length, methodology, and award granted, there are many overlaps in regard to structure and particularly the sections by which these projects are divided. All of the texts have multiple chapters; an acknowledgements section, which adopts a dramatically different tone and style than the rest of the text; a table of contents; an abstract; appendixes; a list of references; lists of various figures and tables, and for the multimodal dissertations, lists of audio, video, and additional images. Even in the less traditional projects there is an introduction, description of methodology, literature review of some sort, and a clear reliance on peer-reviewed literature.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Extra-textual Material</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Stance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T. Dimov</td>
<td>Ack., Abst., Table of C., 4 chs., Bib., Discography, Appendix</td>
<td>audacity screen captures of music files, embedded photos of musical scores; accompanying audio files in an &quot;online cd&quot;; use of both informational and reference footnotes; all components included in zipped folder online</td>
<td>digital quantitative analysis</td>
<td>third person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. C. Giraldo</td>
<td>Abst., List of fig., List of tbl., List of videos, Ack., Ded., 4 chs., Refs.</td>
<td>Hyperlinks, Supplemental videos, Embedded slide images and figures</td>
<td>Biological experiment</td>
<td>third person; however, appears in videos and performs voice-overs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. M. Stack</td>
<td>Ack., Abst. , Table of C., List of tbl. , figures, videos, 6 chs., Epilogue, Refs.</td>
<td>12 videos, fully embedded within the text, thanks her committee for encouraging her to use multimedia</td>
<td>ethnography</td>
<td>first person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. D. Kennedy</td>
<td>Author's declaration, Abst. , Ack., Ded. , Table of C., List of fig. , List of tbl. , 5 chs., Appendix, Bibliography</td>
<td>Complementary video</td>
<td>qualitative analysis</td>
<td>first person; appears in the video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. N. Booker</td>
<td>Copyright, Com. Sig., Abst., Ack., List of tbl. , List of illustrations, 6 chs., Refs., Appendices, List of Refs.</td>
<td>illustrations</td>
<td>qualitative methods: interview and analysis</td>
<td>first person limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Lashaw</td>
<td>Abst. , Table of C., Ack., intro, 6 chs., Conclusions, Bibliography</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>ethnography</td>
<td>first person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z. Zakharia</td>
<td>Copyright, Abst. , Ack., Table of C., List of tbl. , List of fig. , 6 chs., Refs., Appendices</td>
<td>maps</td>
<td>mixed method qualitative</td>
<td>first person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. M. Garcia Sanchez</td>
<td>Copyright, Com. sig., Ded., Table of C., List of fig. , List of tbl. , Transcription Conventions, Arabic-Roman Characters Transliteration Symbols, Ack., Vita, Abst., 8 chs., Refs.</td>
<td>maps, transliteration symbols, children's drawings are figures</td>
<td>ethnography</td>
<td>first person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Kulkarni</td>
<td>copyright, Abst. , Ded. , Ack., Table of C., list of table, List of fig. , 7 chs., Refs., Appendix</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>ethnography</td>
<td>limited first person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. A. Wentzell</td>
<td>copyright, Ded., Ack., Table of C., List of fig. , 9 chs., Refs.</td>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>qualitative case study</td>
<td>first person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Award-Winning Dissertations’ Measures of Structure and Method
### Table 5. Award-Winning Dissertations’ Measures of Structure and Method (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Submission Details</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. J. Fulford</td>
<td>signature page, Ack., Abst., Ack., Abst., List of fig., 6 chs., Appendices, Bibliography</td>
<td>self-created figures</td>
<td>mixed qualitative methods; critical discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Fels</td>
<td>copyright, signature page, Abst., Ack., Table of C., 5 chs., Refs., Appendix</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>qualitative mixed methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. M. Wetzl</td>
<td>Signature page, Abst., Ack., 7 chs., Refs., Appendices</td>
<td>student composition excerpts</td>
<td>qualitative mixed methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. C. Menck</td>
<td>Com. Sig., Ded., Ack. Abst., List of fig., List of Tbl., List of Audio files, Table of Contents, 8 chs., Appendix, references</td>
<td>26 audio files of oral histories, analyzed and incorporated in the text; primary text is a pdf embedded with photos and audiofiles; material is also provided on a website; begins chapters with photographs from her study and quotes from respondents</td>
<td>ethnography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even for dissertators purposely taking chances – dissertations that were awarded for trying to “transform” the genre, using “innovative” techniques and embarking on research that demonstrates “exceptional courage” – there are a number of indicators that mark them as a member of the class of events designated dissertation. In fact, one of the most “traditional” dissertations, in regard to format, research design, and stance, introduces perhaps the most interesting contradiction in form. M.C. Giraldo uses third person throughout her entire dissertation and observes strict research article format in each chapter; however, the innovative aspect of her dissertation, which contributed to her winning an OTD award from the NDLTD, is integrated video clips of her performing the experiments she addresses in her research. In these clips she narrates her process, putting in direct conflict her assumption of scientific distance suggested by her consistent use of
third person throughout the text of her dissertation. These video clips reinforce the personal, subjective nature of scientific work without acknowledgement or reflection in the text.

NDLTD award-winner T. Dimov also utilized third person throughout his text and employs a traditional research article structure; however, his methodology itself is innovative, using computer-mediated technologies to quantify inaudible (to the human ear) differences in vibrato of classical scores. Dimov collected all of his musical samples in one online accessible CD. Though the samples are not integrated within his project, the discography is meant to directly accompany the text and provide an audible version of the visual maps and textual analyses he offers throughout his dissertation. Unfortunately, though the idea is innovative and productive, in its actual production and performance, Dimov’s work exposes some of the difficulties ETD and multimodal detractors raise. Because of copyright restrictions, Dimov is only able to provide less than 5 second samples of the music he is studying, which leaves the audience with somewhat of a lack of context for his data. Since his CD is so large, it must be slowly downloaded in a zipped folder, and because of a change in format, the clips do not directly align with his text.

R.D. Kennedy's dissertation, Evaluation of the City of Woodstock’s Outdoor Smoking By-law: A Longitudinal Study of Smokers and Non-Smokers is fairly traditional in regard to structure; he uses a traditional-simple form, 214 references, and at 375, his dissertation is the longest of the samples that I studied. What is fairly different about his project in respect to the other awarded projects is motive. The purpose of his dissertation was to create a video informing his local community about a smoking ban in the City of Woodstock. His qualitative research, including interviews, observations, and subsequent
analyses, were all conducted in order to gather research for his subsequent video and film appearances of various scientists addressing the impact of a smoking ban. His dissertation document is a fascinating chronicle of the otherwise intangible work that goes into producing such a project. Ultimately, his 12 minute video was well-received and served to solidify and potentially expand the smoking ban that he examines.

For Z. Zakharia and I.M. Garcia Sanchez’s projects, maps are central. Both scholars have numerous color maps integrated throughout their texts, and they frequently draw on these images in their analyses. Being able to include such detailed maps in color allows them to conduct the kind of research that earned them awards. These two projects, as well as the majority of the other texts, begin with a copyright page, though Kennedy’s dissertation breaks from this practice. Instead of a copyright page, his work begins with an “Author’s Acknowledgement,” declaring: “I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.” Such an inclusion gestures towards author awareness of the implications of online publication – an aspect of ETD policies that seems to be not widely acknowledged.

Of this small sample of award-winning dissertations, the one that is most successfully innovative – in that the author uses both multimodal elements and progressive methodologies to accomplish a project she would otherwise not be able to produce – is J.C. Menck’s, Recipes of Resolve: Food and Meaning in Post-Diluvian New Orleans. Using mixed qualitative methods, Menck examines post-Katrina New Orleans through the lens of its food. Throughout her text, Menck incorporates audio clips from
residents’ narratives, recipes, and photographs of her with study participants. Menck’s work is based on rigorous ethnographic methods and seamlessly includes multimodal elements within her research. At the end of her dissertation she links to a video of her defense and an accompanying website that she developed in concert with her dissertation project. The website includes all of the same findings as those catalogued in her dissertation but in a totally different format. Instead of organizing by chapters, her website organizes by recipes, photos and narratives, and does not rely directly on the 234 references listed at the end of her text.

A Closer Look: Two Award-Winning Dissertations in Rhetoric and Composition

In order to further fill out this picture of the conventions privileged by award grantors, I more closely examine two of my sample of award winning dissertations. Because of my disciplinary grounding, I have selected two dissertations in Rhetoric and Composition, honored with the James Berlin award: Carolyn J. Fulford’s Writing Across the Curriculum Program Development as Ideological and Rhetorical Practice and Ana Maria Wetzl’s L2 Writing in the L1 Composition Course: A Model for Promoting Linguistic Tolerance (2012). I pair these close analyses with the overview provided in Tables 3-5 to examine micro-details of these dissertation exemplars in light of my broader findings to situate how these dissertations fit into the genre ecology.

I return to the dissertation markers addressed in Tables 3-5 to situate my examination of these two works. Fulford’s dissertation uses qualitative mixed methods, employs a traditional-complex structure, is 187 pages, has 89 references, and satisfies her Ph.D. in English. Wetzl’s project also uses qualitative mixed methods, employs a
traditional-simple structure, is 320 pages, lists 108 references, and satisfies her Ph.D. in English. Though Fulford has six chapters and Wetzl has seven, their sections are otherwise very similar. In the following, I consider the rhetorical moves each author makes and their relevance to both the overview of award-winning dissertations I have drawn and their assumption of genre norms identified by earlier studies.

Fulford’s Project

Fulford begins her project by opening in the middle of a narrative, immediately pulling her audience into her work. She articulately describes the context of her project, creating exigency, and then poses her research question: how does “significant curricular and culture change around writing” take place at a Midwestern, public, liberal arts college? To answer this question, her dissertation details a four-year ethnographic, longitudinal study of writing at this college study site. After introducing the site of her research and explaining how she generates new knowledge with her work, thus making a “significant contribution to the field,” Fulford moves to establishing her project within disciplinary literature, firmly delineating how her project contributes directly to Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) scholarship. After providing some history of her research site, she moves forward to lengthy discussion about her theoretical framework – as Swales and others have pointed out – a rhetorical move that is an apparently indispensible staple of the dissertation genre. Fulford employs critical discourse analysis in the tradition of linguist Norman Fairclough, one of the early adopters and founders of critical discourse analysis: an interdisciplinary methodology infrequently used in Rhetoric and Composition studies, which she takes ample time to explain to her audience. Such
reflexiveness and extended defense of this methodology indicating her disciplinary
awareness and apprentice status.

Fulford’s introductory chapter is replete with meta-language (Swales), situating
her project and telling the reader what she is about to do and why. She frequently cites
both disciplinary experts and newer scholars, signaling her awareness of the field’s canon
and the importance of staying current and on the forefront of research findings. She
closes the chapter with a clear “Project Overview and Dissertation Outline,” a nod to the
genre norms of meta-language, IMRD structure, explicit methodological description, and
attempts to define the “contribution [made] to the field.”

In Chapter two, Fulford transitions to explicit description of her methodology,
longitudinal ethnographic research. Using meta-language, Fulford describes why this
particular methodology was necessary:

1  The study needed to be longitudinal because the programmatic changes I sought
to understand unfolded over time. Abstract cultural changes such as evolution of
the ideas and values that undergirded the more structural curricular and
programmatic changes also needed to be mapped over time. What was difficult
about using a longitudinal approach was determining when to stop gathering data,
since the program development I had initially sought to uncover did not
necessarily arise as I expected. Closure on the data gathering was a somewhat
arbitrary decision because the writing culture and accompanying curricular
structures continued to evolve [...] Ethnography seemed appropriate for my
project because its methodological roots in anthropology were designed for
understanding culture [...] The ethnographic research practices [...] used to
Fulford's ambivalence about her research method are notable in this excerpt. She admits that “[closure] on the data gathering was a somewhat arbitrary decision” and that ethnography “seemed suitable” (lines 7,13). She painstakingly talks through her process of selecting methods without the ethos that might be expected of a researcher in a journal article, for instance. Such a narrative and such tentative musing suggests that she is trying and testing out methods and is aware that such trial and error is part of learning the rhetorical ropes of study design.

Chapter three begins Fulford’s data analysis with a report on the early observations of her study. Though she has begun to discuss primary data, Fulford is careful to continually cite scholars in WAC and compare her findings to those that have come before; Swales marks such careful attention to citation, even in the midst of discussing new findings, as a clear, tentative marker of dissertation writing.

Wetzl’s Project

Anna Marie Wetzl’s work reveals many of the same rhetorical moves and disciplinary positioning as Fulford’s work. Wetzl details the result of a study she conducted, examining the attitudes of L1 students on L2 writing. Like Fulford, Wetzl borrows rigorous interdisciplinary qualitative methodology for her study, dividing participants into control and experimental groups. The experimental group was asked to take part in a two week education course regarding language variation and ideologies. To
test the impact of this course, Wetzl administered pre- and post-surveys, interviews, and examinations of writing to both groups.

In Chapter one, Wetzl details the context, purpose of, and questions for her study. Unlike Fulford, who clearly lays out her review of literature in her introductory chapter, Wetzl devotes all of Chapter two to a review of literature, emphasizing work done in Applied Linguistics, one of the primary disciplinary influences on her study. Like Fulford, Wetzl begins her introductory chapter with a story to situate her study, but Wetzl’s is much more personal. She describes her own experiences in the classroom as an L2 English speaker, engagingly detailing the difficulties she has faced in the academy in regard to linguistic intolerance. She quickly turns to her research questions and narrating the gap in research that her work fills. Wetzl’s study design and subsequent straightforward, social science sub-headings (Statement of the Problem, Main Research Questions, Brief Description of the Study, Goals and Expectations for this Research Project, etc.) make her work immediately more formal than Fulford, who shows some ambivalence towards her methodology and findings. Using meta-language indicative of the genre, Wetzl closes chapter one with a paragraph providing an “Overview of the Remaining Chapters.”

In Wetzl’s Chapter two review of literature, she discusses the importance of understanding attitudes of L1 users towards L2 writing, or composition in World Englishes, simultaneously underscoring the lack of awareness about these issues – and even these terms – in Rhetoric and Composition. The stated purpose of her chapter, then, is to review literature primarily outside of the discipline and describe its use and importance in the Composition classroom and for the field more generally. She explains:
“my research has as its main audience other composition instructors who, just like my colleagues, do not always have the necessary training on linguistic diversity to understand what L2 Englishes are about” (22).

In Chapter three, Wetzl describes her methodology in detail as well as further information regarding her study’s design and application. She begins by describing her process of deciding on a methodological framework, especially the choice between qualitative and quantitative methods: she ultimately chooses to utilize both. She describes: “In order to avoid the downfalls of one particular mode of inquiry, I decided on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology, i.e. the mixed method approach, to collect different types of data and to paint a more complete image of what happened at the research site” (79). Though Wetzl is not nearly as detailed as Fulford in her description of why she settled on this particular methodology, she also offers a kind of defense of her choices.

In her conclusion, Wetzl returns to an explicit reminder of the kind of contribution her work makes to the field: “While the field of language attitude studies has already offered interesting insights into how people perceive localized varieties of English and their speakers, the present study brings a unique contribution to the field by focusing on people’s perception of written L2 Englishes” (222). Wetzl’s description of her contribution to the field is particularly clear and directly follows the scientific equation for how empirical knowledge is produced: The field has looked at X, but it is missing Y; my project offers Y. Though Richard Miller suggests in Chapter four that such a formulation is fairly artificial in the humanities, this direct appeal to claiming new knowledge demonstrates how widespread the “significant contribution” model is, even in
the humanities. Like Fulford, Wetzl uses her conclusion to restate the issues addressed throughout her project, beginning with a summary of results and then numbered findings. Then, Wetzl turns to a staple of social science methodology, addressing limitations of the study in terms of methodology, participants, and “researcher positionality.” She closes with suggestions for future research and some final comments.

As representatives of work lauded by the field of Rhetoric and Composition, or at least an influential body, *College Composition and Communication*, these two studies are particularly telling of genre expectations and norms. These two exhaustive studies represent rigorous research methodology that draws from interdisciplinary work in the social sciences. Fulford and Wetzl’s projects are multi-year studies with extensive data sets and significant, time-consuming textual analysis. Both writers are careful to situate themselves firmly within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, but they draw much of their research method ethos from scholars outside of the field: this move seems deliberate in both accounts. Fulford and Wetzl are meticulous in their methods of organization, distinctly laying out their purpose, methodology, and brief mentions of findings in their introduction, generally following an IMRD format, and using their conclusion to restate their introductory comments with the benefit of detailed results and discussion. The fact that work such as this is rewarded in Rhetoric and Composition suggests that the field is moving even closer towards social science methodologies and writing frameworks. Such lengthy work directly conflicts with the move by the MLA to encourage shorter dissertations that incorporate innovative structure and multimodal elements.
Conclusion: Contributions to the Dissertation Genre Ecology

The dissertations in Chapter five usefully demonstrate the push-pull of discursive forces on the life of the dissertation genre, as well as the impact of the actors, different genres, and meta-genre on the ecology. One distinctive force, ETDs, for instance, dramatically alters the way a dissertation is received and what form it can take. On the one hand – there are groups such as the Princeton Graduate History Association, desperately trying to preserve the “medium” though the “system” has changed. Their efforts at embargoes and limiting readership of their work seems somewhat nostalgic. They are trying to swim upstream, but the inevitable pull of gravity and physics will most likely make them get with the flow. On the other hand – attempts to simply make progressive changes to the dissertation seem artificial as well, and there seems to be a general lack of audience uptake – at least in most professional spheres. As Carol Berkenkotter noted in Chapter four, graduate students seem to be leading the way for authentic genre change, periodically come up against institutional pushback, but just as often being awarded for taking chances.

Some fields, like Rhetoric and Composition seem to be doing all of these things simultaneously: clinging to the past, consciously trying to ring in the future, and following the lead of graduate students. Yet, award-winning dissertations in the field move genre expectations further away from the progressive aims of the MLA, rewarding tireless, lengthy, rigorous scholarly work, strongly influenced by social science-minded methodologies. Of the awarded dissertations examined in this chapter, only the two projects from Rhetoric and Composition do not have extra-textual material to complement the prose.
This final dissertation genre ecology map demonstrates the impact of online meta-genre accounts, student perceptions, faculty beliefs, and dissertation documents themselves. This map is once again bounded, reflecting that though there are forces driving genre change, there is always genre’s counter-balance, the “relative stability” (Spinuzzi) necessary to maintain a genre’s use and recognizability to its users. This map also attempts to represent the prism effect created by ETD policies—either focusing light so that genre conventions mimic each other, or shooting out in different directions to create greater differentiation, innovation, boundary breaking and bending. Finally, in this map, I recognize ETDs as the primary factor for change within the dissertation genre ecology. Though dissertation documents are bounded by genre norms and expectations,
purposeful genre manipulation, technology, multi-modal tools, and experimentation push at these limits, changing them, shaping them, and further changing what is included of the class of communicative events known as a dissertation.
Epilogue

Dissertation genre change is clearly happening, but whether or not that change can be deliberately motivated waits to be seen, and I for one, think that for it to be authentic, all-encompassing change, it will and must happen slowly and naturally. As research sites and composition tools become increasingly multimodal, intertextual, and hypertextual, dissertations will follow suit – and are already doing so. Unlike the complaint leveled at the MLA working group, that change must come from the top down – from Ivy League administrators, dissertators such as the award winners chronicled in Chapter 5 demonstrate that change will instead begin with graduate student interests and filter through the genre ecology – faculty, award-grantors, administrators, and certainly peers, are enormously influential in regard to the documents that develop. Not that the wringing of hands over poor job prospects is not warranted, it simply is not new and will not in itself cause genre change. More than one hundred years of complaints about dissertation structure have not dramatically changed the notion of the kind of contribution that a dissertation must make; however, infinitely expanded audience, digital bases for research projects, a burgeoning interest in innovative research methodologies and methods of delivery, and expanded writing support on campuses across the nation are demonstrating change in the dissertation genre ecology and subsequent change in the products of the ecology.
Perhaps what is most clear is that the dissertation genre does not manifest in a linear, coherent process. Dissertation documents develop out of an atmosphere of influences – an ecology which is reflexive, overlapping, and “intermediational” (Spinuzzi). Perhaps ironically, my perspective as a dissertator has been indispensable during this process. Like the students in my study, I have learned to write a dissertation by writing a dissertation, and now that I have completed this process – I won’t have to do it again. Though I acquired genre knowledge through this authentic experience, and I have seen how previous experiences have, in some cases, transferred and others have not – I recognize now both the difficulty of explaining this process to apprentice members and the necessity of doing so. The meta-level aspect of this project has been helpful in understanding and theorizing pedagogical approaches to this complex composition.

Primary Findings

Though the dissertation genre works for many, and the ecology is constituted primarily by expert members of discourse communities who have succeeded in dissertation writing, the pernicious coupling of dissertation struggle and lack of completion with lack of personal worth circulates too often in this discourse. This practice magnifies the general shame often associated with getting help with writing at the university, but because of the identity-work tied up in the process of dissertation writing, such an unhealthy association is problematic for higher education at large. It is surprising that with such attention focused on the institutional problems of the dissertation that students would still be held so personally accountable for difficulty, but
this discourse of shame and guilt are tightly woven into the fabric of the dissertation genre ecology.

The dissertation genre ecology seems to have outgrown the sole author, “significant contribution” model, but definitions of the dissertation are reluctant to let it go, since it is often the one concrete descriptor that has long been used to describe the document. Though in some circles the suggestion that a dissertation must make a “significant contribution” to a field is said with a wink and a nod, and there is increasing awareness that the individual production of new knowledge in most writing contexts is “a fiction,” the shell persists across the disciplines.

Perhaps most problematically, the discrepancy between writing transfer assumed at the graduate level and writing transfer experienced has been demonstrated by multiple university stakeholders in multiple contexts within the dissertation genre ecology. Though confusion and insecurity are a natural and important part of any writing process, graduate students will be better served by explicit discussion of the rhetorical situation of dissertation writing. Prescriptive accounts of what a dissertation must look like are counterproductive; however, reflective articulation of what a dissertation should do and how it should be approached would help smooth the dissertation process and ultimately produce better documents, an important feat since they will increasingly be easily accessed by a wider audience.

**Implications**

As a corollary to admitting that dissertations do not exist in a vacuum, but instead circulate within an ecology, this study highlights three primary implications:
• Dissertations are not sole-authored works that offer new knowledge. Thus, collaborative inclusions and opportunities for co-authorship need to be acknowledged and valued as opposed to denied.

• Faculty are not the only influences on the document, and acknowledging the productive assistance offered by dissertating students, outside committee members, special interest workshops, and writing support facilitators such as writing consultants and librarians is essential.

• Dissertation meta-genre accounts, such as handbooks, advice documents, courses, and workshops, must be constructed with transfer in mind. Functionally, this means drawing student attention specifically to the dissertation as a rhetorical situation and explicitly discussing how other writing experiences are both related and distinct from dissertation writing.

Hopefully, the dissertation genre ecology as a metaphor underscores the important, sometimes unexpected influences of outside actors and forces and the talk and text that shape the dissertation genre. Disrupting the vision of a consistent, linear process opens up possibilities for genre change and works to undo some of the problematic identity associations that have long plagued struggling students.
Works Cited


Appendix A: Transcript Notation Key

(.) = pause

(#) = timed pause

underline = emphasis

:= shows delayed speech

[= shows overlapping speech

((noise other than speech))

= shows connected speech
Appendix B: Focus Group Informed Consent Document

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # 4683

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. This form tells you about this research study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called:

Mapping Dissertation Genre Ecology

The person who is in charge of this research study is Kate Pantelides. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

The research will be done at the University of South Florida Tampa Campus Library.

Purpose of the study

Scholars involved in the dissertation process are asked to voluntarily participate in this study. By agreeing to participate in this study, scholars will allow the Primary Investigator to observe, interview, and audio record dissertation work. The primary focus of this research will be to better understand the evolution of the dissertation as a genre.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to

- Allow the Primary Investigator to observe, interview, and audio record dissertation work; only the study group will be privy to these recordings and notes, and the recordings will be destroyed after the required IRB waiting period.
- Allow the Primary Investigator to quote material from dissertation work; however, any quoted material will not include names or identifying information about the study participants or their writing projects.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please the investigator or the research staff. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this
Appendix B (Cont.’d)

study. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status or job status.

Questions, concerns, or complaints
If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Kate Pantelides at (813) 974-9720.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-9343.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study
It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_____________________________________________ Signature of Person Taking Part in Study
Date

______________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

_____________________________________________ Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
Date

______________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
Appendix C: The Dissertation as Genre Focus Group Schedule

IRB Forms

The purpose of this focus group is to learn about your experiences as students developing dissertation projects. I will ask questions about your dissertation process, and your dissertation document itself, but I encourage you not to feel limited to these specific questions. If you’d like to make a comment on another participant’s idea or question, please do so.

Can we begin by going around the room? Can you each state your first name, your department/program and give a quick description of your project?

What kind of advice have you received about writing a dissertation from your colleagues/friends/adviser/committee/books?
   - Does the advice differ depending on the source?
   - How did you learn how to write your dissertation?

How do you define the dissertation?
   - In your view, what must a dissertation accomplish?
   - Have your ideas about the function of the dissertation changed from when you entered graduate school to now?
   - Who is the audience for a contemporary dissertation?

Can you describe your relationship with your committee?
   - How do they influence the topic/content of your project?
   - How do they influence the form/style of your project?

Should the dissertation process/document change?
   - If so, how?
   - Do you think the dissertation has changed since your adviser wrote his/her dissertation? If so, how?

Do advances in technology impact the dissertation?

Does the job market affect your dissertation choices? How?

How do you advise other dissertators to approach their projects? Or – what do you know now that you wish you knew?

What have been the most difficult aspects of writing the dissertation? What has been easiest/most successful?
   - Do you have any final comments about your dissertation experience?

you describe your relationship with your committee?
   - How do they influence the topic/content of your project?
   - How do they influence the form/style of your project?
Appendix C (cont.’d)

Should the dissertation process/document change?
   - If so, how?
   - Do you think the dissertation has changed since your adviser wrote his/her dissertation? If so, how?

Do advances in technology impact the dissertation?

Does the job market affect your dissertation choices? How?

How do you advise other dissertators to approach their projects? Or – what do you know now that you wish you knew?

What have been the most difficult aspects of writing the dissertation? What has been easiest/most successful?
   - Do you have any final comments about your dissertation experience?
Appendix D: Interview Informed Consent Document

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # 4683_____

You are asked to take part in an interview for a research study that is called


The person who is in charge of this research study is Kate Pantelides. This person is called the Principal Investigator. This form tells you about this research study and provides you with a written copy of this consent agreement.

The research will be done at the University of South Florida Tampa Campus Library.

The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences as a faculty member engaged in the dissertation process. My own dissertation project uses genre theory to examine the dissertation as an institutional genre, and my purpose is to better understand the many genres that constitute the dissertation writing process and the tensions imposed on and created by the genre. I will ask questions about your experience with the dissertation genre, but I encourage you not to feel limited to these specific questions. The interview will be conducted in Skype and recorded, and I will transcribe and analyze the interview for my study.

You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. Once I write up my results I will be happy to share them with you. By agreeing to participate in this interview, you are agreeing to take part in research.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Kate Pantelides at (813) 974-9720. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.

Thank you for your participation!
Appendix E: Interview Schedule

The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences as a faculty member engaged in the dissertation process. My own dissertation project uses genre theory to examine the dissertation as an institutional genre, and my purpose is to better understand the many genres that constitute the dissertation writing process and the tensions imposed on and created by the genre. I will ask questions about your experience with the dissertation genre, but I encourage you not to feel limited to these specific questions. Once I write up my results I will be happy to share them with you.

In what capacity are you currently engaged with the dissertation genre?

How do/should students learn how to write a dissertation?

- How do you advise your students to develop their dissertation projects?
- How is your advice affected by the job market?
- How is your advice affected by changes in academic publishing and technological advancement?
- How does your advice differ from colleagues within your own discipline and across the disciplines?
- How should the rest of the committee be involved in the development of a dissertation project?
- To what extent do you define or control dissertation topics?

In your view, what must a dissertation accomplish?

- Have your ideas about the function of the dissertation changed from when you entered graduate school to now?
- Who is the audience for a contemporary dissertation?
- Should dissertations be innovative? In what way?
- How/Should they incorporate new media?
- How do you feel about your university's ETD policies?
- Many descriptions of the dissertation advise that it should make a "significant contribution" to the discipline/nation. What does a "significant contribution" entail to you?

Should the dissertation process/document change?

- If so, how?
Appendix F: List of Abbreviations for Table 5

Ack. = Acknowledgements
Abst. = Abstract
Table of C. = Table of Contents
Chs. = Chapters
Bib. = Bibliography
List of fig. = List of figures
List of tbl. = List of tables
Ded. = Dedication
Refs. = References
Intro. = Introduction
Appendix G: IRB Approval Letter

The following letter provided the initial approval for the study which provided data for this manuscript.

June 23, 2011

Kate Pantelides
English

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00004683
Title: The Dissertation as Genre

Dear Kate Pantelides:

On 6/21/2011 the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above referenced protocol. Please note that your approval for this study will expire on 6-21-12.

Approved Items:
Protocol Document(s):

Study Protocol

Consent/Assent Documents:
Name
Informed Consent Document for Focus Groups .pdf
You are to use only the watermarked/stamped consent forms found under the “Attachment Tab” in the recruitment of participants.
Online Survey has been granted a Waiver of Informed Consent Documentation (which does not require a stamped consent form).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR
Appendix G (cont.’d)

56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Please note, the informed consent/assent documents are valid during the period indicated by the official, IRB-Approval stamp located on the form. Valid consent must be documented on a copy of the most recently IRB-approved consent form.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent (only for the online survey) as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.116 (d) which states that an IRB may approve a consent procedure which does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent, or waive the requirements to obtain informed consent provided the IRB finds and documents that (1) the research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects; (2) the waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects; (3) the research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration; and (4) whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, PhD, Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board

Cc: Various Menzel, CCRP
USF IRB Professional Staff