

The University as a Genre and Activity System

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Abstract: The author explores the challenges graduate students face preparing for a dissertation through university events. Autoethnography using notes, observation, and journal writing and framed by genre and activity system theory highlight university system conflicts with the culture of the student.

Pursuing a dissertation topic is a critical step in an academic career. Therefore, the university offers various events, activities, and experiences that can help students find a dissertation topic. Systems theory is based on the idea that everything could be classified as a system of elements from the realm of biology to all other sciences (Bertalanffy, 1950). Systems theory has developed over the years in various forms as a kind of illustration and criticism of how individuals, institutions, and other elements work together (Graham, 1999). The university can be considered a system, and the various events, activities, and experiences that can be helpful for a student working on a research paper can be elements in that system (Russell, 1997). Despite various events and activities offered at a university, students go from experience to experience and yet struggle to understand the system, find their dissertation topic, and successfully complete their doctorate. The system in turn has trouble understanding what is happening to these students. The dissertation topic search is a personal struggle played out in public. The inner workings of this struggle, however, remain private. Students' perceptions of the university system can be mysterious. Insight into how the university works or does not work for these students can be gained by students' self-examinations via autoethnography. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to give a personal account through autoethnography of how the university works or does not through the lens of a form of the systems theory that focuses on texts, such as dissertations and the activities, and conflicts they inspire.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the genre and activity system work of Russell (1997). A text is a discursive tool (i.e., something students can use to enable a conversation and interactions between individuals or groups or other entities). The script to Hamlet, a grocery list, or a research paper is an example. A genre is a way a text is or has been used repeatedly over time. Hamlet is traditionally used as a script for acting, for example. An activity system is the various social actions one can do or not do related to the creation or use of a text. Writing a research paper promotes taking notes and going to school as well as the actual research paper, for example. Activity systems can have motives and objects. The object is the focus on something and the motive is the how and why something is done. The object of a research paper, for example, can be on literature, but the motive could be to address an issue to get a grade. Genre systems can be a text with multiple genres that allows the user to interact with various activity systems. The script to Hamlet can be read for literary analysis and performed linking the activities of a class with a play (Russell, 1997).

Genre and activity systems create identities for their users. A person who analyzes a script becomes a student and a person who performs it is an actor for example. Genre and activity systems can also create power relations. The student who can master the genre of a research paper is graded better than the one who can not and thus is given more power by the

instructor. Russell used the concept of genre and activity systems to discuss how the writing of a research paper as a genre system in a cell biology class at a university can affect a student and the university in terms of its activity systems. Several issues were brought up including the idea of a student experiencing a double bind. A double bind is when the contradictions between one activity system and another related through a genre system create conflict for the student. An example of a double bind is that the culture of the school can conflict with the one the students seek to help outside of it; however, if they do not stay in school, they can not help change the culture of the school. In another example of a double bind, students study a discipline at the university to help people, but the demands of going to school keeps them from immediately helping people in the short term. If they stop going to school, however, they lose the power that can be gained from an advanced degree to help people in the long term (Russell, 1997).

Method

Autoethnography is highly personalized accounts often told in the first person and sometimes in a story form where researchers put their own experiences at the forefront of research to explore a particular culture, discipline, event, or issue. It is highly controversial, and peer reviewed journals have turned down manuscripts by doctoral students seeking to use it (Holt, 2003). This debate between the students and the reviewers can even in turn become part of the autoethnographic writing story. Ironically, an autoethnography on learning about autoethnography suggests resistance to autoethnography in academia is tied to traditional ideas about objectivity. Much about how to conduct an autoethnography can be learned through the few recent examples (Wall, 2006). Autoethnography and higher education in particular has been the focus of several studies. Issues of biases among graduate students and their faculty have been explored with autoethnography (Hughes, 2008). A university proctor used autoethnography to discuss his experience at Oxford (Walford, 2004). The university has also been the site of a very literary, often funny essay on the sociology of the academy through autoethnography (Pelias, 2003). Finally, Florida International University (FIU) has specifically been the focus of autoethnographies with researchers exploring how experiences shaped their identities as adult learners and adult educators. They noted the various conflicts between their experiences and class and cultural issues (Plakhotnik, Delgado, & Seepersad, 2006).

Using the genre and activity system work of Russell (1997) as a guide, a mapping out of the university system is done with the focus on everything that is related directly or indirectly to the dissertation genre. The system at FIU includes such event categories as (a) workshops, lectures, and presentations; (b) dissertation proposals and defenses; (c) graduate student network meetings; (d) meeting with professors; (e) course work and classroom discussions; (f) writing groups; (g) research; (h) informal channels; (i) other events; and (j) work, profession, community, and home. During the course of 2007-2008 academic year, the researcher attended all of these events in one form or another. The researcher took notes during each event and observed them as an active participant. The notes were put according to the aforementioned event categories. The researcher then looked over his notes and made journal entries about these event categories using the broad themes of the conceptual framework as a guide to understanding the system (i.e., issues about a double bind). Finally, this work was summarized as an autoethnographic essay.

Discussion

The following is discussion summaries of the results for each category.

Workshops, Presentations, and Lectures

At a presentation, a professor suggested that I should write an autoethnography on trying to write a dissertation in my graduate program for a conference. Because I am always attending events at the university related to this and taking notes, she presented it as an easy idea. I had heard of autoethnography, but I actually began to learn about it in earnest at this point by reading several articles about it. Some examples of it read like new journalism to me. Some read just a story about something that was happening to an author and others took on the shape of scholarly writing with familiar headings such as “methods”. I was quickly lost while working on this paper. My first draft had to be substantially rewritten.

The presentation was on creating an academic resume, but it put a conference paper topic on my lap, and potentially a direction for larger research such as a dissertation. It has put me squarely at the center of the tensions in the field over autoethnography. I faced several double binds. This conference paper does not directly help my dissertation pursuit but helps the resume a dissertation may be a part of. However if I do not complete a dissertation, the resume is harmed. If potentially this topic becomes part of my dissertation, I enter into a process that is complicated by the fact that many scholars potentially may not know what it is, may not respect it as they do other ideas, and that this line of scholarship is developing. On the other hand, if I do not take it on, I do not learn anything new. The fact that autoethnography often appears as essays is also an attraction because it can open my voice to a more popular audience than scholars although some scholars can see it as a distraction. I realize that part of my problem with autoethnography and my issues with the dissertation process is negotiating the language and culture of what I perceive to be scholarly work. The presentation also quickly sets up the complexity of genre and activity systems. Everything I do or write at the university, be it a note or research paper or essay, can become something else like a conference paper or a dissertation.

Dissertation and Proposal Defenses

Most of the time, I find myself to be the only student watching a dissertation proposal or defense. At one of them, I was joined by a fully uniformed police officer prepared to leave for work and another student who was minutes away from working at the university itself. The fact that I was a substitute teacher and was not called in that day is the only reason I could catch this event, which means I was in a select group of educators who could actually take advantage of an event like this at a school that prepares educators. In a way, the profession seems unfairly punished by not having these events after public school hours. These events give me exposure to the bringing to life of a dissertation and topic ideas and how they are constructed and reconstructed. You can feel the nervousness of a student who is presenting and you get a feel for how faculty think. When I can prepare for these events by reading the dissertation documents, I can feel the anguish or relief while watching their idea unfold at the presentation. My dissertation topic search now incorporates a sense of getting through the gauntlet of this event.

Graduate Student Network Meetings

This is the best venue for handling issues related to university problems. The people here are often few, but they are sharp and active participants at what is going on. The conflict here is to struggle politically within the school to make it better knowing that much of what happens may be enjoyed by people long after we are done. This is where a lot of inside baseball happens with dissertation issues. We learn what is going on and who is doing what here, but these

meetings do not happen all the time. I often have to pit participation in this with school work and school work usually wins.

Meetings with Professors

I get a lot sometimes by being in the hallway and listening to students who are further along in the process discussing their work with faculty. Faculty have been helpful in the topic process, making suggestions, motivating me into a direction, and noting things that usually I would not be privy to such as a new book on the topic I mention or how the school is addressing the issue. I was recruited to help a professor create a course that may be taught in the future. At best, an article, piece of instructional material, or idea I found may be used in this course at some point in the future. Learning materials I found may be read by students, used in their teaching, or inspire something else. Potentially, this small contribution I have made by happenstance may be the most important thing that I did all year at the university.

This is counterbalanced at times by the dissertation topic process that can be both the most important thing in the world and totally perfunctory and meaningless too. Although many people create work inspired by their dissertation, I get the feeling that dissertations and the work they inspire never gets much further than the conferring of the doctoral degree. I can ask people about recent work at the department and get quizzical looks. I constantly think about what I could be doing if the dissertation was not in the way. My sequential thinking is also at odds with professors. They discuss the long term goal partly because they have already gone through the process but part of me thinks in terms of sequences. I can not put my full thought on a dissertation until I get through the week and then the class and then the coursework, and then the comprehensive exams and so on and so forth through the chain that leads to the dissertation.

Course Work and Classroom Discussions

Dissertations are always brought up in discussions. It becomes a matter of what becomes contributed to the discussion and by whom. It becomes evident sometimes in class discussions who are the active classroom teachers and who are not. Many of the active teachers to me still seem to have the distraction of work in their thought processes. They are slightly late with work or hyper organized to keep from being late with work. Papers may be short on information or full of too much information in a way to compensate for a lack of quality time focused on the university. Those who are not in the classroom have to be explained basic terms, issues, and slang used in the classroom. Teachers not active in research have to be explained basic ideas and terms in that culture. Discussions and dissertation ideas are sometimes tempered by this reality.

I am in the middle of this because I do not always work as a teacher. I suspect that if I was a full time teacher, the quality of my school work would begin to suffer because I would have in the back of my head the residual angst of the troublesome fourth period class I would have to face again tomorrow or the concern for the students with larger issues that I can do little about as a teacher anyway. The big issue with discussions is the fact that they can easily turn into complaint sessions and not important discussions. The need to vent supersedes the need to think. Layered on this is the fact the teaching discussed at the university is often different from the reality and there is a sense that the university does not change or value what happens in the field.

Writing Groups

The writing group I participate in promotes discussions on the challenges of writing for publication. It meets on weekends and, hence, goes against weekend work or free time for me.

Research

Involving oneself in an existing research project at the school and using it as a dissertation topic is the ideal, but one has to be really into it to figure out what it really is

sometimes. A researcher can influence one's own work. My research is mostly influenced by scholarship I read on my own, but I feel pressure at times to take a professor's research advice.

Informal Channels

I was at an apartment complex and with a friend from FIU who graduated from the business school and was 40 thousand dollars in debt. He was showing me his new work truck. On top of the same bartending job he had before school, he was taking odd jobs pressure cleaning. He felt that school was a waste of time, money, and energy. He was not going to be working in what he studied or use the textbooks he bought. We have some similarities because I too do odd jobs on the side so he wondered how I could make ends meet and deal with school and he could not. He lacks some survival skills in the real world I gained from being poor like fixing a used vehicle instead financing a new one. I told him that if I do not have the cash for tuition, I just do not go to school. I am not a role model either but I feel he is emblematic of what happens at FIU. The pursuit of a dissertation is tempered by all this negativity about education and the whole system around it. I have to be positive to people like him, ignore the pity party, and move on or I lose focus on my dissertation. I am surrounded by people like this.

Other Events

I was at a town hall meeting FIU had proposed for discussing budget cuts. The university system itself was physically embodied by the people around me. The custodians were in row. The deans and students were in others. The media was paying close attention. Administration was either on camera or nearby. There was a lot of talking about the mission of the school and political strategy. Through out the presentation, the numbers that struck me were those tied to tuition. If they raise tuition, it gets harder to get through school and to eventually get to the dissertation topic. The double binds of the system are evident for me. I feel for the economic crisis the region is in, but tuition and other costs make me question the pursuit of the dissertation for me or for anyone. The school's focus on certain concepts and departments (such as environmentalism) make me both wonder if I should gear a dissertation topic around the favored ideas of the school and also angry that a university does such a thing. The talk of political strategy is both honest and corrosive of the school environment. The administration has pushed numbers on the deans so that they can make cuts, therefore shifting the weight of blame on the higher level administration to people below them. The end result is the possibility that faculty is cut and that could mean another dissertation interrupted. Furthermore, the meeting hides as much as it reveals. It is hard to question the numbers from the higher ups passed to the deans without research, and it is hard to tell what goes on in each department and how it ties to the bigger picture. The need to be a political activist supersedes my identity as student at moments like this, but it takes me a while to formulate my ideas and I do not say a word at the meeting. Meanwhile, the dissertation is waiting and time is money.

Work, Profession, Home, and Community

Many teachers at the school I teach in do not have graduate degrees or dissertation topics. We talk to students about doing the best job in the world, and yet few in the profession have a doctorate or have done hard graduate level research work. I would feel better as a role model if I had the best degree I could even though many educational leaders I know do not have one. There is no community of researchers at the school. There are just a few teachers who go quietly to graduate school. Once, I saw a research survey being passed out in a classroom by another teacher. Students asked me about school and I explained the process. It is hard for them to grasp.

At an Amnesty International meeting, I was struck by the precarious budget and small number of people involved in the local chapter. The people in it including FIU students are

extraordinary people willing to spend time, money, and energy on various events. I constantly get emails about people whose lives can be saved. Comparing it to the theoretical discussions about the power of education and the fact that a dissertation may not even be read, or the debates on less important matters, I get the feeling if my dissertation topic can not change the world, then it is not worth pursuing. Yet, we are warned all the time not to try to change the world with the dissertation but to get it done. At home or with family or friends, the dissertation is simply an abstract unreal thing only I worry about. You have a degree or not. It is kept a silent struggle because the awe of taking many classes or the unimportance of education as a career is exaggerated by other people and their remarks throw off my focus.

Implications and Importance

The illustration of the university as a genre and activity system is purely conceptual in the work of Russell (1997) when it comes to students and their interactions with the school lacking the thick description of a personal account. The aim of this study was to flesh out the double bind issue in the concept of genre and activity systems through the use of an autoethnography of a graduate student in the College of Education at FIU. This autoethnography adds a thicker personal description to what is learned about a university while acknowledging a larger context in the society the individual interacts with. Thus this study is important because it focuses on a relatively rarely used variation of the systems theory and not only adds to the body of literature in the systems theory but also to the literature of autoethnography and to the small body of autoethnography specific to the context of FIU. Finally, because the researcher is a public school teacher and a graduate student at the College of Education, this study gives added insight to the issues that arise related to the discipline, its professional context, and its community.

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