

Writing through theoretical frameworks in the doctoral classroom

Theoretical
frameworks

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Abstract

Purpose – Many doctoral students apply theoretical frameworks to writing assignments as part of their academic coursework and, later, in the practice of analyzing and reporting research. However, students often struggle to effectively apply theoretical frameworks to their writing processes. Thus, as one way of contributing to the writing pedagogies of doctoral-level instructors, the purpose of this study is to explore doctoral students' learning experiences with analyzing and reporting organizational data using theoretical frameworks.

Design/methodology/approach – This study examines the perspectives of 29 doctoral students through analytical papers and reflections, letters and interviews.

Findings – Five themes within the context of current literature on writing were identified. These included students experiencing discomfort, even fear, about writing; students needing to write and receive honest feedback to learn how to write; the need for an instructional process that moves from conceptual to detailed instructions; understanding that writing has conceptual and skills implications that cannot be achieved in a single class; and the analytical writing process contributes to an understanding of the complexity of holding a doctoral degree.

Practical implications – The findings demonstrate the importance of helping doctoral students gain confidence and improve writing with theoretical frameworks, which can be accomplished with structured formats, through repetition and from instructor feedback.

Originality/value – This study offers unique insights into the challenges that doctoral students face when writing through theoretical frameworks and how instructors can interact with and potentially improve students' writing skills and abilities.

Keywords Teaching, Organizational theory, Analysis, Writing, Doctoral education, Theoretical framework

Paper type Research paper

The act of clear writing is central to the work of the researcher and is a developed art. Many faculty, even master writers themselves, stumble when considering how to teach writing to aspiring researchers and graduate students. Much can be found in the literature about creative writing, technical writing and proper grammar and flow. Texts and articles are also



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available to guide students toward reporting qualitative research; however, little exists to teach students about this task when using a theoretical framework, a theory chosen to guide research design and/or data analysis. Yet, the need to connect the existing theory and new research data is paramount to continuing to build and critique knowledge in all fields of study. For researchers, academics and teachers, “writing is not just a support-level activity; it is the primary way in which we develop and disseminate knowledge” (Ragins, 2012, p. 493). Writing is a learning process in and of itself (Wilson and Cutri, 2019).

In 2015, Anfara and Mertz (2015) (Eds) published the second edition of *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*, a book that reports the use of theoretical frameworks – also referred to as theoretical lenses – by various chapter authors/researchers. Anfara and Mertz define theoretical frameworks as “any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g. grand, midrange, explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of the phenomena” (p. 15). This critical book, the only known to address this issue, takes readers “behind the scenes” to learn how “researchers found the theoretical framework they used in a particular study and how it affected the study” (p. 16). However, the critical issue of how to use theoretical frameworks for *analytically writing about data* was beyond the scope of the book and remains a gap in the literature. It is this gap of how to prepare students to write using theoretical frameworks that was an important focus of this study.

Problem and purpose

Many doctoral students apply theoretical frameworks to writing assignments as part of their academic coursework and, later, in the practice of analyzing and reporting research (Anfara and Mertz, 2015). However, students often struggle to effectively apply theoretical frameworks to their writing processes (Carter and Kumar, 2017; Holmes *et al.*, 2018). This may occur because graduate faculty assume students arrived with this skill set, they do not know how to teach the process or they do not believe they have time or should need to teach writing. Regardless, students are seldom taught *how* to write using theoretical frameworks for their data. Thus, as one way of contributing to the writing pedagogies of doctoral-level instructors, this study explored doctoral students’ learning experiences with analyzing and reporting organizational data using theoretical frameworks.

Relevant literature

Much like undergraduate students, graduate students approach academic writing with a great deal of anxiety (Holmes *et al.*, 2018) and are not immune to the same criticisms of their writing that undergraduates face. Nelson *et al.* (2012) noted that faculty expectations that graduate students will “have mastered basic writing skills [...] are often unmet” (p. 376). The reasons for weaknesses in graduate-level writing skills are varied, but may include the demands that new genres place on graduate students, lack of proper time management and insufficiently helpful feedback from their instructors and thesis/dissertation advisors (Nelson *et al.*, 2012).

Much of the literature on graduate writing instruction focuses on the role of feedback. It suggests that effective writing feedback for graduate students involves instructors providing frequent, written formative feedback, which is low-stakes feedback that promotes improvement (Singh, 2016), and creating opportunities for the development of a community of practice around writing (Biswas, 2017). Although instructors often believe that students have little interest in receiving or acting on feedback, graduate students claim the feedback they do receive is often too late, too vague, too difficult to understand or too difficult to implement (Carter and Kumar, 2017; van Heerden *et al.*, 2017). Feedback related to issues of

content, such as the strength of evidence or clarity of the argument, leads to more meaningful improvements than surface-level feedback, like corrections on grammar and mechanics (Patchan *et al.*, 2016). However, instructor feedback can go too far; Johnson *et al.* (2019) found that feedback that offered general observations but avoided rewriting student passages led to greater improvement.

Additional support can occur through graduate students' working together to discuss their scholarly writing (Ekholm *et al.*, 2015; Mirzaee and Hasrati, 2014). Graduate student communities of practice have been found to be helpful *social* support for the development of writing skills (Biswas, 2017); however, Dressler *et al.* (2019) found that graduate students were more likely to apply feedback from their instructor than from a peer.

The literature, thus, suggests that frequent, written formative feedback from the instructor is most helpful for graduate students, and it is best for feedback to focus on high-level content concerns. Unfortunately, such feedback is often lacking in graduate classes. Carter and Kumar (2017) noted that time pressure on supervisory faculty impedes their ability to provide content-focused feedback. Instead, instructors often focus on grammar and mechanical issues (Nelson *et al.*, 2012) because such feedback is quicker to provide and easier for students to implement.

Furthermore, instruction in and practice with specific methods of academic writing, including general argument construction and analysis, is often lacking for graduate students. Although an andragogical approach suggests giving graduate students significant freedom in their writing choices, graduate students express a desire for more definite parameters regarding writing expectations and more explicit instruction in strategies for writing (Coberly-Holt and Walton, 2017; Nielsen, 2015). Similarly, Santelmann *et al.* (2018) found that graduate students did their best writing when given scaffolded instructions for achieving specific goals. These findings echo the literature on undergraduate writing, which emphasizes the importance of guiding students through the writing process, from initial idea development through substantive revisions (Clark, 2012; Warner, 2019). Just as undergraduate students often flounder if they are given no more than a description of what their end product should look like, it seems that graduate students also need help with the *how* of writing. Given the similarities between undergraduate and graduate students when it comes to writing, it also seems likely that the importance of frequent and contextualized writing practice that has been found for undergraduate students (Morris, 2017; Wardle and Clement, 2017; Warner, 2019) would hold true for graduate students as well.

Overall, it seems that graduate faculty may often misidentify graduate students' "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) when it comes to academic writing. Vygotsky described this zone as:

The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 86).

According to Vygotsky's theory, which has been widely adopted in the educational context, learning and development involves engaging students at this zone through both instructor guidance and peer collaboration (Salkind, 2008). Vygotsky's theory explains why graduate students often struggle with writing when they lack clear guidelines and work in isolation and why they improve with greater instruction and peer involvement.

Study design

This study used a qualitative design and was in part influenced by the tenets of action research, which is most often conducted within the natural environment of the classroom, is

often carried out by teachers, and seeks to “simultaneously improve practice and student learning” in the classroom (Putnam and Rock, 2018, p. 2). As both an instructor and researcher, however, there was also a goal to consider study outcomes for their implications for the doctoral learning process in which this class was situated, meaning the program context.

Theoretically, the study was based upon an epistemology of constructivism that claims among its “conjectures” that:

Humans do not merely experience events, they consume them [...] Making sense of something means organizing and rendering it into apparently comprehensible, understandable, and explainable form (giving it form and substance) so that it is possible to cope with it (Lincoln and Guba, 2013, p. 45).

The assumptions of interpretivism, which “attempts to understand and explain human and social reality” (Crotty, 2012, pp. 66–67) further guided the study design. The four qualitative research quality criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (DeVault, 2017; Lincoln and Guba, 1986) were addressed in a number of ways. These included prolonged engagement and observation in the classroom across two years and with former students, peer debriefing among the authors, triangulation across two forms of in-class data as well as with data collected from former students and thick description of the instruction and students.

Limitations

The findings of this study are not generalizable, but may be transferable. Data were impacted by the limits of human memory and participants’ selections about what to share. Likewise, students’ responses were subjective and varied according to the students’ individual perspectives and experiences. Changes in the class subject, instructor and/or university may have led to different findings. Past students in the course who participated in study interviews had successfully continued their doctoral studies, so it is unknown how data would change if participants who did not continue their studies were included. Finally, this study captured only a period of time; a different period could result in different findings.

Description of study setting

The primary data collection site was a doctoral-level organizational theory course at a Midwestern university that was required for completion of a doctorate in leadership and policy. Students who enrolled in the class over a two-year period served as participants. Additional, supplemental data collection included former students in the class. As is the cyclical nature of action research, data caused modifications to the course across the time span of data collection; thus, the intent of this study was not to compare one section of the course to another but, instead, to consider the perceptions of students in a common environment, as well as implications for learning across the doctoral program.

Within this doctoral program, students primarily learned about writing through theoretical frameworks as a part of the class on organizational theory. While writing through theoretical frameworks could have been situated in a multitude of courses, the nature of analyzing organizational data and coming to conclusions that allow recommendations, as well as the course’s emphasis on theory, naturally provided an opportunity to hone understanding of theoretical frameworks. Most students took the class in their first 18 months of doctoral work.

Theoretical frameworks were introduced to students through an in-class exercise where pairs of students were assigned to describe an object from varying physical perspectives;

thus, one group looked at the object from above (standing on chairs), one at a typical height for the object (seated in chairs) and one from below (lying on the floor and looking up). In a large group debrief, each pair contributed their descriptors, and students were asked to consider how their understanding of the object increased as each additional perspective was added. The exercise was a metaphor for using several theoretical lenses for a single data set in organizational environments that are far too complex to be understood through a single theoretical lens.

The lesson from the exercise was then extended through an instructor-led, PowerPoint-supported discussion in which students explored the impact of varying perspectives on what is seen and understood in organizational data. Figure 1 shows the first slide wherein the researcher/student is depicted wearing sunglasses with pink lenses – in this case, associated with the bureaucratic theory – that, when applied to the data set, turn certain pieces of data pink.

The instructor then reminded the students that they tend to see the color of lenses they wear. Viewing data through a bureaucratic lens highlights pieces of data that are related, meaning they support or are in contrast to the bureaucratic theory. Figure 2 shows the second slide wherein the researcher/student switched to blue lenses – in this case, associated with the political theory – that turned pieces of the same data set blue.

The instructor noted that some of the same pieces of data that were pink are now blue, demonstrating that some data can be important in more than one perspective; other blue pieces are new because they are associated with the political perspective. A final slide in the series shows the researcher/student wearing two sets of sunglasses, one with pink lenses and one with blue lenses, now associated with the power and cultural theories.

The instructor guided the class in observing that a larger portion of the data set is in pink and blue, analogous to two lenses, or perspectives, on the data.

Against the conceptual backdrop of these exercises, students were given three overarching questions for consideration in their written analytical work:

Q1. What does viewing data through the framework tell you?

Q2. What does it suggest?

Q3. What questions does it create or leave unanswered?

Because students often struggled with the practical steps of how to address and write about these questions, the instructor provided simple writing cycles as one possible template. Within the body of the analytical paper, a writing cycle:

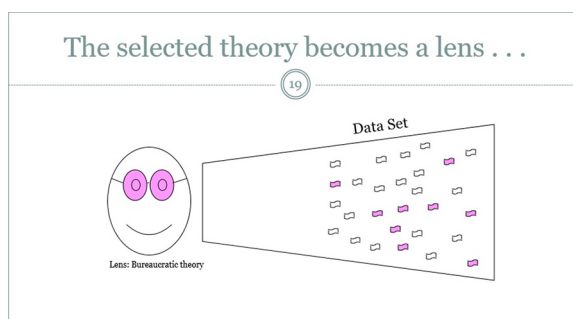


Figure 1.
The pink lenses –
Slide 1 of
presentation on the
impact of varying
perspectives on what
is seen and
understood in
organizational data

- begins by stating one component or characteristic of the theoretical framework with a brief description;
- then presents specific evidence or detailed examples from the data set; and
- closes by clearly stating the tie between the component and the evidence, which is an explanation of how the evidence supports the component of the theory, leaving nothing to chance.

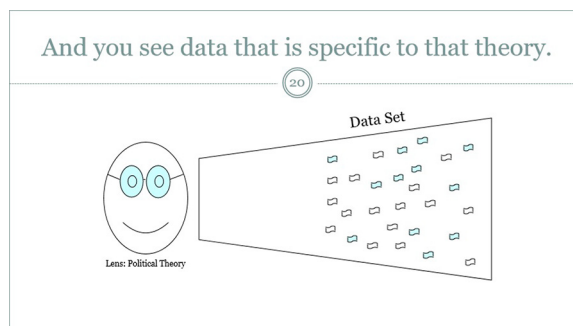
In the early stages of writing, this template of writing cycles could be repeated for all components of the theory. Students were encouraged to “take off the training wheels” as their writing became more fluid and they felt more comfortable with the task. In later iterations of this class, [Toulmin’s \(2003\)](#) model, a well-known argumentation model that breaks argument construction into specific components, was used to further support students’ understanding of the logic of the original writing cycles.

The term “contrary evidence” was presented last in the writing instruction. Borrowed from the instructor’s training in behavioral-based interviewing ([Motowidlo et al., 1992](#)), contrary evidence was defined as information (data) that is contrary to (or in conflict with) emerging patterns as discerned by the interviewer (researcher). Students were told that if they write about the ways their data matches the theoretical framework but do not address contrary evidence, they made the assumption that a theory can be 100% accurate, or that reality can reflect at 100% what was predicted by theory, which is generally a fallacy. The reasons for deliberately seeking contrary evidence were presented as follows:

- Critical thinkers/writers need to consider *all* of the evidence. If they do not, any conclusions they draw are immediately suspicious.
- The researcher needs to get there first. Unacknowledged contrary evidence by the researcher will likely power efforts to refute the findings, as all findings become suspect.
- The contrary evidence may actually change the researcher’s mind. By intentionally considering contrary evidence, the researcher may shift their perspective on emerging findings and use that opportunity to reconsider the data for previously unseen meanings.

Students were instructed to state contrary evidence and, as the “experts” on the data, explain how it may have existed through organizational variables present in that time and space. Students were also encouraged to address how contrary evidence could be a separate written section just before the paper’s conclusion, or it could be a fourth step in a writing

Figure 2.
The blue lenses –
Slide 2 of
presentation on the
impact of varying
perspectives on what
is seen and
understood in
organizational data



cycle. Students were told that, in either case, the conclusion was critical as the final argument that brings together the threads of their analysis into a strong concluding statement.

Extensive “stream of consciousness”-type written feedback was provided by the instructor to guide students toward mastery of the analytical and writing skill sets. The instructor used Track Changes in Microsoft Word to mark grammatical corrections and to demonstrate, within the student’s written work, how small changes to flow and structure could strengthen their writing. The New Comment function in Microsoft Word was also used to highlight and insert comments about larger sections of text. For example, a common comment encouraged students to be more specific in describing the data in which they referred. In later iterations of the class, standard grading schemes were suspended for a plus/minus system indicating the level of mastery of the process, and students were required to rewrite their papers according to instructor written feedback until minimal levels of mastery were achieved.

Data collection and analysis

Viewed from a research perspective, many classroom assignments are naturally data rich. Two of the three data sources used in this study, written reflections and letters, were standard course assignments completed by current students. Qualitative interviews with former students and reflective discussion among the instructor and peer authors of this article, both of whom were former students in the class, were data collection or analysis steps added specifically for research. In total, 29 doctoral students provided data.

Analytical papers and reflections

Four analytical papers required students to apply a specific organizational theory as a theoretical framework for analyzing data and reflection on their experiences. Students’ written reflections, a total of 145 pages, provided data for the study.

Letters

In total, 22 one-to-two-page unstructured personal letters to victims of the Holocaust (the course’s data set; see [Kearney et al., 2013](#)) were reviewed for spontaneous student references to the writing process.

Interviews of former students

Qualitative, one-on-one interviews were conducted with five students three-to-four semesters after they completed the class. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The participants described successful doctoral-level writing when using a theoretical lens, commented on their continuing use of theoretical lenses in writing and presented their perceptions about how their writing may have been influenced by the organizational theory class.

Data analysis

Students’ reflective papers and letters, as well as transcripts of former student interviews, were loaded into NVivo. Multiple rounds of open coding, sorting and re-sorting led to a number of identifiable themes in the collective data. Additional discussion, informed by their own observations and experiences in the class, and collaborative sorting occurred as the researchers further refined themes and worked to discern participants’ intended meanings in relation to the study’s purpose.

Findings and discussion

From the analysis of the data, eight major themes and three subthemes emerged and resolved into five findings. These findings are discussed within the context of current literature on writing.

Finding 1: all students had some level of discomfort about writing; some were even fearful

Students at the doctoral level of study are often viewed as the elites of the educational system, but writing, it seems, renders them all too human. Through their written reflections and descriptions in letters, almost all students reported some level of discomfort or anxiety related to analytical writing requirements: “I am not very good at articulating it in my writing. I have a hard time explaining it in a way that makes sense to the reader.” Specific concerns about the requirements of the course were also apparent: “This paper was much harder to write; it took me almost twice the amount of time as the first, which I did not think was humanly possible.” Some students even admitted abject fear: “I would really like to know how [this paper] stacks up to my previous writing. Am I getting worse? Is that a possibility?” Some reported a small but growing level of confidence:

As I face our third paper, I am now savvy enough to recognize that it will hold its own unique challenges and I will grant myself the grace to muddle through it as I’ve done the first two.

All students reported feeling a considerable amount of pressure or concerns about doctoral-level writing: “Even now, after hours and hours of rewrites and editing, I am still unhappy with my final product.” These feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are consistent with the literature on graduate students’ attitudes toward writing (Holmes *et al.*, 2018; van Heerden *et al.*, 2017).

Finding 2: to learn, the students had to write and receive honest feedback

Jerde and Taper (1994) stated that prior scientific writing experience was the only activity that significantly improved students’ scientific writing performances. It was not surprising, then, that doctoral students in this study needed to *practice* with writing through theoretical frameworks to *improve* at writing with theoretical frameworks. This theme was particularly evident in reflections by current students and through interviews with former students. Repetitive application and writing through theoretical frameworks is particularly well suited to organizational theory courses because the *application* of theory to organizational data is also a goal, particularly from multiple perspectives to better explain a complex environment.

Students repeatedly stated a connection between the quality and quantity of professor feedback and their writing abilities: “The real learning aspect was professor feedback.” Another student said that the instructor’s “time giving feedback is so much more useful than her assigning grades.” Students reported being hungry for specific feedback – “I am dying to get your feedback” – whether good or bad. Specific, formative feedback in applied writing, rather than the grade received, created confidence in their writing skills: “When I was told to ‘paint of picture’ of the culture, that is where the lightbulb seemed to click for me.” Another student said, “It was what she wrote in the columns or in the [...] margins that made the difference, not the subjective grade at the top.” When grading in later classes was replaced with pluses and minuses, one student said:

I was a straight A student through school, and so, when you give a letter grade, there’s a level of expectation. When she did the plus, minus, or you know, you were either below, at/on target, or above, that kind of took some of the pressure off and helped me to see where I needed to be without it being so negative.

Students also contrasted their writing experiences in other classes with the organizational theory class:

My experience with him is that I would write a paper and he would say, “This is great. You’re a really good writer. This is an A.” It was kind of like, “Okay, but that’s – there’s nothing I could tweak or clean up?”

Another student said, “She doesn’t really work on you as far as syntax and grammar [...] What she works on is content and helping you become a better writer.” Such student perspectives resonate with the literature’s emphasis on frequent written feedback from instructors that focuses on substantive aspects of the writing rather than mechanics (Ekholm *et al.*, 2015; Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Patchan *et al.*, 2016; Singh, 2016).

Applied writing experience. Almost all students reported that their analytical writing skills were changed because of their applied experiences: “Without a doubt, [I] got better at it because we were asked to do it.” Repeatedly, students acknowledged the importance of practice: “Educating people on writing is hard to [do] because how people develop as writers, there’s just so much dependent on their just sitting down and writing.” This finding is consistent with the literature, which suggests the value of frequent writing assignments (Singh, 2016). It also suggests the importance of an expanded development period, including multiple applied writing opportunities across the doctoral coursework period.

Finding 3: an instructional process that moves from the conceptual (large picture) to detailed instructions provides multiple opportunities for information to resonate with varied students The sunglasses with colored lenses (Figures 1–3) were noted as useful for helping students consciously move from one way of thinking to another: “I found it easy to look through my little pink glasses and see the data through various aspects.” One former student said:

When I started this org theory class, I didn’t anticipate that I would learn about lenses [...] I didn’t think about it from the standpoint of, “I will write differently because of what we talk about [...]” The sunglasses picture has always stuck with me, where she showed a dataset [...] and the sunglasses were put over the researcher and so how they looked at the data was changed [...] And so now, when I use a theoretical lens, I’m a lot more specific about what I’m noticing and I go into an article or data or writing with a different focus.

As previously noted, the Toulmin (2003) model was used in later classes as a more detailed guide for teaching analysis using theoretical perspectives. The association of Toulmin’s model with writing through theoretical frameworks does not appear to have been previously researched, perhaps because the approach in this class flipped the model. In most

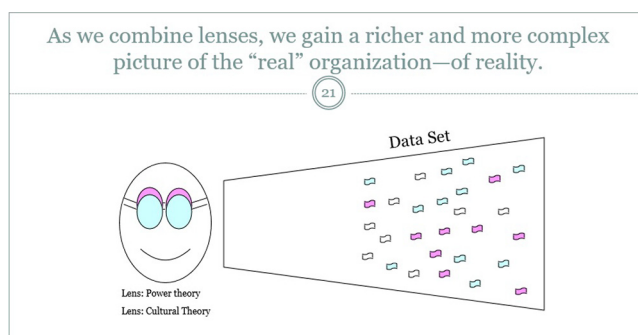


Figure 3.
Combined lenses –
Slide 3 of
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implementations, the Toulmin model teaches identification of presumptions as an outcome of analysis. (For example, one might examine a statement like, “Julia is good at basketball because Julia is tall” and recognize the implicit belief that being tall makes one good at basketball.) The approach in this class used theory, or theoretical frameworks, as the *sources* of presumptions relevant to analysis. Students seemed to grasp this concept fairly easily, particularly finding the analogy of the colored sunglasses – the larger guiding concept – helpful for their understanding. The general success of the conceptual-to-specific approach may suggest value in further use of the Toulmin model of argument for teaching doctoral writing.

Structured writing process. Following the conceptual level, students were offered a specific framework of specific writing cycles and reported *mixed perspectives* on whether the structure was helpful. In general, most saw it as positive – “This framework of cycles really helps justify evidence” – but still somewhat uncomfortable. Students reported processes that leaned heavily on the structure for getting started: “I wrote my introduction and then made a list of each component of Weber’s theory and planned to form each writing cycle around the individual components.” Others were more comfortable with the writing task and felt they could have written without the structure of writing cycles.

Personal preferences seemed to play a role in students’ perspectives as they reported differing reasons for seeing the writing cycle process as helpful. Firstly, they self-identified as highly conceptual students who really needed the structure: “The cycles are the frame to house writing that is organized in a clear manner and builds the case component by component.” Secondly, they self-identified as highly structured people who liked guidelines, but usually used their own preferred processes after affirming the similarities to what was taught. Even for those initially relying heavily on the structure of the writing cycles, individual writing rituals and processes began to reassert themselves as students became more comfortable: “It occurred to me that I had started to take the training wheels off, as I began developing paragraphs differently”.

A small number of students who continued to stick very closely to the writing cycles felt like it constrained them: “Following a set formula for each paragraph just seemed exceedingly dry. I felt like I was performing rote memory drills.”

Overall, students’ responses leaned toward being positive about the highly structured system, which echoes the literature that suggests that many graduate students are more comfortable and successful when they have explicit instructions for how to approach a writing assignment (Coberly-Holt and Walton, 2017; Nielsen, 2015; Santelmann *et al.*, 2018). Those students who believed that they could have been successful without this structure may have simply had strong writing skills at the outset. Another possible explanation for the mixed responses was the lack of an intentionally developed writing community as part of the class, which the literature indicates is another component of effective writing andragogy for graduate students (Biswas, 2017; Ekholm *et al.*, 2015; Mirzaee and Hasrati, 2014) and which is also a key element of Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development. It may be that more intentional implementation of community of practice around writing in the class would have helped these students better internalize the process and move beyond rote imitation.

Finding 4: writing is a comprehensive piece of doctoral-level work, with both conceptual and skills implications that cannot be taught in a single class

It may, at the first glance, appear strange that an organizational theory class, intended to teach content knowledge about *organizations*, should place such an emphasis on analytical writing. Alternatively, it may appear that organizational theory courses are the best places

to teach analytical writing through a theoretical framework. Either assumption would represent a skewed perspective of student learning. In this class, writing was a type of proxy measure of students' understanding of the organizational theory used as theoretical lenses. Or, as one student more eloquently said, "The outcomes of our organizational theory class are to understand organizational theory while applying the concepts and frameworks in analysis." After all, "writing is one form that thinking can take" (Wolcott, 2009, p. 19).

Realistically, most classes in a doctoral program do not have the luxury of focusing only on their intended content, like finance, law, policy, etc. Although artificial dividers unrelated to needed comprehensive knowledge are put into program curriculum at all educational levels for reasons like habit and accountability (Fink, 2013), specialty areas of individual faculty members and accommodating the academic schedule (Freebody *et al.*, 2013), faculty and students must also look beyond these artificial lines to share the load of teaching required skill sets. While this perhaps challenges the independent and competitive spirit of research faculty who train doctoral-level students, the data from this study suggests that faculty must have a concern for the overall preparedness of the student to demonstrate meta-knowledge of content in their field and the capability for independent research. This includes asking the question of what else a particular course may need to teach while still pursuing the primary content intent of the class.

Writing is beneficial to learning because it "forces students to clarify ideas[...] by postulating hypotheses, organizing facts, etc. in a way that is rarely possible otherwise" (Lauer and Hendrix, 2009, p. 425). Through writing, students are permitted to improve their clarity and understanding of a topic, approach it objectively and logically consider the role it plays within and outside of a theoretical concept. Many researchers believe that writing should not just be *taught* in all courses, but *done* in all courses. Duron *et al.* (2006) supported this idea:

Educators must give up the belief that students cannot learn the subject at hand unless the teacher covers it. While it is useful for students to gain some exposure to the materials through pre-class readings and overview lectures, students really do not understand it until they actively do something with it and reflect on the meaning of what they are doing (p. 160).

Finding 5: the analytical writing process, in this case using a theoretical lens, was a conduit into an improved understanding of the complexity and responsibility of holding a doctoral degree

Doctoral students must learn to complete and write *analysis* of the full data in all of its complexity, which was modeled by the component of contrary evidence in this writing process. Working with contrary evidence seemed to trigger thoughts about the responsibility of holding a doctoral degree in messy real life. Students struggled to find "a good way to incorporate [contrary evidence] without it sticking out like that puzzle piece you are trying to force to fit." Many students also reported some level of frustration with the incompleteness of real organizational data. That frustration combined with the search for contrary evidence meant letting go of the quest for the right answer: "I had to release myself from attempting to make open systems the 'right one.'" For others, it meant willingly embracing the sometimes competing nuances found in real organizational data:

There were things that I was assuming about Auschwitz that after examination realized there were several instances of contrary evidence. There were some of the German soldiers that did have a heart, as in the case of Lt. Battel. The other soldiers just did their jobs without asking questions and went and partied, whether to forget or celebrate is still in question.

For most students, the search for, and positioning of, contrary evidence did not come easily even by the end of the course. However, they were beginning to embrace the responsibility that comes with an advanced education:

A lot of writing at the doctoral level is covering your bases so that nobody can argue the points you make or so you can cover your own butt. To prevent arguments, or defend arguments, or to critically look at arguments, or look at points that other people are making and make a critical argument, that's what a doctorate is.

Conclusions and recommendations

Strong, clear doctoral-level writing is the primary vehicle that shares knowledge among researchers and carries knowledge from research and practice. In other words, analytical, academic writing is a primary skill in advancing knowledge. Despite this role, or perhaps because of it, writing continues to challenge both doctoral faculty and students. This study reported findings with a number of implications for doctoral practice and programs.

Whether or not instructors are aware, students often arrive at their doctoral programs fearful about writing. They may be particularly concerned because they are accustomed to being top academic performers and, perhaps for the first time, face comparison to other top academic performers. Students may benefit from *many* opportunities to gain both skill and confidence about their writing through structured formats and/or repetitive practice and feedback. They may also benefit from explicit instruction in how to analyze data through a theoretical framework, whether that instruction uses the colored-lenses analogy, the Toulmin model or some other form. Students should know that it is acceptable for them to flounder and even fail in writing with multiple professors and across multiple courses, i.e. ultimately, how they will deeply learn.

This study further highlighted that students, depending upon their backgrounds and confidence, likely need differing levels and types of structure. Although further nuances continue to be offered by researchers, the concept of learning styles has been around for decades (Dunn *et al.*, 1981). At the risk of greatly oversimplifying the topic, students have differing learning needs, and teachers have differing ways of teaching; varying approaches on both sides of the learning exchange, further highlight the need for core skills like writing to be taught across the doctoral curriculum with formative feedback provided by instructors about substantive writing issues. Students may learn best with the opportunity to respond by revising their work or using a different lens (i.e. additional applied work). Likewise, peer modeling improves students' writing self-efficacy and self-regulation and should, therefore, be included in graduate coursework design. Multiple sources of feedback and response to feedback are part of important repetition in the learning process.

It seems the key conclusion to be drawn from this study is that teaching writing skills must be constant and culminating. A multi-course, continuous learning effort such as this requires that faculty in doctoral programs be willing to plan for shared responsibility for this critical skill.

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