

Probing normalized institutional discourses about writing: The case of the doctoral thesis

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Over the past decade, much government and institutional interest internationally has focused on the expansion and improvement of doctoral education, with degree completion rates and times topping government and university agendas. Since degree completion is intimately linked to the thesis, doctoral writing has surfaced as a new problem space for institutional attention and intervention. These interventions, as well as the roles assigned to teachers and researchers of writing, language, and academic development, however, depend largely on how institutions conceive of writing, which in turn is shaped by normalized inherited discourses about writing.

Drawing on rhetorical theories of discourse and writing, this article examines institutional discourse for how it conceives of the doctoral thesis, how it regulates the writing of the thesis, how it positions the process and product of thesis writing within the knowledge-making activities of the university, and what implications this discourse has for how institutional interventions in support of doctoral writing are conceptualized. Using the example of discourse about doctoral thesis writing offered by graduate schools at research-intensive universities in Canada, the article works from a systemic perspective that invites all those involved in facilitating research education to examine, reflect on, and contemplate institutional discourses about writing as inherited and normalized patterns of social practice. Finally, the article argues that these practices have significant consequences for doctoral scholars, supervisors, and the ability of institutions to develop new visions for curricular innovation in research education.

Key Words: doctoral student writing, institutional discourse about writing, discourse and genre theory, graduate schools, doctoral education, thesis, writing as epistemic.

1. Introduction

Those of us whose research and teaching focus on academic language, learning, and doctoral education must be encouraged by growing interest in the doctorate. Over the past decade, concerns about degree completion rates and times as well as stronger publication records for graduates have risen to the top of government and university agendas (Aitchison, Kamler, & Lee, 2010; Boud & Lee, 2009; European University Association [EUA], 2005; Golde & Walker, 2006; Innovative Research Universities Australia [IRUA], 2008; VITAE, 2009). Given

that publication and program completion are closely linked to the thesis,¹ doctoral writing has surfaced as a new problem space for institutional attention and intervention, especially in institutional units tasked with monitoring the quality of doctoral education, such as graduate schools. However, increased attention does not guarantee improved response: the type and level of support that graduate schools make available depends largely on how they conceive of writing, which in turn is shaped by inherited and normalized institutional discourses about writing. Institutional discourse, as Percy (2011) notes, is of particular interest to all those involved in studying and teaching writing, for a number of reasons. As Percy points out, institutional discourses not only define the problem space called “writing”, but also shape how we as researchers and teachers of writing and language are located in that space and what we are expected to provide. Moreover, institutional definitions of writing will necessarily shape opportunities, limitations, and consequences for doctoral writers, supervisors, and others.

Our purpose here, therefore, is to examine the discourse graduate schools use to discuss the thesis and the processes involved in writing a thesis: what constraints and supports they offer; how they envision the process of learning to write a doctoral thesis; how they locate the writing of the thesis in the overall intellectual work of the doctorate; and, concomitantly, how they conceive of interventions directed at doctoral writing. In short, we are interested in graduate school discourse about the doctoral thesis, the regularities or contradictions that characterize this discourse across institutions, and the implications these regularities and contradictions have for institutional interventions and resource allocation for doctoral thesis writing. Although the concerns with doctoral education, degree completion, and thesis writing are global, we focus here on the discourse in one national location, Canada. We believe that the graduate school discourse that regulates doctoral thesis writing in Canada will resonate with colleagues in other countries because such discourses are, of course, inherited from past generations and accordingly saturated with past “common sense” assumptions about writing, which in the daily frenzy of institutional activity all too easily escape reflection, dialogue, and contemplation. That reflection, however, is particularly important for institutional discourses about writing because, as researchers from around the world have consistently observed, writing often remains marginalized, invisible, and taken for granted (Lee & Aitchison, 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Thais, Bräuer, Carlino, Ganobcsik-Williams, & Sinha, 2012).

We begin by situating our study in current theories of rhetorical discourse and writing studies. We then offer our analysis of graduate school documents about thesis writing as published by Canadian graduate schools on their web sites, exploring how they conceive of doctoral thesis writing and what consequences these conceptualizations have for the design and delivery of institutional interventions. We conclude with implications of our findings for further research on doctoral student writing.

2. Understanding discourse and writing systemically: Rhetorical genre theory

For our study, we draw on rhetorical genre theory because it understands discourse and writing as historically evolved social and ideological practices that are regularized in *genres*, which are defined as recurring patterns of discursive action that arise in human collectives, such as research cultures and institutions, over time. According to rhetorical genre theory, these patterns accomplish the goals of these collectives and allow participants to act together by tacitly inscribing expectations, proscriptions, values, and norms for who can write what, when, how, and with what impact (Bazerman, 1988; Miller, 1984; Devitt, 2004; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Paré, 2014).

This understanding of genres as owned not by individuals but by human collectives, and as developing in these collectives over time through repetition, has important implications for

¹ The final text in doctoral studies is referred to as the *thesis* or *dissertation*, depending on jurisdiction. We use *thesis* in this paper, except where the word *dissertation* is used in our data.

understanding both doctoral writing and institutional discourses about writing. To begin with, discourses and genres precede individuals onto the scene; that is, individuals inherit genres such as the thesis—including a particular range of expectations of what a thesis can or must look and sound like—from previous generations and become gradually socialized into participating in them and reproducing them. This inherited nature of genre is as true for thesis writers as for graduate school administrators tasked with facilitating thesis processes.

For thesis writing, this inherited, locally situated nature of genres means that they are specific to the collectives (e.g., research cultures) whose work they do, and that students entering these research cultures cannot possibly be familiar with their discursive practices and the particular demands they place on researchers, their identities, and contributions. Rather, the discursive practices of a given research culture are learned through gradual participation in the discursive activities of a student's field. In addition, its situated nature within specific collectives means that doctoral writing cannot be separated from the disciplinary discursive activities in which the students are expected to participate (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Starke-Meyerring, 2011, forthcoming).

Moreover, the inherited nature of discourse and genre and their historical evolution through repetition render them a form of tacit, normalized “common sense” (Paré, 2002); they become invisible in plain sight. Participants are usually socialized into them through their participation in the activities regularized by a given genre, often through trial and error or corrective feedback, but usually without a language that allows for collective reflection and probing of normalized discourses and genres (Bazerman, 2009).

For institutional discourses about written genres, this understanding of their regulated, inherited, and normalized nature means that the assumptions these discourses reproduce about thesis writing are likewise historically situated and inherited. They have existed long before current pressures on thesis writing surfaced, but continue to inform institutional practices, programs, and policies regarding thesis writing. Having evolved historically as “common sense”, they are rarely subject to critical reflection.

Most importantly, this understanding of genres as inherited and regularized socio-cultural habits allows those of us involved in doctoral writing, whether as administrators, research development professionals, language and learning educators, supervisors, or writing studies researchers, to adopt a systemic view and to move beyond the notions of individual blame or deficiency that so easily surface when scapegoats are sought for thesis failure or delay. Instead, it is our purpose here to invite participants in these institutional genres to examine them as inherited patterns of discourse that frame, facilitate, constrain, or stifle their practice—in our case, the practices involved in thesis writing.

For this purpose, we draw on Giltrow's (2002) notion of meta-genre—that is, repeated or regularized talk *about* genres. Meta-genres, according to Giltrow, are “atmospheres of wordings and activities ... surrounding genres” (p. 195), which often take the form of policies, directives, memos, procedures, manuals, tip sheets, guidelines, or other documents describing or regulating genres. As Giltrow observes, meta-genres accomplish their work by providing “a kind of pre-emptive feedback ... ruling out some kinds of expression, endorsing others” (p. 190), or by providing “demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations” (p. 195). In this way, meta-genres “recruit writers to dominant interests, or impose discipline on diversity” (p. 191). Some meta-genres become codified as habitual practice—such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, or the *APA Publication Manual*—while others exist as unquestioned assumptions about the proper way to proceed.

The notion of meta-genre is also particularly conducive to tracing shifts in institutional discourses. As genre researchers emphasize, while exerting a considerable normalizing force, genres evolve constantly as a result of new pressures, challenges, and exigencies as well as through the ways in which participants improvise in order to respond to the concrete exigencies they face (Bazerman, 1988; Miller, 1984; Devitt, 2004; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Meta-genres, in particular, prove to be useful sites for tracing these shifting social dynamics of writing, especially if we are alert to—in Giltrow's words—“disparities or collusions” (2002, p. 199) in

meta-genres of thesis writing across institutions. As Giltrow explains, consistencies in meta-genres across institutions “may signify functional collusion of understandings, a deep socialization and isomorphism of practice and identity” (p. 199), while disparities may indicate shifts, tensions, contradictions, or uncertainties, especially in the face of new challenges.

A final point important for our analysis is the emphasis rhetorical genre theory places on the consequential nature of discourses, genres, and meta-genres: they (re)produce certain outcomes and interests of a community, organization, or institution—for example, a particular kind of knowledge (as through a thesis) or particular kinds of subject positions (e.g., certain kinds of disciplined researchers and thinkers). Likewise, institutional meta-genres can reproduce a kind of status quo of thinking and “common sense” about writing that regulates the institution’s actions and interventions. Here, we are interested in the ways in which graduate school meta-genres work to conceptualize, regulate, and locate doctoral student writing within the knowledge-production activities of institutions. We are interested in what these meta-genres suggest about how graduate schools understand writing, what assumptions or perceptions they reproduce or question in light of the challenges they face, and how these assumptions and perceptions might in turn shape decisions about resources and support for writing. Most importantly, however, our goal is to de-familiarize and open up for dialogue and reflection some of the inherited and common-sense ways of talking about writing.

3. The study

Guided by our theoretical understanding of genre, meta-genre, and writing, we systematically searched the web sites of graduate schools at the 11 most research-intensive Anglophone universities in Canada, focusing on all policies, guidelines, descriptions, guides, tip sheets, and other documents that discussed writing as it relates to the thesis. We compiled the documents into one file, which yielded about 200 single-spaced pages. We also took screenshots of home pages and entrance points to thesis related documents in order to capture how the web sites located thesis writing within the overall activities of the university.

Drawing on our rhetorical conceptualization of discourse and writing, we used the following questions to guide our analysis of these documents:

- How do they conceive of writing and, more specifically, the thesis; that is, what sort of processes and products do they envision, and on what assumptions do these rest?
- How do they seek to regulate and facilitate the writing of the thesis: what advice, warnings, proscriptions, or support do they offer to doctoral students? And importantly, who gives advice to whom, based on what evidence, and with what authority?
- How do they position the process and product of the thesis within graduate study and the knowledge production activities of the university?
- What regularities and contradictions characterize these meta-genres across institutions?

After each of the four authors scanned the documents for evidence related to each question, we compiled our observations, debated and probed the evidence for these observations in the documents, and then went back for a deeper level of analysis concerning the main observations or themes that had emerged in our initial reading. It is important to emphasize here that we were not interested in counting instances of particular kinds of statements; rather, we seek to offer a rhetorical, systemic reading of institutional discourse about thesis writing.

We have decided to present examples from our extensive data without identifying particular graduate schools. Although all graduate school documents that constitute our data were public documents, we chose not to identify the names of the universities because they are irrelevant to our research purpose.

Our analysis of these graduate-school meta-genres generated three key observations: First, that graduate schools, without exception, conceive of the thesis primarily as a knowledge *product*, describing it commonly as an “original contribution to knowledge” in the student’s area of research. Accordingly, a large number of graduate-school documents were dedicated to

administering, monitoring, standardizing, and distributing the thesis as a product, and they did so in a fairly consistent manner across universities.

Second, the *processes* of writing the thesis—of producing the disciplinary knowledge product—were conceptualized as separate from the discipline or research culture to which the thesis contributes. Hence, support for thesis writing tended to be placed in peripheral and marginal campus locations, such as alongside chaplaincies, mental health clinics, or other services. Moreover, dissertation writing advice was dispensed generously, but it was largely inconsistent and conflicting across universities, except for one characteristic: none of it was based on research. In short, while the thesis as a product was recognized as epistemic, the processes of writing the thesis were not.

Third, this understanding of thesis writing had serious consequences for institutional interventions and support for thesis writing, which was predominantly provided in the form of ad-hoc workshops outside of the disciplinary knowledge-making practices within which doctoral writers work. Moreover, these ad-hoc interventions were not based on research, either, leading to the somewhat peculiar circumstance that the main activity of research education, the writing of a thesis, was not informed by or grounded in research. We now discuss each of these observations in detail.

4. Analysis

4.1. Administrative meta-genres of the doctoral thesis as a knowledge product

Across these institutions, graduate school meta-genres left no doubt that the thesis is the main requirement of a doctoral degree and as such plays a central role in the student's research education. For example, thesis policies, guidelines, and requirements typically acknowledged that "Your thesis will be the final product of your time in graduate school," or that "all students in a thesis degree program must present a thesis embodying the results of their research." Indeed, across the graduate school web sites, thesis regulations, guidelines, and requirements were very consistent in acknowledging the thesis as an epistemic enterprise in some sense; they typically demanded that the thesis in some way be an "original contribution to knowledge" in a given field. Accordingly, thesis regulations typically began with a rather similar sounding statement to this effect along the following lines (emphasis added):

A doctoral thesis must embody the results of original investigations and analyses and be of such quality as to merit publication; furthermore, it **must constitute a substantial contribution to the knowledge** of the candidate's field of study.

The doctoral thesis must embody original work conducted while in program, and **must constitute a significant contribution to knowledge**. It should contain evidence of critical understanding of the relevant literature. The material embodied in the thesis should merit publication.

A thesis for the doctoral degree must display original scholarship, expressed in good literate style, and **must be a distinct contribution to knowledge**.

A doctoral thesis **must constitute a significant contribution to knowledge**, embody the results of original investigation and analysis on the part of the student and be of such quality as to merit publication.

Despite their central concern with the thesis's contribution to knowledge, these meta-genres clearly focused on the "product" and "results," with phrases such as "embody," "contain," "display," or "express" identifying the thesis as a container for a knowledge product, a sort of wrapping of research in "good literate style", which could presumably be universally agreed upon. With their product orientation, statements about the thesis as an original contribution to knowledge were immediately followed by an abundance of minute instructions for the packaging or formatting of the thesis as a product as well as by deadlines and documentation demands concerning the production schedule for its delivery and distribution.

Across institutions, these regulations were easily accessible in central locations on the web site. They usually appeared prominently on the home page or were immediately accessible from the main menu of the graduate school web site in prominent sections labelled “thesis requirements and preparation”, “regulations and guide for the preparation of theses”, “thesis guidelines”, “thesis documents and forms”, or in prominently located policy sections with “handbooks” for supervisors or students. Their central location within the graduate school web sites signalled their central role within graduate school activity and thus the traditional graduate school role of ensuring technical production, standardization, conformity, verification, and distribution. Moreover, these documents also exhibited considerable convergence across institutions to the extent that the types of requirements as well as their wording in these documents appeared almost identical, signalling strong sedimentation and reflecting a long tradition of practice.

4.2. The writing of the thesis: Graduate-school meta-genres of thesis writing advice

Our analysis revealed extensive concerns with thesis writing at all institutions, with each graduate school offering some sort of advice on writing the thesis. Indeed, announcements of entire suites of workshops, advertisements for writing demonstration sessions featuring professors writing on the spot, specially created elaborate web sites, and descriptions of graduate school initiatives devoted to writing testify to the growing attention paid to writing. Although this emerging commitment to and investment in writing is significant in itself, what is important for our purposes is how these meta-genres conceive of thesis writing, what assumptions about writing they (re-)produce, and how they locate thesis writing in the institution. Here our analysis yielded the following insights.

4.2.1. Advice dispensed on thesis writing denied the epistemic nature of writing and located writing outside the disciplines whose work it does.

As we noted above, the thesis was understood as a knowledge product in graduate-school meta-genres, but the process of arriving at that product, that is, the actual writing of the thesis, was not conceived as knowledge work. This denial of the epistemic nature of writing exhibited two prominent patterns labelled (1) and (2) below.

(1) Meta-genres conceived of writing not as a means of producing knowledge, but rather as a matter of packaging or “writing up” knowledge created elsewhere. Similar to the meta-genres devoted to the administrative processing of the thesis as knowledge product, meta-genres dispensing advice on writing imagined the thesis as a container that “embodies”, “contains”, “displays”, or “expresses” knowledge found elsewhere. To provide only one example, one typical set of “tips for writing a thesis” broke the process of thesis writing down into multiple steps, ranging from finding a topic to editing one’s work, and equated writing with the mere recording of knowledge made elsewhere:

[Step] 5. Write (Record your Findings)

Depending on the discipline and topic, you may complete all of your research before you begin writing, or you may move back and forth between research and writing.

As researchers have noted, this notion of writing as the simple act of “recording” findings, or as it is often called, “writing up”, can be detrimental to thesis writers as it obscures the hard knowledge and thinking work that constitutes the writing of the thesis (e.g., Kamler & Thomson, 2006), for example, the intellectual work of actively working out findings and arguing for their interpretation through writing. As we have outlined elsewhere (Starke-Meyerring & Paré, 2011), the epistemic nature of writing has been well established in rhetoric and writing studies. And yet, nowhere did we see references to writing as knowledge work. For example, there were no references to the ways in which the genre of the thesis in different research communities stipulates a range of types of questions that can be asked, how they can or must be articulated, what kinds of knowledge claims can be made and how, what kinds of evidence and argument are appropriate in support of a knowledge claim, what kinds of researcher positioning is acceptable in an ongoing research conversation, or what kinds of citation practices are considered credible. With writing understood as a skill rather than a set of

social knowledge-making practices specific to research cultures, these kinds of questions were silenced as only the product was valued and submitting “unfinished work” to supervisors was deemed inappropriate.

(2) Denying the epistemic nature of writing, meta-genres of thesis writing obscured the rhetorical dimension of knowledge production. Silent on the epistemic nature of writing, meta-genres also shrouded the rhetorical nature of thesis writing as knowledge work. For example, consider the following common statements of advice:

- Ultimately, your thesis will be in a library. Your ideas should be accessible and clear for future researchers, so keep your writing simple.
- Hand in material that is clear.
- Dissertation writing should be clear and unambiguous.
- The clarity of communication will come sooner or later.
- Be judicious in your use of abbreviations.
- Use quotations selectively.
- The thesis usually follows a simple overall format—it begins with an introduction, which is followed by a main body or several sections, and ends with a conclusion.

As these examples illustrate, the advice assumes that writing can simply be universally clear and unambiguous rather than being interpreted through the various epistemic lenses, practices, assumptions, expectations, objections, alignments, and commitments that situate the thesis in multiple reading contexts (Paré, Starke-Meyerring, & McAlpine, 2009). The statements omit to explain how thesis writers are to know what it means in a given research culture to be “judicious” in their use of abbreviations, or what it means to “use quotations selectively”, let alone why; that is, what role particular ways of handling or avoiding quotations play in the construction of knowledge in a given field. Similarly, generalized descriptions of introduction, body, and conclusion do little to help doctoral writers understand the range and functions of argument or rhetorical arrangement available in the genre in a given research culture.

Or consider how the following examples of statements obscure the rhetorical nature of thesis writing as knowledge work:

In a monograph thesis, a student presents a proposition, or “thesis,” and the research findings to support it. The student draws on existing research, which he or she may accept or reject.

A literature review should serve as a major summary of scholarly and scientific publications on your research topic.

The literature review should enable you to demonstrate mastery of skills in two areas: information selection and critical review/appraisal of available literature.

Your research supervisor and supervisory committee members will be major sources of support and guidance for you as you pursue your graduate research. Plan to consult regularly with them in order to answer key questions about your topic, methodology, data collection, proposal development, and other facets of your evolving thesis or dissertation.

None of these statements acknowledge the historically situated, interested, and contested nature of knowledge; that is, they deny the rhetorical nature of knowledge-making. For example, the notion of “accepting or rejecting” existing research obscures the complex ways in which knowledge claims are staked out or contested in a given research community, whose lab must or must not be cited, how researchers align with or against each other in advancing competing theoretical, epistemic, ideological, or methodological commitments. Likewise, discussion of literature reviews as a matter of “summary” or “information selection” shrouds the ways in which literature reviews as genres work as highly political sites to shape researcher identity development and to create theoretical or epistemic alignments. As Kamler and Thomson (2006) put it fittingly, “literature reviews are the quintessential site of identity work, where the novice

researcher enters ... occupied territory—with all the imminent danger and quiet dread that this metaphor implies—including possible ambushes, barbed wire fences, and unknown academics who patrol the boundaries of already occupied territories” (p. 29).

Along the same lines, we found no acknowledgement of the rhetorical nature of thesis committees—that is, of the potential differences in theoretical and epistemological alignments that might exist between and among members of a student’s committee. Nor did we find any discussion of possible conflict between students and their committees, as—for example—when a student’s identification with factions in a research community is opposed to those espoused by the supervisor or committee members.

To be sure, some advice did seem rooted in some sort of rhetorical understanding of thesis writing. For example, some advice did acknowledge the situated nature of thesis writing in different disciplinary and institutional traditions, and some advice did emphasize the social nature of writing—that there are discursive habits that have evolved over time and that students should somehow familiarize themselves with those. For example:

Publication practices vary widely between disciplines, so a single set of firm policies governing authorship is not possible or desirable.

Carefully review any research that has been recently published by your research supervisor or others from your department.

A valuable source of guidance is recently completed theses or dissertations produced by students who have completed your program. Ask your research supervisor to recommend particular theses and dissertations from students he or she has supervised. Learn from those who have gone before you.

Develop networks with graduate students in your program who are nearing completion of their graduate degrees, and seek their permission to attend their final thesis or dissertation defense presentations in order to learn more about the process.

Clearly, there is some sense here of the socio-cultural nature of writing, of its rootedness in discursive tradition, but such advice was rare, and when given, lacked explanation or theoretical justification, and none of it addressed the epistemic nature of writing. Moreover, when provided, such advice was given in a rather assimilationist “do-likewise” spirit, ignoring, for example, the complex ways in which discursive practices shape knowledge and identities that students may well have reason to resist (e.g., Turner, 2003).

4.2.2. Advice dispensed on thesis writing was divergent and at times contradictory

While meta-genres dedicated to the technical production of the thesis as a material artefact were highly convergent in the concerns they addressed (e.g., they all specified particular right and left margins, particular formatting of tables of contents, etc.), meta-genres addressing the writing of the thesis were highly divergent and at times even contradictory. This divergence concerned the type of advice given as well as the specific content of the advice. With regard to the type of advice, as the above examples indicate, some of it pertained to word choice, other to useful readings for developing one’s writing, and yet other advice pertained to arrangement.

Perhaps more importantly, we found considerable contradictory advice, most notably regarding the role of and responsibility for editing the thesis. For example, while one school’s set of thesis guidelines linked directly from the school’s web site to the web site of the Editors’ Association of Canada, and there specifically to a section titled, “Hire an Editor”, another set of guidelines banned the involvement of professional editors in the production of the thesis outright, rationalizing that:

Ultimately, the thesis must be the student’s own work. Editing should take place as part of a learning process, a collaboration between the student and his/her supervisor and other academics in the University. Working with the student to teach him/her how to edit the thesis is part of a learning experience; having a thesis professionally edited is not acceptable.

Following Giltrow's (2002) suggestion that "disparities" in meta-genres may indicate a developing response to a new situation, we interpret this contradictory position on professional editing as indicative of emerging concerns about how students arrive at the knowledge product that is the thesis. In fact, the inconsistency of thesis writing advice—compared to the high degree of concurrence on format and product—suggests that some conceptions of some aspects of writing may be less sedimented and perhaps particularly conducive to dialogue and reflection.

4.2.3. Advice dispensed on thesis writing in graduate school meta-genres was not based on research

Amidst the divergence and confusion characteristic of graduate school meta-genres, there was one consistency across universities: the writing advice we found was not grounded in research; sources for advice were rarely identified, and as a result, citations or references were largely absent. Accordingly, suggestions for methods of inquiry, invention, and composition were generalized, decontextualized, and assumed to be universal, as if such activities could happen outside of research communities. Moreover, confident pronouncements and exhortations about writing were not supported by evidence or linked to any theory or conceptualization of writing, learning, and knowledge making. When the sources of advice were provided, they usually did not refer to research-based literature, but rather drew on personal accounts, impressions, or perceptions of researchers (though not those studying writing). This lack of a research base is illustrated, for example, in this opening phrase of an essay dispensing advice on thesis writing:

After nearly 30 years of work on my own, and on numerous other, dissertations, I think I can finally offer my own definition of a dissertation.

All of the advice provided, then, is based on personal preferences and impressions, such as, for example, reading the *New Yorker* for its short fiction:

Help yourself out—read lively works. Better yet—read lively works outside your field. In my case, I have subscribed to the *New Yorker* for years. It comes to my apartment once a week. Each issue has at least one piece of fiction, and I read all the fiction because researchers cannot read too much lively short fiction. Short lively fiction is the Dim Sum of the research mind.

How a doctoral scholar, however, might take this advice and translate it into understanding and participating in the discipline-specific discursive knowledge-making practices of their field, say physics, remained unaddressed.

Accordingly, much of the advice provided was somewhat similar to that identified by Kamler and Thomson (2008) in their analysis of popular thesis writing advice books: it abounded with generalized rules considered to be universal, regardless of the particular research community in which a writer participates. As such, the meta-genres reproduced popular perceptions of writing that have not been borne out in research, but have consequences for how resources on writing support are spent.

4.3. Consequences of graduate school discourse about thesis writing for institutional intervention and resource allocation

Working from a non-research based rhetorical understanding of thesis writing as a decontextualized, presumably universal skill, graduate-school meta-genres have important consequences for where writing and thesis writers are located and how resources on thesis writing are spent.

4.3.1. Meta-genres locate writing outside of the disciplinary knowledge-making practices and at the periphery of graduate school activity

We found advice on writing in web site sections referring to "services" or in elaborate separate web sites dedicated to "professional development" or "professional skills", which were usually deemed universal and transferable. Figure 1 below provides an example of a typical location of graduate school meta-genres of thesis writing. The left side of the figure shows the menu items displayed on the main page of the graduate school, with references to writing appearing under a

link to “services”. Following the link, we arrived at a lengthy list of services with brief descriptions, the last of which was called “thesis writing support” and contained only a link to a “Dead Thesis Society”, which did indeed seem to have expired as there had been no new postings in months.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I. The [Graduate School] ... • II. Sources of Information: Programs and Fees ... • III. Fee Structure: Definitions ... • IV. Regulations and Procedures ... • V. Financial Support ... • IV. Student Organizations, Activities and Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizations 2. Social activities 3. Sports and recreation 4. Culture and entertainment 5. <u>Services</u> 6. Libraries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... E. Services 1. Employment ... 2. Housing ... 3. Health insurance ... 4. <u>Counselling</u> ... 5. Chaplaincy ... 6. Women's Centre ... 7. International Students ... 8. Sexual Harassment ... 9. Bisexuals/Gays/Lesbians ... 10. International Programs ... 11. Student Services Centre ... 12. Thesis Writing Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dead Thesis Society F. Libraries ...
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Figure 1. The table of contents of one graduate student handbook web site, illustrating the peripheral location of thesis writing on graduate school web sites.

As the list of services indicates, with writing understood as arhetorical and outside disciplinary knowledge making, thesis writing finds some strange web site bedfellows, including counselling, chaplaincy services, and housing.

4.3.2. *Meta-genres suggest that considerable resources were expended on non-research-based writing-related initiatives*

The lack of a research-base for writing had consequences for where and how resources were spent on writing. In addition to writing advice tucked into “service” sections, much advice also surfaced in elaborate—usually separate—web site sections devoted to so-called “graduate student professional development” or “professional skills”. The elaborate nature of these special web sites dedicated to writing as a professional skill and the many workshops and events that are listed on these sites suggest that considerable resources are being dedicated to these efforts.

At some graduate schools, writing workshops were offered with faculty offering hours of their time to draft in a public setting for students to observe their performance. Descriptions of such workshops were straightforward in spelling out their assumptions about writing:

Today you can witness one of the most secretive of all human behaviours—writing. Come for ten minutes or come for seven hours. Come and go from venue to venue.

... The project is based on the premise that, **as with other skills**, learning how to write an academic paper can be significantly enhanced by observing expert behaviour. (emphasis added)

The passage suggests a recognition that, somehow, research writing must be learned, and these initiatives certainly do not spare time, effort, or resources as the following excerpt suggests:

Every word, every typo, every moment of writer's block will be projected on large screens in four different rooms. Audience members witness the horror, the struggle, and the triumph of writing as it is practiced.

Again, writing is conceived of as a skill owned by and observable in individuals at any given moment rather than an inherited, historically evolved, and constructed set of social knowledge-making practices into which new members are gradually socialized or "disciplined" through increasing participation and feedback. Importantly, there is a recognition of the intensity—"the struggle"—involved in writing; however, the source of that struggle—the deeply social and rhetorical knowledge work that constitutes writing—remains mysterious, a "secret".

Understood as separate from disciplinary knowledge production, writing is perceived largely as an add-on, ad-hoc skill that can presumably be dispensed in a large battery of ad-hoc generalized workshops outside of disciplinary activity. Consider, for example, this statement from one of the "Professional Skills" sections of a web site:

While gaining the knowledge, experience and expertise in your area of study remains the most important aspect of your training, increasingly, funding agencies, universities, employers of highly qualified people, and many researchers themselves are recognizing the importance of **professional skills that go beyond disciplinary expertise**.

These professional skills are known by a variety of terms – **transferable skills, key skills, core skills, soft skills, generic skills, or generic competences**. They are the kinds of skills necessary for effective performance not only in the workplace but in life in general and once mastered, through a variety of opportunities, **can easily be transferred from one field to another**, from one career to another, from one life situation to another. (emphasis added)

The section then moves on to locate writing and discourse as one of those presumably easily transferable skills:

Researchers are able to communicate effectively, concisely, and correctly in written, spoken, and visual forms to a variety of audiences using a wide range of media. Their effective communication depends on a variety of interpersonal skills including listening, asserting, influencing, persuading, empathizing, and exercising sensitivity and diplomacy.

Workshops offered by another graduate school identify a goal to:

transform students into scholars and professionals in their disciplines ... [and] to provide critical communication, writing, and professional skills that enable new scholars to disseminate their research, to teach effectively and collaborate successfully

Conceiving of these "skills" as merely a matter of disseminating rather than constructing knowledge, the program then specifically identifies these "skills" as outside of disciplinary learning:

designed to **complement** the disciplinary preparation that graduate students receive in their departments through coursework, research, conference participation and interaction with faculty. (emphasis added)

Again, we found no references to any research guiding these assumptions about writing. Without a research base, thesis writing finds strange bedfellows—executive writing, dealing with depression, facilitative leadership, or conflict resolution in one "professional skills" web site, or with this list of workshops on another web site:

- Learn the ropes as a Teaching Assistant
- Improve your academic writing
- Get career support
- Learn computer skills
- Write your thesis or dissertation
- Get published
- Using the latest and best research tools
- Get organized
- Deal with stress

The most important concern here, however, is not only the strange bedfellows of thesis writing and its peripheral location outside of disciplinary knowledge production. Rather, it is the indication that large amounts of resources are being spent on ad-hoc solutions based on assumptions that have not been borne out by research. As a result, these interventions inevitably reproduce the inherited assumptions about writing that produced the problem space to begin with. Most importantly, they do little to mentor students into the discursive knowledge-making practices of their disciplines.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

To conclude, we return to the questions we set out to examine: How do graduate school meta-genres envision the doctoral thesis and the writing of the thesis? What consequences does this institutional discourse have for where thesis writing and writers are located, and how resources are allocated? And what are the implications for those involved in facilitating, studying, and/or teaching research writing in doctoral education?

As our analysis shows, graduate school discourse about thesis writing, without exception, defined the thesis as a knowledge product, “a significant contribution to knowledge in a given field”, but located the production of that knowledge, the writing of the thesis, outside of a student’s field, alongside non-academic services, such as chaplaincies, mental health clinics, or housing services. None of the advice provided was research based, with meta-genres reproducing normalized assumptions about writing as a presumably universal skill. As a consequence, institutional discourse about thesis writing led to institutional interventions that were likewise atheoretical and arhetorical, uninformed by research, and located outside the disciplinary knowledge-making practices that shape and are shaped by research writing. Filled with non-research based assumptions about writing, these initiatives provided little opportunity for doctoral students to access any kind of dialogue about discipline-specific discourses and research writing practices, let alone to probe the normalized discourses that produce knowledge in their fields.

As we have shown elsewhere, the consequences for doctoral writers and for supervisors are significant: students find themselves in search of remediation for presumably deficient writing skills, or working in fear of asking questions about normalized assumptions about writing that are simply expected of them as “common sense” or “simply clear writing” (Starke-Meyerring, 2011). At the same time, institutional discourse about writing as a universal skill stifles their efforts to establish writing groups and to produce writing in an environment that has historically marginalized writing (Starke-Meyerring, forthcoming). Supervisors, likewise, find their work of supervising doctoral writing undermined by institutional discourse about writing as a universal skill. Without any research-led support, without the ability to articulate the discourse practices expected of themselves and their students, and pressured to hurry students along for faster times to degree completion, they often have no other option but to offer vague advice or write portions of their students’ theses (Paré, 2011). And regrettably, as Percy (2011) notes, those studying, teaching, and facilitating academic development and research writing across the university remain trapped by this institutional discourse in roles “as remedial and therapeutic skills teachers, corralled from mainstream teaching and learning activities” (p. 138).

Importantly, as Percy (2011) cautions, institutional “skills” discourse has a strong conservative force: it “prevails in spite of us, and we are compelled to work with its nuances, its impossibilities and its constraints” (p. 138). With the emergence of doctoral writing as a problem space, however, we hope to have shown that institutional discourse about writing as a skill has produced an important contradiction: Why, we might ask, are graduate school interventions in research education, and specifically in thesis writing as the main activity of doctoral scholars, not based on research? After all, the meta-genres we examined are located in research-intensive universities, which by the nature of their mission espouse a deep appreciation for and commitment to the value of research in informing practice. More importantly, would not their research education mission drive graduate schools to model the role of research in their practice?

Here we return to rhetorical genre theory to help address this contradiction as a way to open up dialogue about inherited institutional discourse. In particular, we draw on the insights generated by research on genre that has come to understand genres as discursive habits that are owned not by individuals, but by human collectives. Importantly, genres emerge in these collectives over time through repetition. It is their evolution through constant repetition that makes them appear normalized, “common sense”, beyond question, and seemingly universal (Paré, 2002). After long-time participation in these recurring activities, individuals come to see genres as normal to such an extent that the genres in which they participate disappear into invisibility, rendering writing a seemingly universal skill and making it difficult to imagine that there could even be research on writing. In this way, normalized discourses about writing in institutions constrain not only researchers and teachers of writing, but also graduate schools, preventing them from tapping into that research.

In addition, as Giltrow (2002) noted, meta-genres control the boundaries of the discursive cultures whose work they do. Our analysis showed how meta-genres perform a similarly regulating and controlling function with regard to managing a perturbation—the emergence of doctoral writing as an institutional problem space. In our study, we saw how meta-genres turned this challenge into the status-quo of inherited skills discourse, holding in place, reproducing, and extending through ad-hoc solutions various deep seated, normalized, and inherited assumptions about writing. Our hope is that our analysis from a systemic perspective offered by rhetorical discourse theory of genre and meta-genre has opened a space for probing both the genres of doctoral thesis writing and the meta-genres that maintain the marginalized location of doctoral thesis writing in universities. And importantly, we hope that the systemic perspective we offered here allows participants to move beyond seeking blame or deficiency in doctoral students, supervisors, or administrators for long times to degree completion, but rather to work together to open up dialogue that can shape new visions for research-led innovation in research writing across research education curricula.

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