

Through a Graduate Student's Eyes: A Narrative Inquiry Surrounding the Graduate Student's Academic Journey

Ahmad Khanlari
Ph.D. Student
University of Toronto
a.khanlari@mail.utoronto.ca

Abstract

This paper reviews a student's academic experience, while he was studying as a Master's and Doctoral student in education. The researcher used personal narrative as a self-reflexive approach to examine challenges he encountered in his academic life, as well as the lessons he learned from his academic journey. This paper also provides graduate students with strategies to overcome challenges they may experience.

Introduction

During their studies graduate students encounter many challenges that may hinder their progress. They may also encounter opportunities, which can help them through their journey. However, the stories of graduate students are often overlooked. It is my intention to contribute to the body of research that examines graduate students' academic journey, by telling my personal narrative.

As defined by Czarniawska (2004), "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions" (p. 17). A personal narrative approach enables researchers to document their simultaneous thoughts, feelings, and actions that they were engaged in. The use of personal narratives, which is discussed in several documents (e.g., Denzin, 1997; Lawlis, 1995; Lieblick, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), enables researchers to make a coherent whole of disparate events. In the personal narrative, the researchers not only tell the stories about what happened, but also bring out the manner in which individuals interact, which is hidden behind the stories (Franzosi, 1998).

The purpose of this narrative study is to tell my story surrounding the challenges and the lessons I learned as a graduate student. Furthermore, this paper aims to reflect on strategies I implemented to improve my learning environment and enhance my achievement.

The research questions addressed in this study include:

- 1) What challenges may students encounter during their graduate studies?
- 2) What strategies can students implement to overcome the challenges?

My Initial Experiences as a Master's of Education Student

As an international student who had no experience conducting research in the field of education, I found the first year of my Master's degree quite challenging. Although I had successfully finished my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the area of Electrical and Telecommunication Engineering, I can say that the first year of my graduate degree in Education was the most difficult year of my academic journey. I can identify my challenges as three different categories, namely: 1) supervision issues; 2) challenges with socialization; and 3) minimal professional meetings.

Supervision Issues

In the field of education, when students start their graduate studies, they have no supervisor; an advisor is assigned to them. There was no exception for me, and I had no supervisor when I started my Master's of Education. As a result, I was unclear as to my thesis topic; and unsure which courses I needed to take. It was a very challenging situation for me, especially as my background was in engineering, and I had no background in the field of education. I finished my Master's of Education in two and a half years; however, I would have finished in less than two years if the department had assigned a supervisor to me, from the beginning of my studies. Having a supervisor from an early stage not only helps students to start to think about their final research as early as possible, but also helps them become acquainted with the new environment and program requirements, such as submitting the ethics proposal.

Another advantage of having a supervisor from the beginning is that students would have a supportive person if they wanted to apply for grants and awards. Although I was assigned an advisor to whom I could ask questions and seek advice, I did not receive enough support from him. For example, in the first semester of my Master's degree, I wrote a proposal to apply for a grant and I asked my advisor to review it and advise me if the proposal should be changed. I also asked him to write a letter of support for me, as it was a requirement for this particular grant. His answer was quite disappointing and discouraging: "Your graduate research at [... University] does not require funding from outside sources. It is too early in your graduate program to ask me for letters of reference."

I tried to convince myself that it was too early to request a letter of reference, but I realized that many of my friends in other departments had received letters of support from their supervisors, even in the first month of their study. I did not expect to receive an excellent letter of support, but a very basic letter, so that I could apply for that grant, was a reasonable expectation. Even though it was too early for such a request, I was sure that I needed *some* financial support, as the provided funding package could only cover my tuition fees. I expected to be encouraged to seek external grants, even though he could not write a reference letter for me. The way my advisor treated me completely shut down my desire to apply for external grants.

There were other situations in which I did not receive adequate support from my advisor. For example, he was interested in supervising me and asked me to write a proposal. When my proposal was ready, I asked him to set up a time for a short meeting to discuss it. He wrote me back: "I am quite busy marking the prototypes in [course ...] at present. I might have more time later in the semester."

When reading his email, I decided to contact another faculty member and ask him or her to supervise my thesis. I spent a few days contacting other faculty members, but I only received one response from a professor who asked me to write a research proposal. I wrote a proposal and met her in person. In the meeting, she advised me to contact her after one month. When I contacted her, she wrote me back: "I will have to decline the offer. I will be on administrative and sabbatical leave for the next 18 months, thus would not be in a position to supervise."

It was a stressful time for me for I was told that if I could not find a supervisor, I would have to switch to a course-based Master's program, and if I did so, there would be little chance for me to pursue my education at the Ph.D. level. I felt totally lost in the environment due to the lack of formal support.

Challenges with Socialization

I was extremely lonely in the first year of my Master's degree. As an international student, my first challenge was a lack of communication skills. Despite this challenge, I tried to get together with some of my classmates. However, most of my classmates were teachers who were studying as part-time students and had no time for such kind of gathering. Also, most of my classmates were doing a course-based program and had no idea about the thesis-based program and supervision challenges. Furthermore, almost all the courses that I had taken were offered in the evening (5 to 8 pm) and there was little chance to talk with my peers before or after the class.

While I was experiencing this loneliness, I noticed that students in other departments had their own office spaces: they would go to their offices every day and would talk with their peers. I thought that if I had an office space, I would have a chance to visit more graduate students, share my experience with them, and ask for their advice. I applied for an office space in the department and very soon I was given a desk. However, I was the only person who was using that office space and no one else came there, although there were three more desks in my room. It was totally disappointing, and, after a few weeks, I preferred to study at home and stopped going into the office.

Minimal Professional Meetings

During my Master's degree studies, I always wondered why there were no talks, seminars, or workshops within the department. As a student who was new to the field of education, I had many questions about academic writing in this field. However, there were no seminars or workshops offered to graduate students to help them write academic papers and publish them. There were also no workshops to inform students about

different scholarships and awards, or to advise them on how to write a good proposal for awards. Furthermore, I was continually wondering about my future and my career, but there were no workshops or talks to inform graduate students about the different kinds of job opportunities during their studies or after their graduation. Furthermore, although the degree was a Master of Education, I was surprised that there were no teaching assistantship positions. I believe that having the opportunity to work as a teaching assistant not only helps graduate students to experience effective teaching, but also helps them to make connections with other students as well as other faculty members. I believe these kinds of experiences and meetings help graduate students feel they belong to the community, and to not feel left alone in their academic journeys. I also believe that coordinating these kinds of workshops, meetings, and positions not only helps students to feel connected to the community, but also helps them in their journey and improves their progress.

My Second Year as a Master's of Education Student

The beginning of the second year of my Master's program was totally different than the previous year. In the second year, I received some formal support from the Associate Dean and from other faculty members. I also received relational support from my classmates and my wife. This collective support helped me to find the right way in my journey.

Formal Support

During the first year, I had the privilege of being provided with Research Assistantship positions. Working as a research assistant helped me to make connections with faculty members. At the end of the second semester, I asked one of the professors, whom I had worked with as a research assistant, to supervise my thesis. Unfortunately, she was unable to take any new graduate students, but she spoke with other faculty members and recommended me to them. She also encouraged me to write a proposal and to send the proposal to her in order to be provided with feedback. Based on her feedback and advice, I wrote a very strong proposal; however, I could not find a supervisor until I talked to the Associate Dean of the graduate program. He spoke to some of his colleagues about me, and one of them finally agreed to supervise my thesis. It was the end of my stress surrounding finding a supervisor.

In the second year of my study, I worked as a research assistant with another professor over three consecutive semesters. This professor was very supportive; she encouraged me to apply to a Ph.D. program and generously spent her time with me to advise me on how to prepare the application documents, as well as how to apply for external grants through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). In the process of applying, I also received formal support from two other professors with whom I had already taken courses. Receiving this amount of formal support was very encouraging and made me determined to move forward.

Relational Support

At the end of my first year, I had built a close friendship with one of my classmates. Having a friend with an academic background in the field of education was a great opportunity for me to become more familiar with the regulations of the education department. Furthermore, we set up several meetings to think about interesting and important topics for research and publication. I also received never-ending support from my wife, who always encouraged me to publish papers, and to apply to a Ph.D. program. The friendship and support I received from my classmate, along with my wife's support, strongly encouraged me to study harder, attempt to publish some articles, and apply for doctoral studies.

My Doctoral Study

After being accepted into a Doctoral program, and based on my prior experiences in my Master's degree, I assumed I would not encounter similar challenges to what I had previously encountered. Although it is too early to evaluate my doctoral program, as I have just started the second semester of my studies, I can say that there are some challenges. The nature of these challenges differs from those experiences faced before. I am conducting research in a well-known research group, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, which leads me to believe in my abilities. However, I found the first semester of my doctoral program quite overwhelming. While I was strongly motivated to carry out my research and contribute to the group through hard work, I realized that there were too many things that I needed to learn, and my learning curve was too steep. Another challenge I encountered in the first semester was that the university regulations are not clear; not only for me, but also for students who are in the third year of their doctoral program. I witnessed the stress of one of my colleagues who is preparing to submit her comprehensive exam essay, as there are no clear guidelines for the essay.

Recently the department has designed a pass/fail course, which is compulsory for all doctoral students, in order to help them get to know the regulations and the expectations. Each session of this course has two parts. In the first part (the first 1.5 hours), every week one faculty member comes and talks with students, tells students about the department regulations, and advises them about different challenges that they may encounter. In the second part (the second 1.5 hours), the course instructor talks with students about different academic issues, or asks them to reflect on the papers that were assigned for that week. The assigned papers are also related to graduate studies and accompanying challenges and issues. This course was very useful for me and helped me to become acculturated to the academic environment and its rules. This course helped students get to know the faculty members, their research interests, and their projects. It was also good for students to know other doctoral students and share their ideas together.

Lessons Learned and Advice for Graduate Students

The first lesson I learned is that building relationships and effectively communicating with professors is very important for graduate students, so my first advice is to try to communicate with faculty members in your department. One way to have this kind of communication is to work as a research assistant or teaching assistant; therefore, even if you do not need financial support, I suggest applying for these positions. If possible, try to become involved in their research projects, ask them to advise you about important research topics, and ask them to share their own challenges surrounding their graduate studies with you. As a research assistant, I had the privilege to interview 15 faculty members about their academic journey, and I found their experiences and advice very useful.

The second lesson I have learned is that having a group and working as a team is very important and provides a sense of the community. Therefore, my second advice for graduate students, or other students who want to pursue their education at the graduate level, is to build relationships with other students. I suggest trying to form a group with other graduate students who have the same research interests, in order to share your ideas with each other. In our research team, we made a reading group consisting of two Doctoral students and three Master's students. Each week, one person is responsible for suggesting a paper: we all are committed to reading the article and sharing our thoughts at the meeting. However, our final goal is not just reading articles; we aim to publish together in the near future.

The third lesson is that writing is very important. I have been talking with many graduate students and professors, and I was told that writing a thesis and papers is one of the most difficult parts of graduate studies. Based on these accounts, the third advice is to spend at least one hour a day, from the beginning of your study, to practice academic writing.

Conclusion

Graduate studies can be challenging for students, regardless of their academic background or their prior successes. In order to overcome challenges and successfully finish their studies, graduate students need to implement effective strategies. This narrative paper reviewed a number of challenges the author encountered, and discussed the supports he received to overcome these challenges and the lessons he learned along the way. The paper suggests strategies for graduate students who may experience similar circumstances in their own studies.

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