

# The Qualitative Doctoral Dissertation Proposal

BRENT KILBOURN

*University of Toronto*

*This article discusses the primary qualities of a doctoral dissertation proposal and how those qualities relate to the qualities of a dissertation and to the nature of a research university. Typical parts of a proposal are discussed—problem, significance, literature review, theoretical perspective, questions, methods, and ethics—and reasons are given for the role that each part plays in the development of a dissertation. Emphasis is placed on the nature of argument and on the integrity of the proposal as a whole. Examples, including notes on writing, are drawn from several qualitative proposals.*

## INTRODUCTION

The dissertation proposal is one of the milestones in the education of a doctoral candidate. The proposal begins the final long leg of the doctoral journey, and its acceptance is usually met with a well-deserved sense of accomplishment, a sigh of relief, and a tingle of anticipation. It is indeed a personal milestone. However, the development of the proposal can be a tough slog and stumbles can mark the path, particularly at the start. Some difficulties are inevitable—destinations worth arriving at frequently are not easily approached—but some can be made less arduous, if not avoided. Although the unique path that every dissertation proposal takes means that, especially for those to follow, a map is out of the question, a general sense of the terrain is usually helpful; it helps to know that this is a territory marked by sweaty inclines, serene plateaus, and precipitous drops.

The following is a general sketch of the territory from one doctoral supervisor's point of view. It is not a map. My intent is that the sketch will assist doctoral travelers by raising issues that they at least should be aware of in the development of a dissertation proposal. After all, the proposal is a document aimed at convincing a supervisor and committee that the topic is worth researching and the candidate has the wherewithal to carry it out. Nevertheless, what should a proposal include, and why? Although dissertation proposals can vary enormously in form and length, they tend to share some very basic qualities. What are these qualities? And how are they connected to a more general understanding of scholarship?

I have sketched qualities that I regard as important in three broad categories: context, content, and notes on writing. My comments primarily pertain to qualitative inquiry, although some of what I have to say is relevant to other approaches.<sup>1</sup>

## THE CONTEXT

The qualities of dissertation proposals and dissertations naturally reflect their scholarly context, including implicit understandings of the nature of a research university and the apprenticeship education of doctoral candidates. These are qualities that any doctoral candidate should be aware of, but they are not uncontroversial, and where one stands with respect to them differs from field to field, from individual to individual, and from supervisor to supervisor. Let me begin with comments about the qualities of doctoral dissertations.

## QUALITIES OF DISSERTATIONS

Proposals are working documents on the way to the production of a dissertation, and the qualities of a proposal are very much guided by the qualities of a dissertation. Here is a short list: A doctoral dissertation must make a substantive contribution to scholarship. It must address a clear problem. The problem need not be simple; it need not be stated in a single sentence; and it need not be conceptualized in traditional, empirical, hypothesis-testing terms, but it must be clear and explicit. The problem addressed must not have been addressed before, or it must have been incompletely or inadequately addressed—in other words, a doctoral dissertation is meant to make an original contribution to scholarship. It is expected to be systematic rather than selective. It should have relevance beyond the local conditions of its execution. It should acknowledge the research context within which it is developed. It must make an argument and, regardless of the meaning of *argument*, the conclusions must be adequately supported. Finally, a doctoral dissertation should demonstrate the author's sensitivity to the connection between method and meaning. The author should, in some way, show an awareness of the relationship between the conceptual and methodological moves made during the conduct of the study and the final outcomes of the study. The author should show an awareness of the bearing of those moves on the overall integrity of the work and should be able to give good reason for making them. I call it *self-conscious method*. Of course, these qualities are expressed in varying degrees in actual dissertations, but generally they set the standard to which a dissertation should aspire.<sup>2</sup>

As to self-conscious method, writing that is self-conscious tends to reflect the layers and complexity of the process of a dissertation as it unfolds from conceptualization to finished product. But more significantly, self-conscious method is the means for justifying the various moves that are made within all the other qualities expected of a doctoral dissertation, from conceptualization to literature review, to argument, to form. And here, perhaps, we can see the rough distinction between research in general and research done within the rubric of a doctoral dissertation. A doctoral dissertation is, after all, not only a piece of original research; it is a demonstration that the candidate is ready to do independent research. It is tied to the apprenticeship nature of the education of a future academic. Self-conscious method in a doctoral dissertation is an explicit demonstration of that which, later in the author's career, will be assumed.

The concept of self-conscious method presupposes an understanding about an aspect of a dissertation worth exploring a bit further—its relationship to evidence and argument. A dissertation is a document that (*in one fashion or another*) makes claims (*of one sort or another*) that are supported (*in one way or another*) by argument and evidence (*of one type or another*). Claims based on evidential argument (claims supported by evidence and argument) are opposed to claims based on unwarranted opinion, ideology, dogma, power, and authority. Evidential argument is a cornerstone of academic scholarship regardless of the approach to inquiry. Power and authority are alive and well in the academic world, but they are not the foundations on which the university builds its reputation. The ideals—the principles—that the university struggles to fulfill (struggles circumscribed by epoch, culture, and local context) are ideals based in academic freedom and evidential argument.<sup>3</sup> A proposal, then, is a piece of writing that outlines the problem to be addressed, sets the boundaries for the sorts of claims that will be made, and articulates the methods by which those claims will be supported by evidence and argument. It is a piece of writing that sets in motion a process that customarily culminates in the oral defense of the dissertation. Although the essential nature of a dissertation is supporting claims with evidential argument, what it means to do that is not nearly as cut and dried as it was in an earlier time, and there is a healthy academic discussion about the meaning of terms like *claim* and *argument* and *evidence*.

Indeed, to say that a doctoral dissertation must have an argument may seem unduly restrictive, particularly for qualitative inquiry. Many qualitative inquiries (narrative, for instance) do not, in any formal sense, make an argument; they do not lay out in step-by-step fashion what we might generally think of as an argument. But this begs a question: What do we think of when we think of an argument? If a dissertation must have an argument, what does this actually mean? First of all, we should recognize that there is considerable variability in the language used to talk about arguments. For

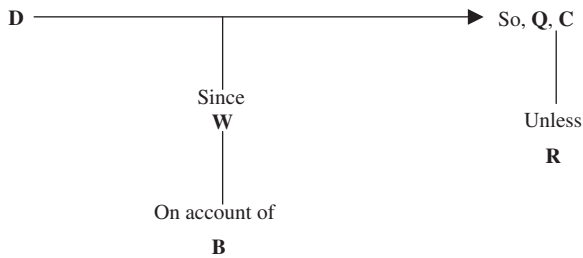


Figure 1. Stephen Toulmin's argument pattern.

instance, saying that a dissertation must “make a point and back it up” or should “support its conclusions” are different ways of saying that it must make an argument. Most arguments are not unitary entities; they are complex. Consequently, to say that a dissertation should make an argument does not mean that there is a single linear strand of thinking that culminates in a single “therefore” statement, as with a syllogism. The reference to “the argument” in a dissertation is often a manner of speaking that may, most likely, refer to a network of arguments, some of them sometimes more central than others. Often the arguments in dissertations are implicit, as with many qualitative dissertations. That is, a reader does not literally “see” a formal statement of the argument (in fact, to make the argument formally explicit might look rather odd). In these cases, to say that a dissertation must have an argument is a metaphoric way of speaking. But even in such cases, there is usually a set of conclusions or findings in a final chapter (the “answers” to the questions posed in the study, for instance), and these findings, taken together with all that has gone before and the qualifiers (limitations) that follow, could be said, metaphorically, to be “the argument.” But now I have not only used the term *argument*, but I have also introduced the terms *conclusion*, *qualifier*, *limitations*, *findings*, and *answers*. The begged question still is before us. What do we think of when we think of an argument? What is its anatomy, so to speak? Perhaps if we were a bit more clear about the anatomy or structure of arguments, we might better understand what is meant to say that a dissertation must have an evidential argument—literally or metaphorically—and why that is an important stand to take.

Stephen Toulmin's classic work, *The Uses of Argument* (1969), is helpful for making sense of these issues, and it is worth taking a short detour to have a look at the relevance of his work to the concept of a research university and to dissertations and dissertation proposals. His argument pattern (p. 104) is seen in Figure 1.

In this pattern, D = data, C = claim, Q = qualifier, R = rebuttal, W = warrant, and B = backing. Different terms can be used to represent these

concepts. For instance, *conclusion*, *explanation*, *interpretation*, *results*, and *findings* are among the terms that are commonly used in place of *claims*, and the term *phenomena* can be substituted for *data* with no loss of meaning. In the case of qualitative inquiry, for instance, we construct an interpretation (make a claim or come to a conclusion) based on our analysis of observations, interviews, memories, documents, and so on (the data). There are warrants that connect our interpretations to the data—that is, there are statements, almost always implicit, that allow the data to be seen to be relevant to the interpretations. We usually qualify the interpretations; the statement in the final chapter of a qualitative dissertation that the interpretations are not, strictly speaking, generalizable beyond the particular case examined is a form of qualifier, and that qualifier is subject to a rebuttal. Further, there is backing for the warrants—statements that legitimate the warrants, so to speak. The theoretical perspective of the study (discussed below) is, in Toulmin’s (1969) terms, the backing for the warrants that connect the data to the interpretations. That is to say, the theoretical framework represents a point of view that legitimizes the manner in which the interpretations are justified or warranted.<sup>4</sup> In short, Toulmin’s argument pattern is a formal and explicit way of expressing one of the quintessential aspects of a dissertation. It also highlights in stark terms a hallmark of the concept of the university.

At the risk of repetition, several points emerge from the anatomy of an argument. First, the formality of the argument pattern, as depicted in the diagram, allows a visual representation of the logical relationship of a set of concepts with regard to what an argument *is*. That we may not always (or ever) use exactly the terms Toulmin uses to describe the pattern, or that we may never have “seen” the pattern before, or that “we don’t really talk that way in real life” does not alter this essential relationship among concepts and, consequently, the essential qualities of what the concept of an argument means. Within any language community, we frequently become untidy with the terms we use, and over time, we develop a shorthand way of speaking. For instance, what we commonly call “evidence” is, in Toulmin’s framework, a combination of the data plus the warrant and backing (and the terms *data* and *evidence* are frequently used synonymously in everyday language).

Second, it is important to recognize, again, that actual arguments are enormously complex affairs that usually involve complicated layering and trains of logic, so to speak. The “evidence” for an interpretation usually involves statements that themselves are interpretations that, in turn, depend on other interpretations, and so on. This does not mean that the argument pattern is inadequate; it just means that most real arguments are more complicated than the elegant simplicity of Toulmin’s pattern would suggest.<sup>5</sup>

Third, as Toulmin (1969) remarked, the warrants for a conclusion (or an interpretation) are seldom explicit. Warrants are brought to the surface and become visible when interpretations are challenged. Challenges to an interpretation are almost always challenges about the quality of the evidence. Remember from above that *evidence* is a term that generally includes data, warrants, and backing. There are four possibilities: (1) the challenge can be that there is not enough data to support the claim (e.g., claiming that a teacher believes in streaming because on one occasion she was heard to say, “streaming seemed to work with that class”); (2) the challenge can be that the warrant is inadequate (e.g., “yes, I agree with your data—there are dozens of trailer trucks parked in the desert—but I don’t see how that leads to a conclusion that there are weapons of mass destruction”); (3) the challenge can be that there is inadequate data and inadequate warrant (e.g., “you have satellite photos of only two trucks, and besides, on what grounds does a truck in the desert mean that there are weapons of mass destruction?”); or (4) the challenge can be a fundamental disagreement with the theoretical perspective (backing) as when, say, a person refuses to accept the “evidence” for parapsychological phenomena.

Toulmin’s argument pattern, then, is one way of representing the deeply ingrained, but seldomly discussed, belief that the quality of our inquiries depend fundamentally on evidential argument. The idea of “evidential argument” can be taken both literally and metaphorically, as I have suggested above, depending on the field of study. For instance, standard empirical proposals commonly use terms like *evidence*, *data*, *support*, *claim*, and so on. Philosophical (analytical, conceptual) inquiries are generally written with empirical phenomena as a backdrop and, although the terms *argument* and *claim* appear frequently, terms like *data* and *evidence* seldom appear either in the proposal or the study, if at all. Qualitative inquiries normally take pains to make clear that they are not generalizable (to qualify the claims that are made, to use Toulmin’s language) and to argue for the usefulness of the findings; in so doing, they implicitly assume evidential argument even though the terms *evidence*, *data*, and *warrant* are unlikely to be seen in the proposal or in the dissertation. Narrative studies seldom, if ever, use terms like *evidence* even though the crafting of a narrative clearly is dependent on various types of evidence. I am suggesting, then, that any academic scholarship is guided by the implicit and explicit rules of inquiry (evidential argument), but the degree to which one will actually find the associated terms (claim, evidence, data, support, argument, and so on) depends on the field of study. Regardless of approach, the grounds on which the outcomes of a study can be regarded as “true” (warranted, justified, accurate, revealing, insightful, useful, and so on) is a legitimate question for any dissertation.

Let me conclude this important detour by coming back to a statement that I made above: A dissertation is a document that (*in one fashion or another*) makes claims (*of one sort or another*) that are supported (*in one way or another*) by argument and evidence (*of one type or another*). The simple formality of Toulmin's argument pattern and the general idea of evidential argument should not be read narrowly to refer only to empirical, hypothetico-deductive, scientific forms of argument, which is why I have italicized the parenthetical comments in the previous sentence. Dissertations of all types fit into this framework in one way or another. The "claims" (results, findings) of dissertations with a more empirical/quantitative bent tend to be focused on a well-honed, specific (null) hypothesis that often can be stated in a single sentence; in these cases, the claim of the dissertation is explicit, and the term "claim" is frequently used to discuss the work.

The "claims" of empirical/qualitative dissertations are seldom, if ever, talked about using that term, and what is being claimed, so to speak, is more general than one would find in a quantitative work. The "claim" is usually implicit, but if made explicit, it would be written something like: (a) the descriptions in this study are accurate, (b) the interpretations in this study are trustworthy, (c) the perspective offered in this study is useful. In each of these cases, a claim is being made, but the term *claim* is not used, nor is it explicit in the way I have written.

The claims of philosophical/analytical dissertations are often discussed using that very term, but the support for the claims is less on empirical data than on the logical tightness of step-by-step argument, often including the careful analysis of central terms in the argument. As for evidence, one community of scholars might not agree with the warrants and backing or the data routinely used by another community of scholars, which is one of the reasons that qualitative inquiry had difficulty in gaining a toe-hold within the educational research community, as pointed out by Roberts (1982). In my view, the reason that Toulmin's (1969) argument pattern is important is that it helps us think about the nature of the work we do, including dissertations and proposals, and it connects that work to our shared understanding of an essential aspect of the concept of the university.<sup>6</sup>

## QUALITIES OF PROPOSALS

The concept of an argument in a dissertation concerns the need for supporting the conclusions or interpretations in the study, whereas the concept of an argument in a proposal concerns the need to construct an argument for doing the research in the first place. The proposal is an academic document, and consequently, its stock-and-trade is academic prose. Even though what is being proposed might be unusual or

unorthodox, the means for proposing it are defensible, reasoned arguments. There is an art to writing a good proposal (and good proposals are carefully crafted), but in the end, a proposal is an academic document, not a literary one, and straightforward clarity about what, why, how, who, and when is critical.

Coherence is another critical issue. Proposals are composed of parts, and these parts need to be clear and coherent, but they also need to fit together so that the document has integrity. If the methodological approach to a problem is qualitative, for instance, then the problem should be framed in such a way as to be congruent with qualitative methods. Likewise, the specific questions to be addressed in the study should be able to be answered using qualitative methods. The literature review should be seen as an integral part of the proposal rather than simply tacked on. At any given point in the proposal, a reader should not raise the question, “Why is this passage here, and where does it fit in the proposal as a whole?” These are all issues concerning the integrity of the proposal, and they are critical for its acceptance by a committee and for the production of a solid piece of research.

Although clarity and integrity are critical, what constitutes an acceptable proposal (and dissertation) varies; different fields of inquiry lie on different positions along the radical-conservative continuum. What is considered profound innovation in one field may be regarded with skepticism, if not derision, by another, and where a field (or supervisor) lies along the continuum will naturally have a significant steering effect on the nature of the dissertation proposal. There are many approaches to educational inquiry and various ways of categorizing them—the crudest distinction is between quantitative and qualitative research.<sup>7</sup> The overall shape of a proposal will depend on (a) the general approach, (b) the particular refinement within a general approach (e.g., narrative inquiry within a qualitative approach), and (c) the particular supervisor. Each of these establishes norms and expectations that influence what the proposal will eventually look like.

## GENUINE INQUIRY

A proposal to write a dissertation should be a proposal to do a genuine inquiry—*genuine*. A proposal is not aimed at proving what a researcher is convinced about and already believes. Naturally, a researcher will have plans, hunches, hypotheses, ideas, insights, points of view, and convictions. But a dissertation involves a process in which questions are asked and issues are raised for which there are no predrawn conclusions—the outcomes of the inquiry could turn out differently than what was anticipated. A dissertation may have several general aims, but to use an old way of speaking, its



primary aim is to develop new knowledge and understanding, an aim that is connected to the traditions and functions of a university. The primary aim of a dissertation is not to advertise and to convince other people of what we already know or believe; there are other vehicles for fulfilling that agenda. Thus, the framing and wording of the proposal should reflect an attitude of genuine inquiry—it involves a spirit of genuinely finding out rather than proving.

## THE CONTENT

With the above context in mind, let me turn to a discussion of the significant parts of a dissertation proposal: problem, theoretical perspective, questions, literature review, methods, ethical considerations, and plan. Most, if not all, of these parts need to be in place and need to be adequately done if the argument for doing the research is to be convincing to a supervisor and committee. In short, a proposal contains the following colloquial line of thought: Here is the educational research problem. → Here's why it's significant. → Here's what existing research has said about it. → Here's what the research has missed. → Here's what I intend to do. → Here's how it will contribute.

Let me pause for a moment and return to something I said at the very beginning of this article: It is not a map setting out rules and forms to be mindlessly followed. The variability in qualitative research is enormous, and each version of qualitative work (participant observation, ethnography, phenomenology, and so on) will have different understandings as to what issues are to be made explicit and how they should be framed. Having said that, the following headings are fairly standard for many qualitative dissertation proposals. I will discuss each in turn, beginning with the problem, and will articulate the reason for its place in a proposal.

- I. Introduction (Overview and Background)
- II. Problem
- III. Theoretical Perspective
- IV. Questions
- V. Literature Review
- VI. Methods
- VII. Ethics
- VIII. Plan and Timelines

## PROBLEM

One of the most important parts of a dissertation proposal is a clear statement of the problem that the study will address. A clear problem statement should be able to be framed (in the candidate's mind, if not literally) in such a way as to complete the sentence, "The problem this study will address is. . ." <sup>8</sup> I cannot stress this point too much. A proposal must state the problem of the study clearly and succinctly. Statements such as "I want to explore. . ." and "This study will examine. . ." do not tell a reader what the problem of the study is; rather, they say what the study will do, and although what the study will do is equally critical, a reader first wants to know the problem that will be the focus of the research. The problem statement is usually set within a discussion of the background or context to the problem and a statement of the significance of the problem for educational research. (It is common to see Background, Problem, and Significance as separate subheads in a proposal.) A statement of the problem need not be simple, but it must be clear and it must be explicit. It should be as complex as needed; dissertation problems frequently have a "layered" quality to them. It is generally a broader sort of statement than the specific questions that a study will address.

Jane McDonald's (2004) doctoral dissertation concerns the transition from practicing nurse to nurse educator. The first two paragraphs of her proposal set the context and move quickly to say what the dissertation is about:

Nursing in Ontario is currently facing a number of challenges. Attempts to deal with an increasing, and some would say critical, shortage of nurses in the province are being complicated by changes to the educational requirements for beginning registered nurses from a minimum of a 3-year diploma program to a 4-year degree program. As the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO), the professional body for nursing, struggles with issues of recruitment and retention, educational institutions that prepare nurses are struggling with attempts to increase enrollments and to forge new relationships and develop new curricula. To further complicate the picture, many educational institutions are also facing a shortage of nursing educators.

It has been the practice of many post-secondary institutions to hire educators who are knowledgeable and skilled in their professional fields . . . In nursing, these new educators are frequently brought from clinical practice to teaching without the benefit of any formal teacher training or practice teaching. The guiding philosophy seems to be that competent practitioners will be able successfully to bring their

knowledge of the practice setting to the educational arena and will be equally competent teachers. Literature, however, suggests that beginning teachers in the primary and secondary school systems struggle with learning to teach. Are new nurse educators different? The focus of this thesis [dissertation] will be on the experience of nurses who move from practice to teaching.

Articulating the problem in the proposal is one of the more difficult stages of a dissertation, one of the sweaty inclines. With few exceptions, authors have difficulty in constructing, narrowing, specifying, and justifying the problem that their research will address. It is not uncommon to hear a graduate student talk with a tinge of desperation about needing to find a dissertation problem. Although more often than not, this is simply a way of expressing a difficult stage in the process, the word *find* is not quite the right metaphor. *Construct* or *develop* are better terms for capturing the process. Problems are usually constructed out of a complex interplay among one's own thinking about an issue, one's own experience, and one's understanding of the research literature.

There are many reasons that this critical aspect of the research process is difficult, but the one that I want to focus on at this point concerns a distinction between an *educational problem* and an *educational research problem*. Educational problem is a more encompassing concept than educational research problem. All research problems in the field of education necessarily involve educational problems, by definition, but not all educational problems are research problems. Only a portion of all the imaginable educational problems merit the attention of two or three years of painstaking systematic inquiry. Following are two (overdrawn) hypothetical examples that will help make the distinction concrete.

In the first example, imagine that 40 angry parents in a rural school board call the director of education to complain that their children have not been picked up by the bus for three consecutive days. This is clearly an educational problem (a phenomenon to be understood) and it is serious, to be sure. But it is not a research problem. Serious as it is for those involved, it does not merit a sustained, systematic research effort. Agreed, the educational problem will involve some investigation by the director, and that investigation (making a few phone calls, possibly hiring a private detective, definitely hiring a lawyer, and so on) may culminate in dismissing the bus driver (who, as it turns out, has taken to supplementing his income by offering tours of the fall colors in the early morning light to the elderly). Nevertheless, although the issue obviously involves an investigation (some form of research), it is not weighty enough for a doctoral dissertation.

In a second hypothetical example, imagine that, year after year, the children in one region of the country, having no obvious differences with

surrounding regions, seem to learn to read much faster than their peers in other regions. This too is clearly an educational problem (a phenomenon to be understood), but intuitively we sense that it is a problem that might well merit systematic, sustained research. It is a problem that merits the time it would take to shape it, to narrow it, and to hone it into a research problem.

Notice a striking difference between these two hypothetical examples: In the learning-to-read example, common sense suggests the importance of consulting existing research in the field, whereas in the missing bus example, common sense suggests that it would be a waste of time. Besides the difference in scope between these two examples, then, a research problem is always articulated with reference to the research literature in the field. In her qualitative study, *Teaching Poor Readers in Grade One* (1995), June Rogers examined the relationship between her teaching of poor readers according to specified types of remedial instruction and their reading development. In the following quote from her proposal, notice how she articulates the problem and justifies it with reference to the research literature.

Recent research on reading acquisition, particularly in the area of phonological and reading strategy awareness, is extensive. However, the majority of the research has been conducted with groups of randomly selected children using quantitative methodology from which generalizations about reading acquisition have been made. The focus has not been on individual poor readers. Studies on children's writing acquisition have typically used qualitative methodology. Some of these studies have focused on individual children and some have illuminated the link between reading and writing. To my knowledge, however, no study has investigated the link between reading and writing in combination with phonological skills instruction and reading strategy instruction to facilitate the reading development of individual poor readers in grade one using the "being there" approach of interpretive methodology. In her discussion of educational research methodologies and designs, Rosenblatt (1988) argues that, while the experimental model is important in educational research:

Extrapolation of results to practical situations should be very cautious. Moreover, no matter how much we may generalize quantitatively about groups, reading and writing are always carried on by individuals. If research is to serve education, the linguistic transaction should be studied above all as a dynamic phenomenon happening in a particular context, as part of the ongoing life of the individual in a particular educational, social, and cultural environment. (p. 17)

There is, thus, a need to focus on the individual poor reader in light of what current research is suggesting about how one learns to read. My study seeks to uncover the poor reader's understandings of the reading process derived from a specific remedial reading program that is based on what current research suggests are three important factors in reading acquisition: phonological awareness, reading strategy awareness, and opportunities to write. Only through an in-depth examination of the poor reader's understandings of the reading process in this context can we assess the contributions of a specific program aimed at facilitating the reading ability of the poor reader in grade one. I suggest that this in-depth examination can be accomplished through an interpretive study aimed at capturing vivid, contextual descriptions and understandings. (Rogers, p. 4)

An educational problem gets translated into a research problem (1) when it is couched in an argument (an argument, not merely an assertion) that illustrates its educational significance and (2) when it explicitly refers to existing research. The distinction between the educational problem and the educational research problem can be helpful for thinking about the conceptual development of a problem statement regardless of whether the terms themselves are actually used in the proposal proper. It should not be surprising, however, that issues about the problem of a study are more complex than this relatively straightforward distinction. Most research problems (or, if you like, the development of educational problems into research problems) have layers to them, a quality that is partially due to the different ways in which we use the word *problem*. An example of what I mean can be seen in Vicki Bales's (1995) examination of the change process, from the participants' point of view, in a community-based service organization for women. During the development of her proposal, I sent her the following e-mail.

Hi Vicki! I mowed my lawn yesterday and woke up this morning thinking about your research problem and how I could clearly state what I'm getting at when I keep harping about the problem statement. Before I try an, admittedly, rather strange analogy with lawnmowers let me make a couple of preliminary points. First, I shall be pushing for just a tad more precision and clarity in your brief "problem statement," not because of any gross inadequacy with the statement, but to be sure that there is conceptual clarity underlying it. At this point, my response to your message has more to do with me trying to make myself as clear as possible than it does with the state of your proposal. So here goes:

I suspect that my difficulty in being clear has to do with the different contexts (all very closely related) in which the word “problem” is used; or, in another way of speaking, the word “problem” has a bunch of overlapping meanings, depending on context, and in any given utterance we might use the word “problem” in several different ways. A silly analogy might help. Suppose my neighbor wanders into my backyard and sees me sitting among the debris of what appears to be a lawnmower—parts strewn here and there, tools all over the place. There I sit, holding a thingamajig in my hand, staring at it pensively. The onlooker says, “Hey, what’s the problem?” I respond, “I’m trying to get this mower back together.” In a colloquial way, we have communicated clearly to one another and, given the context of the situation, we have a mutual understanding of what each of us said and meant.

However, in fact, the original question (what’s the problem?) is ambiguous. My response picked up on one of several meanings by zeroing in on what I was coping with at the very moment (trying to get the mower back together); and, awkwardly, but more literally and linguistically formal, I was saying, “*My problem is that* I am trying to put this mower back together.” The meaning of the term “problem” in this context has to do with what one is trying to *do*. We might call it the *action sense* of problem. Given the passing pleasantries of a sunny Sunday afternoon the interchange between my neighbor and me might well end with no more than the action sense of problem (he’s not really into lawnmowers or neighbors).

On the other hand, my neighbor might well have meant something beyond the action sense of problem; and I might have responded by saying, “I have taken this mower to three different shops and not one of them fixed it properly, so I’ve decided to fix it myself.” Such a statement could be formally reframed as, “My problem is that no repair service I’ve tried has been able to fix the mower.” Notice that there is a shift in meaning with regard to “problem” here. It has less to do with what I’m actually doing at the moment or going to do in the future and more to do with what “caused” me to do those things. It has to do with the source of the problem, one might say. It is the *source sense* of problem. Again, the conversation with my neighbor might well end there.

But, given another scenario (my neighbor is a fix-it freak), he says louder, and with growing frustration, “BUT, WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?” and I suddenly realize that he’s actually interested in what might be called the *primary source sense* of the problem—colloquially

put, what is mechanically matter with the mower? I respond, “Well, there was this ping sound that got louder and louder and the whole thing began to shake and smoke and then it just stopped—I think that the main-bearing is worn out.” As a cautionary note, there are obvious difficulties with mechanical analogies like this (the primary source sense is extremely simple in machines as compared with social situations), but the simplicity allows certain distinctions to be highlighted.

Further, my neighbor looks around and sees that most of my yard is in perennials and the small amount of grass is crispy brown and short, and he says, “So, what’s the problem?” And here he means, what is the *context* that gives your problem meaning. I say, “Oh, its not my lawn that needs mowing, but my uncle broke his leg and their mower was broken and they were having a big party to celebrate their daughter’s graduation and their grass has gone ballistic and I said I’d mow their yard.” Let me recap the different senses of problem in this bizarre example:

- 1) action
- 2) source
- 3) primary source
- 4) context

Now then, your original problem statement reads as follows:

My problem is to contribute to developing theories about feminist pedagogy and to a growing but still limited understanding of feminist service organizations by examining how a feminist, community-based service organization operates and with what pedagogical consequences for the women involved.

Notice that it is primarily in terms of the *action sense* of problem. And the remainder of what you have written seems to work away at the *source sense* and the *context sense*. Notice that the source sense of problem is addressed by the literature review—metaphorically you are saying that one aspect of the problem is that there are various inadequacies in the literature (no shop has fixed this lawn mower), a literature which addresses in one way or another or doesn’t address the *primary source sense* of the problem. And I keep asking you to articulate in a few brief sentences or a shortish paragraph on what that primary source sense of the problem actually *is*. The primary source sense of the problem is not that there are gaps in the literature, even though

the gaps are one of the sources of the problem and if there were no gaps at all and if all the literature were totally adequate, then there would be no problem at all.

Let me provide an example to convey the primary source sense of the problem. I have made this up and it is only tangentially related to your work, but it does capture the spirit of what I've been talking about:

Feminist service organizations are in desperate need of increased funding if they are to survive (why that is important will be argued below) and the reluctance of the government to fund is based on inadequate conceptions of the function, dynamics, and outcomes of these organizations. Recently, the government has agreed to target funding toward specific components of these organizations. However, present plans are based on ill founded conceptions of the dynamics of how they work and the existing literature either does not address or inadequately addresses key issues that are in need of deeper understanding so that funding agencies can be better advised. In order to address these inadequacies and gaps I will contribute to developing theories about feminist pedagogy and to a growing but still limited understanding of feminist service organizations by examining how a feminist, community-based service organization operates and with what pedagogical consequences for the women involved.

I'll stop there and send this off to you. Get back to me and let me know if it makes sense. In short, I'm pushing for a kind of "it goes ping and the bearings are shot" type statement somewhere in the development of the problem in the first chapter. Talk later, BK

As suggested at the start, proposals frequently have a separate section that argues for the significance of the proposed study. That discussion commonly involves the study's potential contribution to the improvement of practice or to its theoretical contribution, although those exact terms may not label the discussion. Not all educational problems merit the sustained attention of systematic inquiry that a dissertation requires, as has been pointed out above with the distinction between educational problems and educational research problems. It is also not uncommon that a discussion of the significance of a proposed study is written in terms of the literature—that is, the significance can be partly in terms of a critique of the literature, showing what the literature has contributed and what it has missed. Again, the idea is to demonstrate that the proposed inquiry fills a significant gap in the literature and will contribute to a theoretical or practical knowledge base that is educationally significant.



## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The theoretical perspective of a proposed study might also be called the theoretical orientation, the framework or, in Toulmin's (1969) terms, the backing. Not all proposals have an explicit discussion of the theoretical perspective and, for those that do not, the perspective of the study is usually implicit in the proposal. Whether explicitly stated or not, the theoretical perspective is particularly important when it comes to interpreting the data in a qualitative study. A fundamental assumption for any academic research is that the phenomena (data) that we wish to understand are filtered through a point of view (a theoretical perspective)—that is to say, it is assumed that there is no such thing as a value-free or unbiased or correct interpretation of an event. Interpretations are always filtered through one or more lenses or theoretical perspectives that we have for “seeing”; reality is not something that we find under a rock. (In this sense, theoretical perspectives also guide what is taken to be data and what data are selected for interpretation.) The reason that the theoretical perspective is important in a proposal, then, is that it is yet another way in which a researcher makes his or her findings intelligible to an academic audience and open to scrutiny. As Sandelowski (1993) noted, theory may enter a study at a variety of points. Frequently, a dissertation will emerge from an entire tradition of inquiry (e.g., narrative, critical pedagogy, feminist ethnography) that is saturated with a particular theoretical perspective—a particular outlook on the nature of human interaction. In these cases, there is almost always a fairly lengthy discussion of the theoretical perspective, but it may not be titled as such.

Qualitative studies usually lie along a continuum of theory application at one end and theory development at the other. In the latter case, the emphasis is placed on developing a theoretical perspective as it emerges from the phenomenon itself; studies guided by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) notion of grounded theory are of this type. The value of this sort of work is understanding of the nature of a phenomenon on its own terms, so to speak. In the case of theory application, a theoretical perspective is explicitly and systematically used to interpret a phenomenon, usually with a view to the insights that the perspective offers for theory and practice. In either case, the theoretical perspective is an important aspect of the study and is something that is usually written about in the proposal.

Returning to Rogers's (1995) proposal on teaching poor readers, the second paragraph indicates the way in which her literature review helped delineate the theoretical framework of her study. Notice the last sentence:

The literature on reading acquisition shows four important findings. First, the research shows that an important difference between good and poor readers is their phonological awareness . . . Phonological

awareness includes the knowledge that a spoken word consists of individual sounds (phonemic awareness) and knowledge of letter–sound correspondences (phoneme–grapheme awareness). Second, the research shows that some children’s reading difficulties are due in part to their limited awareness and employment of metacognitive monitoring strategies to aid comprehension . . . Strategies that good readers employ to aid comprehension of written material include rereading, asking for help, and using phonological knowledge. Third, the research shows that the reading process can be influenced through the writing process and vice versa . . . In particular, the research indicates that opportunities to write facilitate the development of phonological knowledge . . . Fourth, the research shows that the positive effects of encouraging children to use context (semantic and syntactic information on the page) to read by making predictions or guesses to figure out words have been overstated and that a more balanced approach in the teaching of reading is required . . . This balanced approach emphasizes the development of phonological skills within meaningful contexts. These findings foreshadowed the focus of this research proposal and provided the theoretical orientation of the proposed study. (p. 1)

Somewhere in a qualitative proposal, it is appropriate to comment on one’s own biography as it relates to the study because this too is an issue of perspective—personal perspective. (I mention it here because it hints at how the researcher understands the theoretical perspective even though a personal statement is not necessarily found in the theoretical perspective section of a proposal or dissertation.) At the proposal stage, it helps a potential committee member judge the nature of the commitment to the inquiry, and in the dissertation, it helps a reader judge the quality of the work. How detailed such a statement should be depends primarily on the nature of the problem, but whatever is said should be focused on the inquiry rather than simply autobiography.

Chris Suurtamm’s (1999) study is about authentic assessment in the teaching of mathematics. Here is the autobiographical statement from her proposal:

Peshkin (1988) suggests that it is important to be aware of our subjective selves and the role that this subjective self plays in research since being aware is better than assuming we can be rid of subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988). Being aware of my subjective self means being aware of the qualities that will enhance my research as well as the beliefs I have about mathematics education that could skew my interpretation of the data if I were not aware of them. Eisner (1998) suggests that

Each person's history, and hence world, is unlike anyone else's. This means that the way in which we see and respond to a situation, and how we interpret what we see, will bear our own signature. This unique signature is not a liability but a way of providing individual insight into a situation. (p. 34)

My personal history includes over 20 years as a secondary school mathematics teacher including leadership roles of department head and assistant department head. In mathematics, what counts for me is shown through my constructivist approach, focusing on developing students' understanding of mathematics and valuing individuality rather than relying on rote memorization of routine algorithms and only one correct answer. I have attempted to incorporate authentic assessment techniques in my own classroom. In a leadership role, I am attentive to teacher potential and growth and demonstrate this through the presentation of collaborative workshops, encouragement of teacher portfolios and growth plans, and participant observation of my colleagues. In my attempts to incorporate new ideas in my professional practice I too often grapple with difficult issues of implementation and perhaps that is why examining the practice and concern of others is of interest to me.

I also have had previous experience with qualitative research and therefore have developed interview, transcription, and observation skills. I discovered that the active listening skills I had previously developed in my brief experiences as a guidance counselor were very applicable to interview settings. I have developed observation and recording skills through coursework in qualitative research methodology and constantly practice the ability to "see what counts," as Eisner (1998) would suggest that the ability to see what counts is what differentiates novices from experts. I am also committed to seeing with an open mind rather than being confined to only seeing what I think should be there. My intent is to gain insight into the experiences of others rather than to allow my biases to interfere with what I see. (Suurtamm, p. 28)

In a more personal way, Álvarez's (2000) statement is also good because it helps us to understand her orientation to her study and why she made some of the choices she did. She wrote,

I have given a substantive argument as to why it is important to follow the general direction taken in this study. But the general direction of a study is marked by many possible paths, each with its own merits. The decision to take one path rather than some other (equally plausible)

path is often a matter of the heart as well as the mind. My decision to analyze readings on the Information Society, naturally, was guided by my role as a researcher, but it was also influenced by who I am as a person. In this section I would like to show some of the more personal reasons for taking this particular path in the thesis, ultimately leading to the phenomenon of the Information Society and to the work of Stephen Pepper as a way of understanding that phenomenon.

The time and energy that it takes to do a doctoral thesis is such that it is highly unlikely that a person will be able to finish unless she is deeply and personally committed to the work. It is always difficult to know with any precision the historical paths to where a person ultimately finds herself, but I do think that the source of my commitment to this particular study ultimately can be traced to my enduring curiosity with how things work and my strong-willed independence to find things out for myself. For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated with the inner workings of machines of all sorts, and as a child I took great delight in taking things apart and showing other kids how they worked. In retrospect, this double interest in exploring mechanisms and explaining how they worked led quite naturally to the field of education and an interest in teaching about educational technology. (Although the paths seem clear and natural now as I write, they twisted and turned in real time.) (p. 20)

At five pages, Álvarez's personal statement is lengthy but not self-indulgent. She traces the path of her intellectual interests from her early interest in computers, to technophobia, to education, and on to her doctoral interest in metaphor. As she said,

Morgan's work with metaphor had a powerful influence on me and was the initial stages of my thought that there was a possible connection between the metaphoric ways that people viewed their reality and the technology phobia that I witnessed in the computer labs. At the time I was dimly aware of how I was thinking, but I did not have the time to pursue those thoughts in any systematic way. I do remember tucking the thoughts away in my mind as something to pursue in depth at a later time. Now, as I look back, I can see that my interest in metaphor mirrored my interest in mechanical things and in software. I was still fascinated with how things worked. The idea of metaphor (in a philosophical rather than literary sense) was a tool that opened a window onto how things worked in the intellectual sphere. . . . This was how I ran into the work of Stephen Pepper. It is hard to describe the visceral feelings that one can have when you intuitively feel that

you have discovered the very thing you have been looking for, even though you are at a loss as to how to express it. Finding Pepper's work marked a milestone in my intellectual life. (There was one copy of his book in all of Spain, in Girona.) Pepper (1942) argued that metaphors, root metaphors to be more exact, were the basis on which we comprehend and give meaning to the world. I felt as though I had found the tool I needed to make sense of a phenomenon that eventually will overtake our taken-for-granted ways of viewing our world. That was the moment when I came to make my research explicit in my own mind. I wanted to study and understand the Information Society phenomenon and to do so a tool was needed, a tool that would give meaning and be comprehensive enough to succeed. Pepper's work is not the only tool. I have understood that all along. But it is one that I saw as having considerable potential for making partial sense of a phenomenon that is under-researched. Importantly, for me, it is a tool that I found on my own. (pp. 20-25)

Not every personal statement in a proposal needs to look like Álvarez's, but hers is a good example of a statement that is well integrated into her study. It gives a good sense of her commitment to the work, a sense of her intellectual history, and a sense of why she made some of the decisions she did (e.g., the decision to use Pepper's work as the theoretical framework).

## QUESTIONS

Most, but not all, qualitative proposals contain a set of questions to be answered that are more specific than the general problem statement. These questions should be seen to be logically linked to the overall problem and should be as precise and clear as possible, within the bounds of the overall approach to the inquiry. There are several reasons for having specific questions. The substance, terms, and tone of the questions are all indicative of the way in which the general problem will be addressed. The questions begin to put flesh on the bones of the problem. At the proposal stage, the way the questions are stated betrays how a researcher is thinking about the problem and usually is an indicator of the adequacy of the framing and feasibility of the inquiry, issues that a dissertation committee is keen to have resolved. The questions themselves often are a matter of common sense, but they also frequently are developed as a result of a pilot study. Here again, not every qualitative dissertation begins with a pilot study, but conducting a pilot is a very useful way of determining if a line of thinking will bear fruit. In the course of conducting a pilot study, directions to follow and questions to ask usually emerge and can be developed and honed.

Another source for the development of questions comes from the research literature. Chris Castle's (2001) dissertation is about ways of knowing and ways of teaching in different museum settings. Notice how she relates the research questions to the literature in her proposal:

As demonstrated by this review of the literature, despite ongoing interest and repeated calls for research, there has been little work done to document and analyze the nature and experience of teaching from the perspective of the museum teacher. Yet, the need for such work is particularly pressing in light of the rapid change experienced by the museum world as a whole. As I have tried to show above, each commonplace of the museum curriculum is beset by elements of controversy and confusion but this is especially true of the museum teacher. The potential of this role cannot be fulfilled without a better understanding of museum teaching and what it means to be a teacher. Without first locating and acknowledging the source of their own authority, museum teachers cannot hope to share power with the visitor.

Therefore, my research questions are: *How does the interaction between museum teachers experience and the context in which they practice give rise to their knowing how to teach? How do they use their understandings to reason their way through and perform a complete act of pedagogy in the museum setting?* (Castle, p. 17)

In his proposed study of the growth of pedagogical content knowledge in beginning science teachers, Paul McGinley (1991) outlined the two general research questions on page two of his proposal and then developed a more refined set of subquestions that emerged from his reading of the research literature.<sup>9</sup> At the end of his proposal, he summarized,

In this research proposal, I have raised a number of questions which frame the research problem. It is worthwhile to restate these questions in order to summarize the essential thrust of the study. In Section I, two guiding questions were posed:

1. What is the nature of the growth of pedagogical content knowledge in beginning science teachers?
2. How does collaborative reflective practice contribute to the growth?

In Section II, the following more specific questions were developed:

1. What does the growth of pedagogical content knowledge "look like" over time? For example, are new patterns or pattern changes in the beginning science teacher's teaching evident over time?

2. How is this growth experienced by the beginning science teacher? For example, how does the beginning science teacher perceive their thoughts, beliefs, or values as changing with respect to the teaching and learning of science?
3. What is the nature of the collaborative reflective practice? In other words, what would describe the structure or characteristics of the reflective practice?
4. How do the teachers and myself view the collaborative reflective practice? For example, how do we view our roles in nurturing the growth of pedagogical content knowledge through reflective practice and how do the nurturing roles evolve over time?
5. What evidence suggests that reflective practice has contributed to the growth of pedagogical content knowledge? (p. 18)

To back up for a moment, it is instructive to look at how these specific questions are connected to McGinley's understanding of the research literature.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of new initiatives in the areas of beginning teacher induction, reflective practice, and the growth of pedagogical content knowledge, my own review of the research literature over the last ten years also reveals that very little has been written on these themes with regard to the beginning science teacher. Even less has been written which collectively tries to tie them together. Nevertheless, the following recent studies are pertinent to my research proposal:

Some studies have examined the subject-matter knowledge of the beginning science teacher . . . although not in relationship to reflective practice. Similarly, Smith (1989) studied the growth of pedagogical content knowledge (and other types of teacher knowledge) for an experienced grade-three science teacher.

Also, Churcher (1990), acting as a participant-observer in a grade six science classroom, researched the needs of an experienced teacher who was relatively inexperienced at teaching science. Through reflective practice, Churcher examined how the teacher's needs could be met in the context of the classroom. Her efforts at nurturing reflective practice as a teacher assistant will be helpful to me in a similar endeavor. Churcher's focus was not specifically on pedagogical content knowledge but included several knowledge categories, including, pedagogical, subject content, curricular, psychological, and personal and inquiry knowledge. Churcher's assessment of teacher knowledge

could provide a useful comparative framework from which to explore Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge. For example, it is possible that growth in the categories of teacher knowledge conceptualized by Churcher might accentuate growth in pedagogical content knowledge. Moreover, perhaps, there is considerable overlap which will be seen in the various conceptions of teacher knowledge.

These ideas relate to further specific questions to be addressed in the study: What does the growth of pedagogical content knowledge "look like" over time? For example, are new patterns or pattern changes in the beginning science teacher's teaching evident over time? How is this growth experienced by the beginning science teacher? For example, how does the beginning science teacher perceive their thoughts, beliefs, or values as changing with respect to the teaching and learning of science? Each of these questions in turn speak to the guiding questions outlined at the beginning of Section I: What is the nature of the growth of pedagogical content knowledge in beginning science teachers, and How does collaborative reflective practice contribute to the growth? (McGinley, pp. 10–11)

Aside from giving specific examples, it is difficult to say about the questions that a qualitative study might address, because those questions emerge from the particulars of human situations. Suffice it to say that the narrowing of a problem and the honing of specific questions are critical in a proposal. I do find it helpful to recall that qualitative inquiry focuses on the quality and texture of events rather than how often those events occur; this is the most elementary distinction between qualitative and quantitative inquiry. Erickson's (1986) comments about qualitative (interpretive) research, particularly with regard to participant observation research, are helpful because he sets a tone for thinking about the sorts of questions that a qualitative study might address:

Interpretive [qualitative] methods using participant observational fieldwork are most appropriate when one needs to know more about:

1. The specific structure of occurrences rather than their general character and overall distribution . . . .
2. The meaning-perspectives of the particular actors in the particular events. . . .
3. The location of naturally occurring points of contrast that can be observed as natural experiments when we are unable logistically or ethically to meet experimental conditions of consistency of intervention and of control over other influences on the setting. . . .



4. The identification of specific causal linkages that were not identified by experimental methods, and the development of new theories about causes and other influences on the patterns that are identified in survey data or experiments. (p. 121)

Erickson (1986) continued,

Field work is best at answering the following questions . . . :

1. What is happening, specifically, in social action that takes place in this particular setting?
2. What do these actions mean to the actors involved in them, at the moment the action took place?
3. How are the happenings organized in patterns of social organization and learned cultural principles for the conduct of everyday life—how, in other words, are people in the immediate setting consistently present to each other as environments for one another’s meaningful actions?
4. How is what is happening in this setting as a whole (i.e., the classroom) related to happenings at other system levels outside and inside the setting (e.g., the school building, a child’s family, the school system, federal government mandates regarding mainstreaming)?
5. How do the ways everyday life in this setting is organized compare with other ways of organizing social life in a wide range of settings in other places and at other times? (p. 121)

I noted earlier that there are different approaches to educational inquiry, qualitative being one of them, and that within these general approaches are different versions, or camps. In the above comments, Erickson (1986) is clearly talking about participant observation as one version of qualitative inquiry. Within any general approach to inquiry, each version tends to have similar sorts of orienting comments and types of questions that guide the development of the questions that a proposal will address.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A doctoral dissertation is meant to be original research and, consequently, it is important to consult the literature to see what has been done already in a field. The literature review is frequently not complete in a qualitative proposal, but it has to be complete enough to convince a supervisor and potential committee member that the researcher has done his or her homework and that the problem merits attention and has not already been addressed. In short, researchers must situate their work in relation to

existing research. A dissertation proposal refers to the literature to see what research has and has not been done with regard to the problem. It is a way of helping to build an argument for addressing a particular problem, and it is also a way of finding information that might be helpful for conducting the research. There are several logical possibilities with respect to the literature review:

*No research has been done on the problem*

This makes the review of the literature simple but awkward to write. Bluntly put, one possible reason that there is no research on a particular problem is that scholars may regard the problem as not worth researching. The lack of research in an area shifts the burden of writing to arguing persuasively why research of a particular type is needed (rather than to reviewing the literature). In any event, the proposal should indicate what type of search has been done (ERIC, the Internet, and so on) and what descriptors were used. Readers need to be convinced that a serious effort has been made to find research in the problem area.

*Some research has been done on the problem*

Usually some relevant research has been done on a problem. In this case, the researcher needs to show how that research is related to the proposed problem, including how it helps and how it is inadequate. It might involve arguing that the related research is methodologically flawed, that it misses a particular aspect of the problem, that the questions raised in the proposal are different from those in the related research, or that existing research is inadequately framed or misses a new way of thinking about the problem. Here is an example, again from Paul McGinley's (1991) proposal:

While each of these themes is important, none address the subject-matter concerns of beginning teachers. Surprisingly, in spite of recent subject specific curriculum reforms, there are few literature references related to beginning teacher induction on curricular and pedagogical issues about what to teach, how to teach it, and how to know whether the students have learned it. Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1990) suggest two factors which might explain "the lack of attention to subject matter in the literature on beginning teachers and teacher induction." (p. 4)

In some areas of qualitative inquiry, the aim of a proposed study may be to contribute to a growing case study literature. In this event, one is less likely to find a review of all preceding case studies and is more likely to

find an argument about how the proposed work will add to the corpus of cases. It is assumed that each case is unique and, in that sense, an original inquiry. (This rationale becomes less tenable as the case study literature grows.)

*An abundance of research has been done*

When there is an abundance of research on a particular problem, a researcher may find that a vein of inquiry has been exhausted and that there is little left to do that is original. More commonly, a researcher provides a fresh (original) perspective on a stale, exhausted line of inquiry.

*There is an abundance of related literature*

Sometimes a particular problem has a lot of relevant literature, but the literature is not research literature; instead, it is in the form of position statements, policy statements, ideological statements, rhetorical exhortations, and so on. In this case, such literature should be reviewed, as appropriate (it often serves as part of the context for the proposed research), but the fact that there is little or no research literature should be acknowledged, and it should be argued why the proposed research is needed. Meagher-Stewart (2001) found that there were several bodies of literature relevant to her study of public health nurses and that only one of those could be considered research. Here is how she structured the discussion at the beginning of her literature review:

It is . . . appropriate in this chapter to provide a context that more specifically positions the problem this study addresses, the invisibility of the community development practice of public health nurses with adult women in high-risk environments. There is a vast amount of theoretical literature, position statements, and empirical research that has relevance for this inquiry. I identify two main areas of literature for review here. First, in Part I . . . theoretical literature and position statements are presented that generally situate the social, political, historical, and professional context in which the public health nurses' community development practice happens. Secondly, literature is reviewed that describes the sociopolitical context of women's health and health promotion, particularly for women in high-risk environments.

In Part II . . . literature is presented that deals more explicitly with *empirical research* related to public health nursing and community development. (p.12, emphasis added)

The following feedback on the literature review in an early draft of Jane Coryell's (1995) study of curriculum integration echoes the point that I have been making:

Your review of the literature in its present form is primarily a review of the literature that sets the context and, as you say, frames the study. What is missing is a review of the RESEARCH literature. Notice that in Chapter One you will have established a need for a particular kind of research, namely, the study you are doing. It is only appropriate, then, that part of your literature review be devoted to seeing what other research has been done in this area that helps inform the present study. There are several possibilities. One is that absolutely nothing has been done that even remotely addresses the issues with which you are concerned. Or, perhaps work has been done with respect to integration, but in other disciplines—say, the integration of math into science programs. Or, perhaps work has been done, but it has missed information that you think is important to have (pointing to an inadequacy in the existing research, an inadequacy that you wish to address). In short, you need to talk about this: What does existing research say about the problem of your study? If it says nothing, then you need to tell your audience what kind of literature search you did (ERIC, Ontaris, by hand, etc.) and convince them that there isn't much out there.

The upshot of all of this is that either a new chapter gets created, or the present Chapter gets two parts (one dealing with context, the other with research). Then you need to take the writing bull by the horns at the beginning of the chapter by saying something like: "This review of the literature is in two parts. In the first part I shall set the educational context of the study by referring to four distinct literatures that are relevant to the problem established in Chapter One. The second part of the chapter examines the existing research relevant to the problem. I shall argue that this is an 'under-researched' area and shall revisit the reasons why a study of this nature is important to do. The conclusion of the chapter will outline a more precise set of research questions and set the stage for a discussion of methodology in Chapter Three."

As can be seen from these examples, the literature review should be connected to the proposed study. Another form of connection is when existing research helps provide the theoretical framework for the study, as seen in Paul McGinley's (1991) proposal:

In Section II, The Literature, I will draw on research literature to develop a rationale for the study. I will illustrate both the importance

of the proposed study and the lack of information on the research problem. I will also explore conceptual frameworks of (a) pedagogical content knowledge developed by Shulman (1987) and others and (b) reflective practice developed by Nolan and Huber (1989) and others. Moreover, I will illustrate the significance of linking the two frameworks together for articulating and addressing the research problem. Finally, I will develop the specific questions to be addressed. (p. 2)

Then, in the introductory paragraph to his literature review, McGinley states,

### Section II: The Literature

This section is divided into three parts each of which contributes to a rationale for the proposed study by illustrating the importance of addressing the research problem and verifying the lack of information on it. The first part examines: (a) the major themes of current research on beginning teachers, (b) concerns of the inclusion of beginning teacher the lack of emphasis on subject matter beginning teachers, and (c) arguments for subject matter considerations in induction programs. It also further conceptualizes Shulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge. The second part examines research suggesting a connection between reflective practice and teacher growth with respect to content knowledge. It also further conceptualizes the notion of practice according to several researchers. The third part examines: (a) reflective research literature which considers the pedagogical content knowledge and reflective practice of beginning science teachers and (b) the lack of empirical longitudinal studies describing and interpreting the growth of pedagogical content knowledge in beginning science teachers through collaborative reflective practice. (p. 3)

Furthermore, in some cases, the existing research contributes fairly directly to the development of the specific questions that the study will address (see above). If that is the case, then that development should be discussed as the literature is being reviewed. In such cases, it may be helpful to conclude the literature review with a restatement of the central problem of the inquiry and with subquestions or refinements to the questions to be addressed in the inquiry. The idea is to show how the particular questions or issues that the inquiry addresses partly emerge from the research literature. It is a conscious attempt to keep in mind that the dissertation emerges from and is set in the context of educational inquiry rather than

policy development, rhetorical speculation, self-discovery, consciousness raising, and so on (these features can be present in a dissertation, but they should be secondary to the primary function of inquiry).

## METHODS

The aim of the methods section of a proposal is to tell how the inquiry will be approached and to show how the specific methods have a reasonable chance of answering the questions asked. A methods section may have two parts. The first part is a justification for the general approach to the inquiry—a justification for why an experimental, correlational, survey, phenomenological, interpretive, critical, and so on, approach to the inquiry is the appropriate path to follow given the nature of the problem. How much explicit justification is needed is often a function of traditions and expectations of a particular field of inquiry. Fields where quantitative, empirical inquiry has been the dominant approach may require a fairly lengthy justification for a qualitative approach to the problem, whereas proposals in fields that have embraced qualitative inquiry may have only a few lines or no explicit justification for the approach at all.

The central portion of a methods section is a detailed discussion of the specific methods that will be used for data collection, interpretation, and presentation in the proposed study, and the main question is whether the specific methods are adequate for answering the questions that the inquiry has posed. This aspect of a proposal should be specific and concrete even if it is understood that some plans may change once the inquiry is under way. Early drafts of proposals are frequently too vague on these points; potential committee members recognize that not everything can be precise at the proposal stage of a qualitative inquiry, but they are looking for evidence that the author has thought through these issues and recognizes their significance to the overall quality of the work. With regard to data collection, details should be included about who, what, when, where, how many (participants, observations, interviews), how frequent (observations, interviews), how long, and so on. It is helpful to comment explicitly about how the data collected will be sufficient to address the questions of the study. With regard to analysis and interpretation, the proposal should indicate (1) how the researcher plans to go about data analysis and (2) from what point of view or theoretical perspective the data will be interpreted. Again, the aim of the section on methods is to demonstrate clearly and specifically the nature of the links between the central questions of the inquiry and the methods proposed to research those questions.

## ETHICS

In addition to acknowledging the university's ethical review protocol, it is appropriate in the proposal to acknowledge any potential ethical problems beyond common everyday risk. Anyone intending to do research involving people should (1) not be naïve concerning issues of power and privilege, (2) thoroughly understand (not simply be familiar with) the implications of ethical concepts such as risk, no intent to harm, informed consent, and the right to withdraw, (3) adhere to the formal ethical protocols of the university and, where warranted, the host institution at which the research will be undertaken, and (4) most important, act ethically.

## PLAN AND TIMELINES

Many proposals conclude with a plan showing the overall logistics and the estimated timelines for the study. It is recognized that such plans cannot be etched in stone, but potential committee members want to see evidence of a plan that is thought out and realistic. Such plans are frequently in point form, showing the critical phases of the study and when they will occur.

## EXCEPTIONS

There are exceptions. Dissertation proposals are unique, and not every proposal will have the parts that I have described, the order I have described them, or the labels I have used. And, not surprisingly, there are exceptions to how well the parts are developed in any given proposal. If one picked a random handful of proposals, some might not seem very complete, given what has been said above. In my experience, exceptions are for two reasons. First, although a proposal is a critical document, it is not a formal document.<sup>11</sup> That is, the aim of the proposal is not to produce a perfect, bound document *qua* document. The aim is to have a working document that eventually satisfies the student and the committee that they are ready to get on with the dissertation. It is not uncommon that committee members suggest changes to a "final" draft of a proposal but during the discussion add that the changes should be made to the dissertation rather than the proposal. That is one reason why there is sometimes reluctance on the student's and supervisor's part to have the final draft made public. It is "final" only in the sense that it was the last hard copy and satisfied the committee who then signed in all the right places; the final version is in the student's head. (This could be why dissertation proposals are not always easy for students to get a hold of if they want to see an example as a guide.) When I asked Chris Castle (2001) if I could use her proposal, she said,

Yes, certainly you have my permission to use my thesis [dissertation] proposal. I have attached the Third Draft, Nov 97, which I believe was the final version. I am flattered that you asked! Along the way I shared the proposal with several fellow students and they all told me the same story you got—that no one wanted them to see what they had originally written because it sounded so naive in retrospect. I suppose mine does too but *c'est la vie*, without that benchmark how else can you see that you've actually learned something in the process?

A second reason for exceptions to the image of a proposal I have outlined can occur when a doctoral student is working within a well-formed tradition of scholarship (which is frequently embedded in a series of ongoing research projects that are the lifeblood of the student's and a professor's work). In these circumstances, there is usually a community of understanding, so to speak, and a proposal can be relatively short because much of what has been said above is implicitly understood.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES ON WRITING

The parts discussed above constitute a generic qualitative dissertation proposal. These parts are standard. Let me now turn to a handful of notes about writing qualitative proposals and dissertations. (By and large, the issues about writing are the same for both and, as above, some examples come from dissertations rather than proposals simply because the degree of development in a dissertation provides a clearer example.) Qualitative dissertations put heavy demands on the ability to write well. All the virtues of qualitative inquiry—the textures and nuances of human interaction, the complexity of perspective and perception, the sense of being there—are virtues unfulfilled in the hands of a clumsy writer. If someone does not like the challenges of writing, then qualitative research probably is not for them. The challenges begin with the proposal. There is art to it and, as in art, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. If taken with caution, these notes on placement and integrity may be helpful—at the very least, they will stimulate thinking about the joys and tortures of writing.

At the level of base practicality, a dissertation proposal should be as user-friendly as possible. The ideas need not be simple, but every effort should be made to ensure that the reader does not trip on obstacles in the path. The destination is to be as clear and concise as possible about what one proposes to do. Doctoral students frequently misjudge how much help a reader may need to absorb the intended meaning of the text of a proposal. Making a proposal user-friendly concerns commonplace practical issues, including the appearance of the document. Drafts should have a table of



contents that lists sections and subsections exactly as they are in the body of the proposal and with page numbers so that a reader can get a sense of the whole and find key parts quickly. (I prefer a title page that includes the title, author, institution, date, number of the draft, and a table of contents.) Even first drafts should be purged of misspellings, incomplete sentences, grammatical errors, and so on—in other words, they should be proofed.

Beyond such practical issues are those that generally fall under the category of good writing: Clarity, conciseness, attention to detail, and sensitivity to structure and development are generally features of good writing. Over the years, I have found Strunk and White's (1959/2000) *Elements of Style* to be more helpful than most guides to the art of writing, but writers tend to have their favorites. Van Leunen's (1992) *Handbook for Scholars* is helpful as well. Also see Kilbourn's (2001) comments about communicating clearly in the initial paragraph of a proposal or dissertation.

#### PLACEMENT

Some features of good writing are particularly important for academic prose, including dissertation proposals, especially when it is dense and lengthy. These features generally concern strategic moves to guide the reader through the text in a way that increases the likelihood that she or he will acquire the intended meaning. Where are things put that will help a reader move through the text with understanding? There are numerous issues concerning placement, but two in particular seem to plague proposals, particularly in their early drafts.

#### *The first instance concerns the statement of the problem*

The difficulty is this: Frequently, it takes a reader far too long to get to the point of the proposal—to a clear articulation of the problem.<sup>13</sup> It is as though the writer is afraid that if he or she makes the point too soon, the punch line would be given away. Not so. A reader is desperate to know what the problem is as soon as possible so that the rest of the proposal can be read with that problem statement in mind. It involves a delicate balance for a writer. How much context should be provided before the point is made? The answer to that question is almost always, as little as possible. To be sure, the statement of the problem in a proposal presents a genuine dilemma to a writer. Logically speaking, a clear statement of the problem would come after a long, carefully developed argument that lays out the general background, including a review of the literature. At the end of such an argument (after, say, 15 pages or so) an author would to say something like, “Consequently, in light of the argument just made, our understanding of *so and so*

has been inadequately researched. In this proposed study I will address that problem by . . .

The difficulty with this approach to writing is a practical one. It takes far too long for the reader to get to the point and, on the way, the likelihood is increased that the reader will lose interest or raise questions that block his or her understanding and sympathy for the work. The antidote to this problem is judicious repetition. From the standpoint of user-friendliness, it is helpful to have a clear problem statement very early in the document (within the first couple of pages and preferably within the first two paragraphs), followed by an argument that supports that statement. It is as though the author is saying, "Here's the problem, now let me take you through the argument supporting it, and at the end I'll repeat the problem." The following is from the very first page of Chris Suurtamm's (1999) study of authentic assessment. Notice that the reader has a good idea of the problem that the study addresses from the very first paragraph (Kilbourn, 2001).

This is a proposal for a qualitative study of five secondary school mathematics teachers as they attempt to employ authentic assessment strategies in their instructional practice. The proposed study emerges from a noticeable lack of detail in the literature concerning the beliefs, practices and concerns of secondary school mathematics teachers as they endeavour to change their assessment practices to align with current forms of mathematics instructional methodology. In this proposal I will suggest that such detail is needed if educators are to understand the value, successes and difficulties of employing authentic assessment in a secondary school mathematics program.

#### Setting the Stage

Before examining authentic assessment in mathematics, I would like to set the stage by highlighting some of the salient issues in the current state of mathematics education. Mathematics education is undergoing. (Suurtamm, p. 1)<sup>14</sup>

*A second instance of placement concerns the dilemma of how to finesse the need to say two or more things at the same time*

In a lengthy and conceptually complicated piece of academic writing, it is common for a writer to be faced with this chronic background/foreground issue. A writer thinks, "Okay, I need to say this right here, but if I do that, then I should also make the other point too, and if I go that far, then I should also bring in that other part because otherwise they won't

understand how I got there, and then . . . ” The urge to say everything at once cannot be satisfied. In linear prose, some ideas need to be brought to the foreground while others remain in the background; moving smoothly through the foreground background terrain sometimes requires “metawriting” or, as some say, “sign-posts.” Metawriting hovers above the text, so to speak, and orients a reader—its distinguishing characteristic is that it is writing about the text rather than of the text itself. Jerome Bruner is a skillful writer, and a quick example from his *Acts of Meaning* (1990) is instructive (metawriting in italics).

What I want to argue in this book is that it is culture and the search for meaning that is the shaping hand, biology that is the constraint, and that, as we have seen, culture even has it in its power to loosen that constraint.

But lest this seem like a preface to a new optimism about humankind and its future, *let me make one point before turning, as promised, to the issue of relativism.* For all its generative inventiveness, human culture is not . . . (p. 23, emphasis added)

Metawriting can help frame meaning for readers so that they get the intended point, and it helps them see the logical progression of a complex argument. Metawriting calls for a different style, as seen in the following few lines of an imaginary proposal:

The previous section has outlined *so on and so forth* and has shown that *so and so*. In the next section, I take the penultimate step in the argument by discussing Dumphy’s (2001) point about resistance. Her position is an important link between *so on* and *so forth* and is critical for seeing the significance of this proposed study. Before moving to that discussion, however, I want to foreshadow an issue concerning interpretation (treated more fully in Chapter 4) because it will help avoid confusion between my own view of resistance and that of Dumphy.

Not as smooth as Bruner, granted, but in addition to reminding the reader of where the text has been and where it is going, the metawriting in these sentences does alert a reader that there will be a diversion to a brief discussion about interpretation. The reader is told why there will be a brief diversion (to avoid confusion). If the author had engaged the full discussion about interpretation at this juncture rather than deal with it fully in the chapter on method, it is likely that it would have seemed strangely tangential to the main point and likely would have blunted the momentum of

the argument. If the author had simply had that brief discussion about interpretation rather than alerting the reader to it, there would be a good chance that the reader would wonder not only why it was there but also why it was so brief and incomplete. By saying that it will be brief and will be treated more fully later, the author helps the reader relax and recognize that this is not all that will be said about interpretation.

Metawriting can be overdone, of course, but if used judiciously, it can help an author master the writing rather than be subservient to it. One of the most difficult things to do in a proposal (and dissertation) is to keep the big picture in view while examining the details. It is a familiar foreground-background problem, and writing that takes control of the text, shapes it, and points readers in directions the author wants them to go is one way of addressing it.

## INTEGRITY

A good proposal has its own integrity. The parts must fit together, and the fit must be clear to the reader. Integrity is related to the overall logic of the inquiry and to meaning. Naturally, a proposal should be consistent with terminology, grammar, writing style, editorial style, and citation style. But, more important, the conceptual and methodological parts of the proposal need to make sense in relation to one another, and the writing must be done in such a way as to make that clear.

Ciaran Sugrue's (1992) research into teachers' ideas about child-centered curriculum in Ireland is an elegantly designed inquiry, one in which there is integrity among its various parts. The study had three phases. In the first phase, Ciaran interviewed 16 teachers for their views of child-centered curriculum. In the second phase, he selected 6 of the 16 to conduct a mini-case study of a week's duration each. In the third phase, he selected 1 of the 6 to conduct an intensive case study. After reading his dissertation, you definitely have the feeling that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and that, as a reader, your understanding of the phenomenon he explored goes far beyond the one intensive case. You think back to the mini-cases and even to the 16 interviews, and you begin to form a picture of what the general shape of their constructions might look like even though neither you nor Sugrue has seen those particular details. The sixth chapter of the dissertation, entitled "Practitioners' Curriculum Constructions," includes the five mini-cases that precede the major case study in the seventh chapter. Sugrue's discussion at the beginning of the sixth chapter is instructive with regard to framing and integrity:

The substantive issue is teachers' interpretations and construction of child-centred curriculum. The focus of the previous chapter was on

practitioners' interpretations of a policy of child-centredness. Details of these teachers' intentions are but a partial account of their curriculum constructions. Consequently, observational data of actual practice was required, not to determine the degree of congruence between practitioners' intentions and actions, but to gain insight into the dialectical relationship between thought, action and context by documenting the process of curriculum construction. Details of practice enabled me to provide more focused accounts of curriculum construction which, in turn, facilitated the isolation of recurrent "cultural themes" of practice for more thorough investigation. It was not practicable, within the limits of the study, to observe the curriculum practices of all sixteen interviewees. In the circumstances, six was a reasonable compromise between the need for breadth and a more focused investigation than was the case in phase one. By purposefully selecting practitioners who taught in very different contexts, phase two sought to respect complexity and contextual variation as well as biographical and professional difference while simultaneously isolating the most significant tensions and dilemmas of curricular construction.

From a methodological perspective, the progressive focusing of the substantive issue through the three-phase design implicitly demonstrates the limitations of more narrowly conceived research questions and indicates the distinctive nature of the present inquiry. It also enables the specific details of individual practitioner's practice to illuminate the general problem of child-centred curriculum. However, because of the relatively short period of time, five days, spent in each classroom, the mini-case studies are not sufficiently detailed to provide an exhaustive analysis, as well as adequate contextualization, of the most enduring issues of child-centredness. Consequently, the mini-case studies served as an effective means of narrowing the focus of the substantive issue so that its core themes could emerge. Having isolated those themes, it was necessary to investigate them in greater depth through the detailed accounts of the curriculum constructions of one practitioner in a major case study. In this manner, the particulars of a practitioner's curriculum constructions became the vehicle for illuminating the universal concern of child-centred ideology. (p. 169)

Sugrue notes what the previous chapter has done and articulates what the present chapter will do within the overall purpose of the study. Much of what he says in these two paragraphs has been said previously in the dissertation, particularly in the first chapter. But his study is lengthy and complex and, from a reader's point of view, it is helpful to have these

framing comments at the beginning of this sixth chapter. These well-developed paragraphs were not as well developed in the first draft of the dissertation, nor in the proposal. Nevertheless, even at the proposal stage, Sugrue had a fairly clear set of reasons for the three-phase design of his inquiry. It had integrity. From the standpoint of writing, what is important is that, although the connections were always there, so to speak, Sugrue explicitly talks about them and shows the reader where they are; he does not leave it to chance recognition.

The tension for many proposal writers lies in the different attitudes and approaches to writing that need to work together for the text to read smoothly. On the one hand, because of the nature of academic inquiry, there is a need for relatively terse, straightforward prose in which the logic and details of the inquiry are made as clear as possible. On the other hand, once that logic is in place, a writer needs to go back to the beginning and carefully read the text from the standpoint of a reader, shaping and filling those places for which a reader will need guidance or reminders. (Literally reading the text out loud is a good way to spot problems with syntax and cadence.) Frequently, some writing needs to be done in a proposal that is done for strategic reasons rather than logical reasons; repetition of an important point may be logically redundant but strategically necessary to keep a reader focused on the point while moving through a particularly difficult part of the proposal.

## CONCLUSION

Although the various parts described above (problem, perspective, questions, literature, methods, ethics) have a rough logical progression, their actual development tends to occur sporadically and simultaneously. There is frequently a close relationship between the literature review and the various attempts at constructing and refining a problem, for instance. Furthermore, a researcher might well have a clearer image of what she or he wants to *do* than what the problem is, particularly in the early stages. Normally, one part of the proposal gets worked on for a while and other parts are then changed as a result; as those parts become refined, they affect the original part, and so it goes until the document has an integrity that is sound and convincing.

Several areas commonly cause difficulty in the writing of a proposal and take time to iron out. The first area concerns developing and narrowing the problem. Frequently, the problem is conceptualized too broadly (and it would take an army of researchers and never-ending funding to address the problem adequately). The distinction between an educational problem and a research problem, discussed above, begins that process of narrowing,

as does articulating the various facets to the problem, as seen in the letter to Vicki. A second area of difficulty concerns the specific questions that the study will address. This is often a matter of being precise and cautious with wording so that one does not inadvertently commit the study to a different direction or method than intended. A third area concerns integrity—making sure that the document is internally consistent with respect to form and meaning, that it be seen as a whole, and that none of its parts lie outside its central focus. Ironing out these wrinkles is why a proposal usually takes three or four drafts. In the final analysis, four general questions need to be adequately addressed with respect to a proposal:

- Is it clear?
- Is it detailed?
- Does it have integrity?
- Is the research needed?

Other, more specific, questions depend on the topic and nature of the inquiry (see the appendix), but these four questions are relevant for any proposal. Although proposals must satisfactorily meet the requirements of these questions, precisely how they do so varies considerably from proposal to proposal. As said above, proposals vary in length and content for several reasons. One is the demands of the supervisor; another is the particular field and the time at which the proposal has been written. In the early days of qualitative research in education, it was common to see lengthy theoretical discussions justifying a qualitative approach, whereas today it is less common to see such justification unless it is in a field that has not embraced qualitative inquiry. Because proposals are not formal documents, the final version may exist in the notes and scribbles (or an appended letter of understanding) that emerge from a dissertation committee meeting. Consequently, some variation in proposals comes as a judgment by the committee that the proposal is sufficiently conceptualized to proceed with the research—with the understanding that the suggestions will be incorporated into the study—and that to delay the student from moving on would be counterproductive.

It is also important to realize that proposals and dissertations are products of their time, not only because of the state of inquiry in any particular field of study but also because of trends that develop in a field or an institution—that is to say, certain ways of writing and formulating proposals (initially established for good reason) become habitual and unquestioned norms. For instance, it has become common in qualitative proposals to have a personal statement, a practice not common in the early days of qualitative inquiry in education, at least at my institution. Make no mistake, there is

ample justification for including a personal statement in a qualitative inquiry, but the lack of integration of the personal statement in many proposals, particularly in early drafts, suggests that it has been included not for good reason but because the author thinks that is what one is supposed to do when writing a qualitative dissertation proposal. Similarly, at my own institution, it has become the norm to include a discussion of ethics in the body of the proposal itself, even though everyone knows that before the research can proceed, the standard protocols of the university and, where appropriate, host institution, must be formally completed. When this practice became the norm is not clear, but most proposals from a decade ago do not include a discussion of ethics, although they would have had to fulfill the requirements of ethical review protocols.

With these observations about the variability of proposals in mind, let me close with a letter to Jim Rooks concerning the second draft of his proposal (the fourth draft was accepted). Rooks's (1998) self-study concerns his experience—the highs and the lows—as a beginning professor instructing preservice teachers to teach reading. The following letter revisits a number of the points made in this article.

Hi Jim!

Got your note and I like what you are writing and agree with what you are saying. You are moving along very nicely and fairly quickly with this draft. I realize that time is a big factor, but soon you should attempt to put the whole proposal together. Before you take that step, it will be helpful to work a bit more on the precise nature of the research problem you are trying to address. Let me make a few comments.

Even in an interpretive study that might go in a variety of unknown directions during the course of the study proper, there is a real need to obtain a degree of focus and precision with respect to the problem. The “problem” is actually a “train of thought” that usually begins with a wide angle focus and moves to a fairly precise statement or handful of closely related statements. In the process of narrowing the focus, the articulation of the problem involves addressing the “what” and the “why” of the study, plus a little bit of the “how” (which is usually done in a section on methods). The visual picture, for me at any rate, is of an upside-down pyramid [see figure 2], with the most general, context-setting statement(s) at the top and the most focused problem statement at the bottom tip. All of the “train of thought” involves showing the reader the various contexts within which your study will lie. It is a continuum, moving from broadest to narrowest on the pyramid; but the continuum can be seen to have three parts: social context, educational context, research context. So, at the base of the upside-down



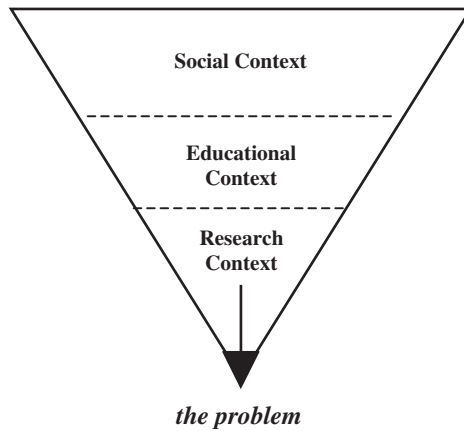


Figure 2. Train of Thought.

pyramid, the social context talks about what is going on in society that is relevant to your research. (I am not saying that you need to talk a lot about this, but I am saying that it is part of “setting the problem.”) For instance, you might begin with the concern of parents and business that our children don’t seem to be able to read as well as we might hope, or some such backdrop argument (with quotes from newspapers, etc.).

The educational context moves the “train of thought” toward the more specific educational arena. This is where much of your work lies at the present and it needs shaping and aiming (toward the research context). The logic or argument of your inquiry has to be clear and apparent. The clarity of the argument is helped a great deal by a certain kind of “linearity” in the writing; and that is why the pyramid and train metaphors are helpful to me for thinking about the “narrowing” process, on the one hand, and the “directional movement of the argument,” on the other hand. So, in the end, your argument for a research problem might be substantively complex but it will have a structural simplicity and elegance because all of the various necessary “parts” seem to be there, in the right order, with appropriate substantiation/argument, and so on. Good proposals and theses are cruelly seductive because the apparent simplicity of the argument makes it look so easy.

What I’m talking about with respect to the argument and research problem is sometimes called “reconstructed logic.” Actually it is a very messy process. As I’m sure you are aware, you don’t simply start with

the social context, then move to the educational context, and then to the research context. In fact, these all overlap considerably and are “running in your mind” at the same time. I am not surprised, then, that you have come down the pyramid to the point where you are in the domain of the research context, but don’t feel that you have the precision that you suspect is needed. It is at this point where the “steps of the trail” run out and you have to *construct* the path you want to take.

In the case of some research areas, there is a fairly clear single path to a single destination. In other areas, there are different paths that could be constructed to the same destination—that is, different approaches to a single problem. In your case, it seems to me that, because the area you are in is “under-researched” (at least within an interpretive mode), there are a variety of paths and a variety of destinations; and you are at the point of working out both the path and the destination. It is an act of construction, not discovery (although one might discover some things while constructing). And it almost never proceeds linearly, even though the reconstructed logic makes it appear that way.

Now then, I think what is important to recognize at your juncture is that, rather than proceeding linearly, you need to work all ends against the middle, so to speak. By that I mean your construction of problem and method comes about by weighing and adjusting several things. You tentatively frame a problem statement, as you have done. But you also monitor whether it is feasible to do, logistically, and within a reasonable frame of time. You alternatively adjust the method, the logistics, the time frame, and the precise articulation of the problem in relation to each other, but also in relation to the educational context and the research that has been done to date.

For instance, I look at your three statements in the middle of page two, followed by the problem statement (nice) and I see that it is shaping toward pre-service teachers and beginning teachers. It is closely related to, but moves away from, a focus on your needs as a professor/teacher. Again, to move toward pre-service teachers and beginning teachers of reading takes a path that leads to one kind of destination, while to move toward the dilemmas of a professor/teacher of preserve/beginning reading teachers takes a path that leads to a different destination. In the one, you are researching “them” and their context. In the other, you are researching yourself and your context. The latter would be easier to document and the data would always be there, so to speak; but it might lack punch without the

former. On the other side, to research only “them” bleeds the work of the sense of urgency that you feel and the sense of participation-in-the-construction-of-their-situations that you have. The two destinations are not far apart and I can readily imagine a study that would involve both, but what is important to recognize is that each context brings forth different issues of method and logistics and different justifications for “why would this be important to do?” The work is important to do, don’t worry about your ability to articulate that; but you need to work on what the work *is*. Further, the research problem will likely have parts but they will be seen to be conceptually linked. For instance, when I say that I can imagine a study that would involve both a focus on you and on “them,” there would need to be a clear conceptual link between those two parts.

In the proposal and thesis you have to (1) justify why the research problem you have constructed is worth researching (the social and educational contexts help you do that), (2) you have to justify why the methods you choose are appropriate to the questions the problem generates, and (3) you have to show why the kind of information that your research will generate is needed. This last point is important. Your interpretive thesis will produce a certain kind of information and understanding that is characteristic of this mode of research. Why is that information necessary or important? That is, in what context of professional practice would it be useful or helpful and why and to whom? Some of this comes from paying attention to your own gut reactions as you read the research that has been done and as you reflect on your own situation and that of your students and ex-students.

It might be helpful to think less in terms of the need for “change” and more in terms of what people are coping with in their various contexts. I think the kind of research you want to do will probably aid our understanding of the complexity of teaching/reading situations. Go back to the first few pages of Erickson on this. It may well be that an implicit part of your argument involves the perception of teachers and professors to change, but I suggest that your strongest argument will be that there is a kind of information that we need to have (that we presently don’t have) in order to understand better the nature of the situations with which your participants (perhaps including yourself) are confronted. “Change” is another problem for another day and the rhetoric about change is, to my mind, often counterproductive to genuine change. In any event, I don’t think interpretive method is best suited to a “change” context—that almost always involves getting into some manner of documenting (quantifying) progress. It might be

useful at this point to have another look at June Rogers's proposal in order to (1) have a sense of its structure, and (2) to see what part of the elephant she is dealing with so that you can get a better sense of what part(s) you want to deal with. [Let's see, now I have pyramids, trains, steps, trails, paths, destinations, and elephants—not bad, eh!—I'll not shirk from a mixed metaphor!] Jim, you are doing very well; keep on as you are. You aren't too far from having a draft that you can show potential committee members. That's all for now. BK

The three or four drafts that it normally takes to produce a good proposal are not wasted effort even though a candidate is understandably anxious to move on to the research itself. Although it is well recognized that issues may emerge in the conduct of a qualitative research that could not be anticipated, it is critical that the overall conceptualization of a study be worked out in advance so that a researcher knows what he or she is doing. It is the thoroughness and intensity of the conceptualization at the proposal stage that affords a researcher the confidence to respond appropriately when unanticipated issues do arise. Furthermore, the writing in good proposals usually turns up in the first chapter of a dissertation. The process of writing the proposal itself—the gut-wrenching process of getting the ideas to work—is a training ground for the attention to detail that is required to conduct a solid piece of research and produce a strong dissertation. It is important to remember that a doctoral dissertation proposal is one of the first formal steps in the apprenticeship of becoming an academic researcher. Its primary function is to convince the university (as represented by a supervisor and committee) that the author is ready to conduct a study and that the plans are sufficiently worked for it to be completed satisfactorily within a reasonable time.

#### APPENDIX—QUALITIES OF A PROPOSAL

1. How informative is the introduction? Is it easy to understand?
2. How long before you understand what the proposal is about?
3. Is there a clear articulation of the problem that the study will address? How far do you have to read before you have a clear sense of it? (Note: There is a difference between a statement of what the research will do and the problem that it addresses.)
4. Is a plausible argument made for doing the study? Will the study likely make a significant contribution to practice or theory?
5. Are the questions that the study will address clear? Do they seem reasonable, given the nature of the problem?

6. Is the literature review adequate, and is it conceptually integrated with the problem and the questions posed?
7. Is there a convincing argument for the theoretical perspective taken to the problem? Is the perspective (or theoretical framework) from which the data will be collected and analyzed clear and reasonable?
8. Is there a convincing argument for the methodological approach taken?
9. Are the methods of the study spelled out in concrete detail? Will they have a good chance of answering the questions the study poses?
10. Is the researcher's role in the inquiry clear and acceptable, given the nature of the problem?
11. Is the "design" of the study apparent, and does it have integrity? Is there a coherent train of thought that runs through the proposal from beginning to end?
12. Is the structure of the proposal apparent and lucid? Do the parts fit together?
13. Are the transitions from one part of the proposal to another clear and helpful?
14. Are the ethical considerations clear and acceptable?
15. Is the proposal well written? Does the author guide you through the work?

*My thanks to Ciaran Sugrue for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.*

### *Notes*

1 My comments come from over 25 years of experience in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The terms *research* and *inquiry* are used interchangeably in the discussion.

2 For a discussion of these issues in a related context, see Kilbourn (1999).

3 The more a society veers from genuine openness, the more difficult the struggle of the university to fulfill the principles on which it is based; the struggles of universities in Spain bear witness to the damage from Franco's long-lived totalitarian regime. But we need not resort to spectacular examples. The current concern about private funding to universities (say, the support of scientific research by drug companies) is a concern based in the realization that the strings of funding can fetter the expression of academic freedom and evidential argument in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

4 The theoretical perspective of a study can be open to challenge, of course, and can also be seen as supported (or warranted) by foundational beliefs about the nature of reality. Stephen Pepper's (1942) work is helpful in this respect because he allows us to see that what is admissible

as data and warrants are ultimately matters of worldview. See Roberts (1982) for a discussion of Toulmin's argument pattern and Pepper's worldviews in qualitative and quantitative research. Roberts argued that the quantitative paradigm emerges from formist/mechanist assumptions, whereas the qualitative paradigm emerges from contextual/organic assumptions.

5 Toulmin's treatment of warrants and backing is suggestive of the complexity of actual arguments, but it should be emphasized that his primary aim was to show the essential elements of an argument rather than to parse a genuine argument as one might find, say, in a court of law or perhaps in a contentious academic paper. For a complicated layered argument and good writing, see Renata Adler's (2000) *A Court of No Appeal*.

6 I emphasize this issue because, in my experience, in the rush to break from confining empirical/quantitative interpretations of the meaning of terms like *evidence*, *argument*, and *support*, beginning researchers sometimes lose sight of the overall aim of a dissertation—what sets it apart from propaganda, blind belief, unfounded opinion, raw power, and snake oil—and why the academic tradition of supporting claims, interpretations, and conclusions with evidence and argument came to be a deeply held value in the first place.

7 Soltis (1984), for instance, discussed empirical, interpretive, and critical approaches, whereas Shulman (1988) talked about correlational, quasi-experimental, survey, philosophical, historical, and case study inquiries, and Jacob (1987) parsed the various approaches within the broad category of qualitative inquiry. Since these analyses, there have been "additions" to qualitative approaches, such as narrative inquiry, life-history inquiry, feminist inquiry, post-structuralist inquiry and arts-based inquiry, among others. Any of the approaches can have alternative labels and refinements and a different hierarchical relationship to the rest, depending on who carves the pie.

8 Some supervisors will advise that there be a clear statement of the purpose of the study rather than the problem, and in that case, the wording and syntax are slightly different.

9 Sadly, at the very point of beginning his study, personal circumstances made it impossible for Paul to continue.

10 Much of what I am saying here also could be placed in the discussion of the literature review.

11 Precisely how formal the proposal is as a document depends on the university and the department. In my own department, although there are forms signed stating that the committee has been struck and the topic registered (and, presumably, the proposal has been accepted), there is no requirement that the proposal have any particular editorial form, be bound, or be kept in a publicly accessible place (as opposed to the dissertation). The proposal is not a publicly available document as the dissertation is.

12 In other words, the brevity of the proposal should not be taken to indicate that the candidate does not understand where his or her work lies in relation to scholarship in the field or the nature of the argument. Having said that, I personally do not think that implicitness in these matters is a virtue.

13 The lack of a clear statement of the problem in early drafts is also indicative of a stage in the proposal development process—that is, sometimes there is no clear statement in early drafts because the writer is not yet clear on what the problem really is.

14 After a review of relevant research and theory, Chris has a section called "Restatement of the Problem," which comes on page 26 of a 43-page proposal.

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BRENT KILBOURN teaches in the Center for Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. His interests include constructive feedback in teaching, worldviews and

curriculum, and qualitative inquiry. Recent publications include “Fictional Theses” in *Educational Researcher*, December 1999; “The Art and Structure of a First Paragraph,” *Teachers College Record*, January 2001; and “Balancing Feedback and Inquiry: How Novice Observers (Supervisors) Learn from Inquiry into Their Own Practice,” *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, Summer, 2005.