

Dialectic Dialogue for Academic Anxieties in the Dissertation Process

Cara L. Garcia, Ph.D.

Abstract

This is an explanatory case study of the dissertation-writing experience of Roma, a student at risk for non-completion of the doctoral degree because of a type of academic anxiety commonly known as “writer’s block.” Roma sought help from the Cara, the first author of this article, who documented their interactions so as to explain that Roma’s background as a professional newspaper reporter, newsletter editor and her then-current position as a university composition instructor was insufficient support for her writing process. However, dialectic dialogue, an intervention derived from principles of gestalt psychology, was used in interactions mainly by phone and email to address four types of interruptions to concentration which characterized Roma’s academic anxiety. Roma’s recovery of concentration was verified by a pattern-matching method, comparing her experiences before and after intervention on each issue to the classic Hegelian dialectic: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Implications from Roma’s case pertain to writing instruction, especially the use of conferencing and journaling strategies for students of all ages, but especially adults, to increase achievement and self-efficacy.

Cara L. Garcia, Ph.D. — Professor of Education, Pepperdine University

Dr. Garcia came to Pepperdine University from the Los Angeles Unified School District where she was a teacher and teacher-advisor. She teaches methods courses, chairs dissertations, and supervises educational therapy services offered through the clinic. Her research interests focus on academic anxiety, specifically reading and writing blocks, test anxiety, stage fright, and math anxiety. She is the author of *Too Scared to Learn: Overcoming Academic Anxiety*, published by Corwin Press.

Contact: cara.garcia@pepperdine.edu

Dialectic Dialogue for Academic Anxiety in the Dissertation Process:

The dissertation is the traditional capstone of many American educational programs. It serves several purposes in the graduate studies curriculum: (1) students learn to reason from their own data rather than their life experiences; (2) the dissertation is part of a rite of passage to independent scholarship; and (3) it provides opportunity for the student to contribute to the professional literature under the guidance of a professorial committee.

The dissertation is commonly referred to, and thought of, as a product, a research report often written in five chapters reflecting the scientific method; however, it is also a process or rather an intersection of several sub-processes. A dissertation involves not only conducting research, but also the negotiation of a rigorous writing process. Ideally, students learn about themselves as scholars, working mostly on their own, using self-reliance and discipline to set goals and schedule work time. Additionally, the process has a strong interpersonal component: students have the chance to develop professional bonds with their chairpersons and dissertation committee members who acculturate them into the ways of scholars.

At-Risk Dissertation Students

When a student in the field of education, for example, fails to complete the dissertation, the profession suffers the loss of a person in whom years of time and effort has been invested, someone whose dissertation might have made a unique contribution to the literature. Conventional wisdom holds that a person who fails to complete the process is “self-selecting out,” and is willing to bear the unofficial degree of ABD, “all but dissertation.” However, research indicates that the most significant barriers to completion are not self-selecting out as much as pressures from jobs, family, significant others, lack of support from the professorial committee (Germeroth, 1990; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992) as well as self-doubts such as, “Maybe I’m not doctoral material” (Arnkoff, Glass, & Robinson, 1992). A recent review of the research found all factors present across disciplines (Herzig, 2004). The self-selecting out process seems complex and multifaceted and, in our opinion, bears investigation at the individual case study level.

We wondered exactly how the documented pressures of non-completion manifest themselves at the very moment a student is trying to write. Based on our own writing experiences and those of our students, we know that concentration during the writing process can be interrupted before pen ever

touches paper and every point along the way thereafter. We reframed these pressures as potential “interruptions” to concentration. We saw a need for a case study to document how external and internal pressures interrupt the writing process. Furthermore, we wondered how our “dialectic dialogue” strategy, an intervention which we have used in other at-risk situations, would facilitate the recovery of interrupted concentration in an at-risk dissertation situation.

Interventions

Universities have responded to the needs of dissertation students with a number of interventions. These seem to align with the kinds of problems that dissertation students experience.

Intrapersonal and Physical Issues Anxiety Management Training (AMT) is a short-term therapy designed to reduce anger and anxiety through the use of relaxation techniques (Suinn, 1995, p. 288). When the student is relaxed and distanced from an anxiety-provoking topic such as job pressure, it may be easier to focus on the writing material. This approach addresses the intrapersonal aspect of the writing process, especially physiology, through stress reduction. Often breathing is taught to allay physical tensions and is followed by positive affirmations and goal-setting.

During an AMT session the writing process may be visualized in order that the student might see himself or herself as a researcher. Mahiri and Godley (1998) have documented how the writing process is intrinsically tied to one’s identity as a literate person. Germeroth (1990) reported that some students have found large, concentrated blocks of time such as an entire day of writing to be helpful while others indicated that a couple of hours a day was more beneficial. This is the kind of insight intended to help students toward an authentic writing process.

Interpersonal and Skill Issues A second approach to dissertation support is institution-sponsored seminars and support groups on writing and data analysis skills. The “doctoral club” (Cesari, 1990) is an example of addressing the need for peer interaction and support (p. 375). Cesari describes how meetings may focus on a particular chapter of the dissertation or sharing practical tips. This approach seems strong on interpersonal support and affirms for each student that he or she is not the only one struggling.

Thirdly, the dissertation chairperson’s support can be seen as an intervention. It is traditionally didactic, consisting of peptalks and tutorials aimed at writing and research skills as well as interpersonal

relations with committee members. The didactic approach can be very helpful but doesn't further the student's own insight nor does it model collegiality.

Recent years have seen the use of a mentoring approach which may include intrapersonal issues as well as interpersonal. Ideally, the advisor would be able to initiate a relationship which is consistent with the recommendation stemming from Mike Rose's (1990) investigations into writing blocks: a relationship free from the "reductive separation of roles" (p. 22) implied by the advice-giving of a peptalk.

Limitations Although current interventions in the dissertation process address a range of issues (skills, physiology, interpersonal, and intrapersonal), they do so in a manner that can miss critical issues in the student's experiences. The peptalk in particular communicates interpersonal support, stressing to a student that the advisor believes in him or her. But the best peptalk may still miss the point in that the student himself or herself may not believe that he or she is capable of the task or perhaps worthy of the degree. Furthermore, the student may be concealing this belief from himself or herself.

These intrapersonal issues may be at the heart of the writing block.

In reflecting on this literature, we believe that if students can attain insight into their blocks, they can best choose from the available supports based on insight into what kind of support they need to progress. The following sections explain the use of a therapeutic intervention called dialectic dialogue which can address the skill, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and physiological issues as they arise in the dissertation process.

Dialectic Dialogue as an Intervention. Dialectic dialogue was originally derived from gestalt psychology principles (such as foreground, background, and insight) and applied to the reading process (Garcia, 1985; Garcia, 1986; Garcia, 1994a). Continued research has developed this form of dialogue as an intervention for academic anxieties such as writing blocks, test anxiety, stage fright, and technophobia with students, faculty (Garcia, 1994b; Garcia, 2005), and families (Garcia, 1997). It has been employed with Cara's dissertation advisees, and has been pilot-tested in a dissertation support group (Garcia & Green, 1998).

Academic anxiety is hypothesized as an inner conflict so that one part of the student is straining to concentrate on a task and the other part is interrupting concentration. For example, most students have had the experience of straining to write a phrase or sentence and immediately crossing it out. The "inner

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

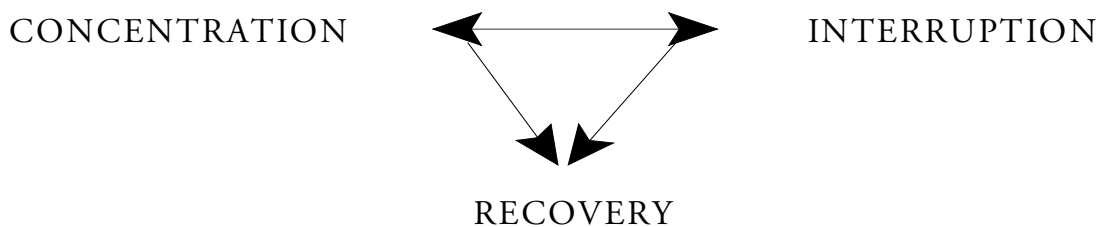
drafter” is interrupted by the “inner editor.” The back-and-forth struggles between drafter and editor are the experience of anxiety; it is a process of inner conflict.

Importantly, the student is often unaware of the vacillation between the concentrating and interrupting selves. Because the anxiety is uncomfortable, the student does not dwell long at either pole of the conflict but shuttles back and forth, and in the process commonly loses awareness of the polar nature of the conflict.

Someone who can see the gestalt of the process can intervene. The intervention to “unblock” may involve a “dialectic dialogue,” so that the student’s writing process is made explicit through a dialogue somewhat like a “think-aloud” (Emig, 1983), slowing the process down, using reflective listening (Rogers, 1961), and bringing to awareness the inner conflict between the concentrating and interrupting aspects of the self. Inner conflict-resolution can then be used to recover concentration and move forward on task with aware self-regulation.

In classic philosophical terms, the inner conflict-resolution is a dialectic process. The concentrating and interrupting selves are polarities of thesis and antithesis. The recovery of concentration is a middle ground between the thesis and antithesis, the synthesis, which is created from aspects of both thesis and antithesis, however, is unique. Synthesis is unique because it is the insightful place; it has aware insight into the whole process that neither the concentration nor interrupting polarities has.

Figure 1 — Dialectic Nature of an Academic Struggle



The result of the dialectic dialogue is recovery of concentration that is authentic for the student. It is the result of insightful dialogue between the concentrating and interrupting selves to clarify what they each need from the other in order to resolve their conflicts.

In addition to the process of dialectic dialogue, there is a content aspect to a dialectic dialogue. Four categories of interruptions have been determined from research on the method (Garcia, Abrams,& Carlson, 1991):

- skill, e.g., “It’s not clear to me exactly how to write a ‘Statement of the Problem.’”
- interpersonal relationship, e.g., “My advisor expects a draft before our next appointment. Help!”
- intrapersonal concern, e.g., “Maybe I’m not doctoral material.”
- physiology, e.g., headache, stiffness, eye strain shallow breathing

If the student has some awareness of the content of these inner conflict issues and how vacillation occurs between them and the concentrating self, the dialectic dialogue can be done by journaling. To build on the intrapersonal example above, if the student were aware of the inner conflict, he or she could use a double-entry dialogue journal (Staton, 1980). This would involve dividing the journal page vertically and assigning the left column to the concentrating self and the right column to the interrupting self. Point by point, the selves confront each other’s beliefs about whether or not the student is “doctoral material.” Ideally, they come to write out a resolution so that enough concentration is recovered to resume work on the dissertation. As the Garcia (1998) has earlier proposed,

Whereas concentration contributes to the possibility of growth, the interruptions contribute to the possibility of safety. The synthesis is the student’s way of growing cautiously and authentically. With insight into the dialectic nature of their concentration-interruption-recovery, students can begin to monitor and self-regulate anxiety independently. They can regulate their own academic anxiety as they would any anxiety (p. 15).

Because dialectic dialogue elicits the student’s own self-assessment, self-direction, and self-pacing, it offers an alternative to existing strategies such as anxiety management, support groups, peptalks, and tutorials (Garcia, Abrams,& Carlson, 1991).

By using peptalks as the chief type of writing conference, dissertation advisors address only the student’s interrupting self. As the case of Roma will attempt to show, a student’s writing experience also reflects the concentrating self that accounts for the writing that is actually produced and for the appointments that actually are kept. Peptalks admonish only the doubting aspect of the student and overlooks the aspect of the student that did, in fact, produce a draft and submit it for feedback. Peptalks miss the opportunity for the

student to begin the internal dialogue between the concentrating self and the interrupting self. The outcome of a successful dialogue can be increased responsibility and self-support and increased self-knowledge, two goals central to the rationale for having the dissertation experience in the curriculum.

Roma, A Writing Instructor with a Writing Block

Roma is a 53-year-old Caucasian woman who was a journalist for 10 years and owner of a personal promotion agency for 20 years before deciding to enroll in a doctoral program in English. She was referred by a mutual friend to the first author, Cara Garcia, who is a professor of education. The mutual friend explained that Roma had drafted her chapter one, but had essentially stopped writing and had spent her dissertation time for the last year reviewing the literature. However, she taught freshman composition as a Graduate Assistant at the same university where she was enrolled, and regularly dealt with students who were blocked in their writing assignments.

The next few sections will shift to a narrative from Cara's point of view, reporting her observations, hypotheses, and reflections from her field notes.

My friend hosted a dinner to introduce Roma to me. Roma seemed to be a healthy, well-spoken, and outgoing person attractively attired in ethnic clothing and jewelry gathered from her travels. The conversation in the larger social gathering ranged across literature, art, music, sports, and current events. Roma was enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and comfortable. I was impressed with the range of her experiences, tolerance for ambiguity, respect for others, and genuine care for anyone trying to learn and grow. Roma expressed a deep interest in students in her community adult school English-as-a-second-language (ESL) class and her university undergraduate freshman composition classes. She advocated social actions to improve the state of women's rights, and was especially articulate about women's studies.

Roma and I spent a few minutes apart from the social group to discuss her dissertation. She had brought me a copy of her initial prospectus for the study, and I scanned this as she described the procedures, timelines, and milestones in the graduate school of her university. Our discussion focused on the context of her "writing block:" the structure of her dissertation committee, the format of the dissertation, and her topic. Roma mentioned a few unique aspects of her situation. Her committee was unique since the faculty member she had chosen to chair her committee was a friend of her family. While the chairperson had encouraged Roma to keep writing, a form of peptalk, Roma was disappointed not to have had some feedback on the chapter that she had written and submitted months ago. She wanted to discuss the ideas of her study. Additionally, Roma explained that the graduate student organization had two years past criticized the treatment of dissertation students but Roma had been told all their complaints had been remedied. There seemed to be no institutionalized support

group available at that time. However, Roma had a close friend who was going through the same program and was experiencing comparable problems with her chairperson.

Case Selection

Roma's description of her writing process included a detailed and lengthy list of household chores and other activities, such as extensive reviews of the literature, which she would use to avoid the writing process. I hypothesized, based on previous experiences with other cases of writing blocks, that Roma's interrupting self might be thinking of chores and literature because of a fear of having her ideas read and criticized. This would be an interpersonal issue. Another possibility was that her interrupting self might be uncertain about the exact look and feel of a review of literature in a dissertation, which would be a skill issue. Finally, her interrupting self might reflect self-doubts about the ability to write the chapter, which would be an intrapersonal issue. Of course, it could be two or three issues concurrently that were interfering with Roma's process.

Although I had little familiarity with Roma's dissertation topic, I was familiar with the dissertation process used at Roma's university. I thought I could facilitate Roma's process through the use of dialectic dialogue without deep knowledge of the content of the study.

My initial assessment of Roma was that she had the ability and willingness to identify and confront her anxiety. Roma's ability to articulate her inner experiences would be instrumental in facilitating the rigorous detailed data gathering processes of a case study. Had Roma not had been so articulate and engaging, I would have referred her for educational therapy for academic anxiety at the university community counseling center, where nonverbal activities and role-playing are used to teach students to identify and articulate their ideas, sensations, and emotions. Instead, I decided to work with her as a professional courtesy.


Intervention

Since Roma was articulate and independent, I proposed and she agreed to experiment with working by e-mail and phone with an option for face-to-face meetings if necessary. After agreeing to work with Roma by distance, I obtained her permission to document our work in depth to explain anxiety and interventions in the dissertation process. I thought Roma's case would be of professional interest because she was a professional writer and writing instructor with a writing block, because the study would use distance learning, because it offered an opportunity to explain the complexities of the dissertation process from the student's point of view, and because it would offer dialectic dialogue as an alternative to the peptalk. Roma's experience seemed to have potential for

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

an explanation-building study that could transmit the lived experiences of a student using dialectic dialogue to recover concentration during the dissertation process. Indeed, this proved to be the case. Figure 2 shows a transcript and analysis of a typical phone call.

Figure 2

Dialogue	Analysis
<p>CG: Hi, what's up? ROMA: My grades are in and I'm getting ready to write and I'm thinking, "I need to read some more."</p>	<p>CG begins the format with a "tell me" open-ended question. Roma responds by describing a dilemma that CG sees as a dialectic of writing-not writing.</p>
<p>CG: And yet part of you wants to write, yes? ROMA: Yes, for once everything around the house is working and it's time to get at this.</p>	<p>CG clarifies and labels the polar opposites of the dialectic: the concentrating part wants to write and the interrupting part wants to read more.</p>
<p>CG: So the writing voice says it's time to write, everything's running, and the reading voice says "I'm not ready to write, I need more time to read," yes? ROMA: Yes</p>	<p>Time to write.  No, I'm afraid. Notice how one self is cognitive and the other is emotional. Such is the rich complexity of the inner dialogue.</p>
<p>CG: I'm guessing that these two aspects of yourself need to be introduced to each other, and find out each other's concerns and interests in this dissertation process.</p>	<p>CG proposes a contract, a verbal agreement, for Roma to experiment with a dialogue that may help her become aware of how her dominant writing self is conflicting with her (uncertain) reading self.</p>
<p>ROMA: OK.</p>	

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

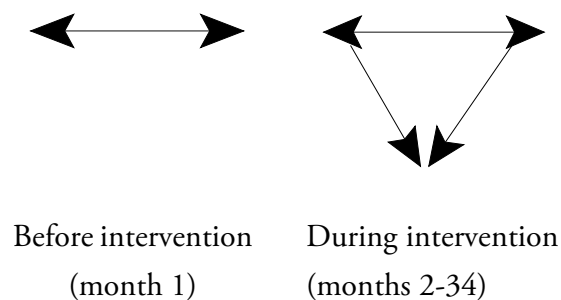
CG: Can you take a moment and get in touch with your writing self—describe yourself from that point of view.	By bringing this aspect of her self to the foreground and identifying with that aspect of the whole process, Roma learns about herself as a writer and about her writing process in depth.
ROMA: Yes, I'm competent! I know what I want to say and how to say it. It's time to get on this!	The concentrating aspect of the self often is motivated by "shoulds."
CG: Now become the part of you that wants to read more.	Bringing to the foreground the other aspect.
ROMA: I'm fearful. You might be wrong and you'll be exposed as a jerk!	The interrupting aspect of the self is concern for need for safety.
CG: Does Competent Self have a reply?	Directing the dialogue explicitly.
ROMA: She says, "So what? The worst that could happen is that I have to research and rewrite."	The concentrating self wants risk-taking, growth, change, and learning.
CG: What's happening now?	Facilitating rather than directing.
ROMA: I'm Fearful Self and I want to stay on the couch reading and having tea.	Roma speaks in first person, present tense indicating that she is truly in touch with "Fearful."
CG: Does any of this feel familiar?	CG probes to determine if this is the process by which Roma has been interrupting her writing.
ROMA: I've been on the couch since '95.	Expressing the frustration of the writing block.
CG: So the Fearful Self has been running the show?	Restating to clarify how Roma's process works.
ROMA: Yes.	
CG: I suggest a journaling experiment, for followup, okay?	CG and Roma make a follow up contract for an experiment to explore the conflict.
ROMA: Sure	

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

CG: To continue, I suggest that you divide a sheet of paper the long way, and use one column for Competent and one for Fearful to continue the dialogue they've begun. ROMA: Okay. Yes, I tell my students all the time to journal when they get stuck!!	CG proposes a shift from "other support" to "self-support," using the journaling activity as a tool to work her way through this conflict if it reemerges. Roma's reflection links to her instructional practices.
CG: So. . .what's a goal for right now that would work for both of your selves? ROMA: Two paragraphs. CG: And what do you need from me?	CG checks for Roma's needs. Roma articulates need. CG probes for Roma's needs for "other support" or independence.
ROMA: I'll e-mail you if it works out and phone you if I get stuck.	Roma makes a clear statement of self-support.

Figure 3 depicts the shift that Roma made from "other support" in month 1 of the intervention to "self-support" over months 2 through 34 of the intervention.

Figure 3 - "Other support" in month 1 of the intervention to "self-support"



Research Design

_____ Explanatory case study method was chosen to address the central question of “how” an articulate, motivated, composition instructor could be blocking her writing. By analyzing Roma’s point of view on issues that she raised and using my belief in the dialectic nature of anxiety, I sought to identify the parts within the whole: the specific beliefs, feelings, and sensations that comprised the pattern of concentration-interruption or concentration-interruption-recovery.

Yin (1984, p. 39) has suggested that validity in an explanatory case study depends on “analytic generalization . . . a particular set of rules to some broader theory.” The set of rules for Roma were based on the dynamics of gestalt field theory in which figure and ground were restated as concentrating and interrupting selves. The gestalt was restated as recovered concentration, an aware integration of the concentrating and interrupting selves. Theoretically, at the moment Roma has insight into how she interrupts her concentration while trying to write, she can choose how to deal with the interruption, or not. Choicefulness is the desired outcome of awareness and without awareness of choice and self-support, Roma’s dialogue for an issue could stay in a concentration-interruption pattern. With awareness, choice, and self-support the pattern would become concentration-interruption-recovery. These rules guided intervention and analysis.

The analysis of the dialectic dialogue generalizes to the broader paradoxical theory of change from gestalt therapy.(Beisser, 1970). This theory holds that individuals change by becoming more fully who they are rather than who they think they should be.

Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person [i.e., the therapist] to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what he is-to be fully invested in his current positions. . . . The premise is that one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing. (p. 77)

Thus, the dialectic dialogues with Roma hypothetically would reveal that the recovered concentration position is her authentic self. Her concentrating self would reflect her attempt to write as she thinks she should and her interrupting self would reflect her attempt to not write for reasons related to issues of skill (e.g., critical analysis), interpersonal relations (e.g., being ignored), intrapersonal issues (e.g, feeling uncertain), or physical

issues (e.g., headaches). Ideally, interventions in concentration-interruption patterns can result in a concentration-interruption-recovery pattern thus explaining how to break through a writing block.

Description and Analysis of the Core Issue

The perceived core intrapersonal issue of Roma's experience, is illustrated by the dialectic triangle. Figure 4 shows how the dialogue from Figure 2 might be depicted. Notice in Figure 4 how the concentrating self (Competent Roma) is focused on the task at hand, "I know what I want to say and how to say it," and the interrupting self (Fearful Roma) is focused on what others might think, "You might be wrong and you'll be exposed as a jerk." After journaling between the Competent and Fearful parts of herself, Roma concluded that the worst thing that could happen would be that she'd have to rewrite and research. The researchers viewed this as predominantly a skill issue, because getting a writing session started is considered a learned skill in the larger writing process even though it has interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects. Such is the rich complexity of lived experience.

Figure 4. Starting the Writing Process

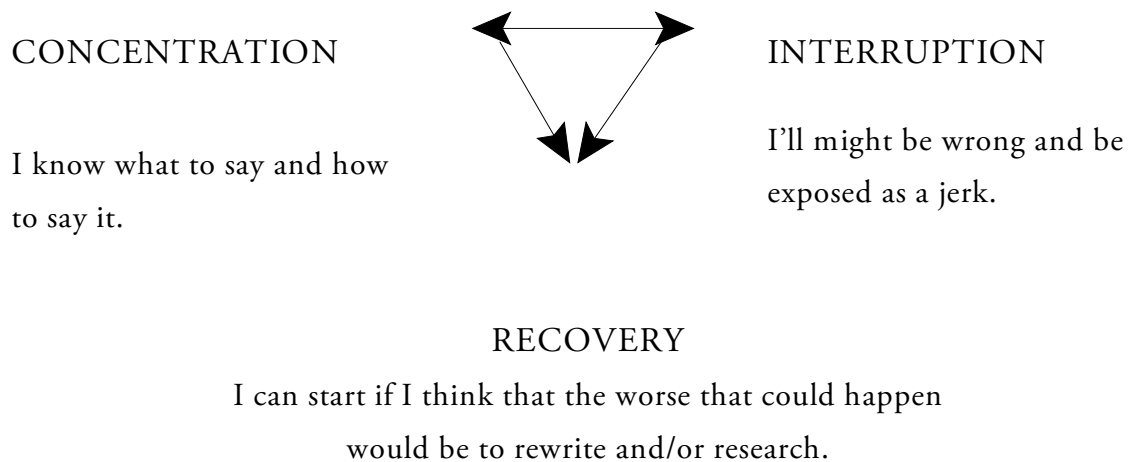
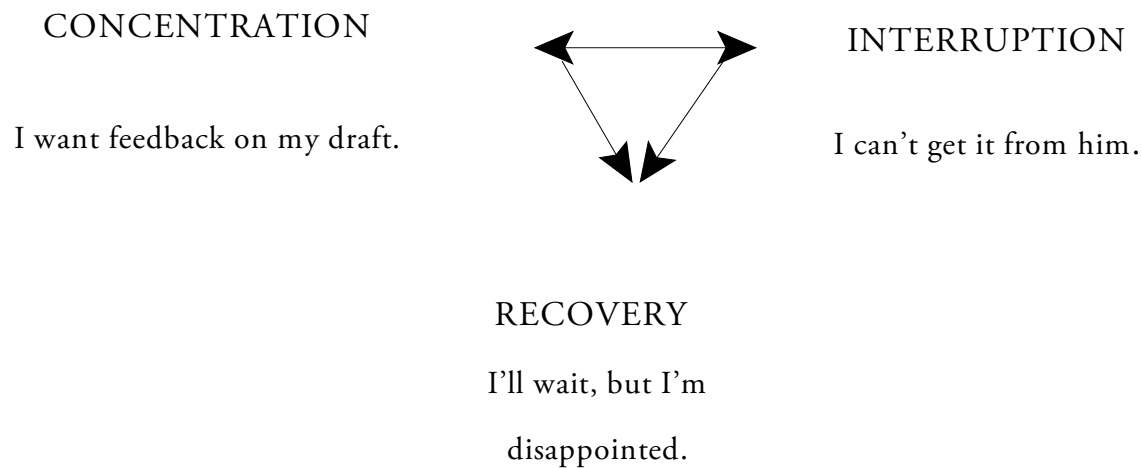


Figure 5 is a summary of Roma's journaling about her chairperson's lack of feedback. Roma wants to contact her chairperson to demand some feedback but because she knows the risk of being demanding of a more powerful person, she resolves the matter by agreeing to wait but also acknowledges her disappointment.

Figure 5



Data Collection and Organization for Analysis

Data collection ended in month 35, when Roma scheduled the defense of the dissertation which occurred in month 37. Over a period of 35 months, there were 35 phone conferences, 34 e-mail exchanges, and two face-to-face meetings. I kept notes during phone conversations and wrote follow-up reflections. I archived all e-mail messages and reflected on those as well. I reviewed all the data and read it into a tape recorder.

Soon after month 38, Joseph Green was engaged to assist with transcription, data organization, entry, analysis, and other tasks that followed from that point on.

At this point in this report, we will switch to first person plural voice to describe our collaboration on the case.

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

Our data organization was a direct outgrowth of the dialectic nature of the dialogue with Roma; without drawing a triangle for each dialectic, we laid out tables that preserved the dialectic nature of the interactions.

We included Roma's self-reports as well as Cara's part of the dialectic dialogue as data. We viewed the dialogues as a form of participant-observation. Cara was tracking Roma's concentration-interruption-process so the data were organized into a matrix with those headings. Based on past research with other kinds of academic issues such as reading, stage fright, and test anxiety (Garcia, Abrams, & Carlson, 1991), the dialogues were categorized by date and then type of interruption: physiological issues, skill-related issues, interpersonal and intrapersonal issues. Intersecting columns were the aspects of the dialectic dialogue: concentration, interruption, recovery. (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Issues	Polarities		
	Concentration	Interruption	Recovery
Skill			
Interpersonal			
Intrapersonal			
Physiological			

Issues across Time

After entering the data into the matrix, we tallied the types of issues occurring for each date. We found three distinct time periods in over the 35 months:

During months 1-9, Roma struggled primarily with three major skill-related issues:

1. To quit reading the literature and draft the dissertation.
2. To get her writing sessions started each day.
3. To let her drafts be drafts without editing them prematurely.

During months 10-17, Roma struggled with two interpersonal issues:

1. Her family wanted to know when she'd be done, especially since she was highly productive during this time.
2. Her faculty committee members were not reading and commenting on her drafts.

During months 19-34, Roma struggled with interpersonal issues that exacerbated her intrapersonal issues:

1. The committee member, Jane, wrote Roma a long and critical letter. It took weeks for Roma to be able to resolve the anger and recover concentration sufficient to respond to the suggestions.
2. Roma's family continued to ask for progress reports.
3. Roma's classmates were applying for academic positions and she did likewise from peer pressure.
4. Roma worried about being too old to begin a career in academia.
5. Roma thought her chairperson Tony and her committee member Jane didn't think highly of her writing skill.
6. In month 29, Roma reported that she had driven onto a freeway offramp going the wrong way. She became aware of her driving error and made a U-turn on the off-ramp before she encountered any traffic. In dialectic terms, she was able to recover concentration before she had an accident.

Her recall of the incident was that her concentration was interrupted by thought of her relationship with her chairperson, plus the concerns related to the pressures of teaching courses at two universities.

Limitations of Methods

In three instances where categorizing was ambiguous, we discussed the possibilities together until consensus was reached. For example, in a month 2 email, Roma wrote "I've said [it] a zillion different ways, but not in a way that's clear. . .that's my goal this morning. There's fear about engaging with this—fear of judgment by chair—fear of condemnation by community." We agreed that the first statement was a statement of concentration and the second was a statement of interruption. We disagreed about whether it should be categorized as a skill issue or an interpersonal issue. After discussing Roma's underlying needs, it seemed that finding her own voice was a primary need and fear of condemnation was secondary, a result of what might happen if she found her own voice. We concluded that this should be categorized as a skill issue, finding own voice.

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

Table 1

Interrater Reliability

Time Period	Total number		Agreement
	of dialogues	Discrepancies	
Months 1-9	27	1	93%
Months 10-17	15	0	100%
Months 19-34	24	2	91%

Discussion

Over the 35 month data collection period, different types of issues dominated at different time periods. Table 2 shows the frequency of each type of issue over time.

Table 2

Summary of Issues by Time Periods

	Months 1 - 9	Months 10 - 17	Months 19-34
Skill related	10	5	2
Intrapersonal	10	2	7
Interpersonal	7	8	15

From months 1-9, Roma was predominantly struggling with skill issues. When compared with the pattern of issues from months 10-17, the number of skill issues decreased significantly from 10 to 5, as Roma

reported increased confidence in her writing process, found her own voice, and stopped reading the literature and began drafting. More dramatically, the number of intrapersonal issues decreased from 10 to 2, as she was able to address and resolve conflicts between Competent Roma and Fearful Roma. Finally, the number of interpersonal issues appeared slightly less frequently than the skill and intrapersonal issues: the family was waiting and the committee was accepting drafts (but not responding or returning them).

From months 10-17, Roma's progress was that of a largely self-supportive student who had gained self-sufficiency and was not stuck, as evidenced by the decrease in skill and intrapersonal issues. She essentially finalized four of the five dissertation chapters during this time. However, the resolution of the skill issues let interpersonal issues with her family and committee members become predominant in Roma's attention. She had given drafts to all committee members but only the two non-faculty members had responded. This period ended with a meeting with her chairperson who promised to write a letter to faculty committee members asking for feedback on the draft.

From months 19-34, Roma's interpersonal issues increased. The chairperson's letter to committee members requesting feedback for Roma prompted a long and critical review from one of the committee members. This unexpected criticism stimulated more intrapersonal issues and constituted a setback in her self-support. Nevertheless, her skill-related issues remained low.

Follow-up Interview

In an in-person interview, we met face-to-face with Roma for 2 hours. We asked questions designed to get closure on issues which Roma had raised during data collection, but had never mentioned again, for example, the recovery of her brother after a serious accident. These issues were "let ride" in order to strictly follow Roma's lead through her dissertation process. The interview information was entered in the "recovery" cells of the data matrix for eight issues, strengthening the number of post-intervention issues which have a concentration-interruption-recovery pattern.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Roma's experiences explain how an articulate, motivated composition dissertation student and composition instructor experienced the anxiety of a writing block by allowing her concentration to be interrupted by unaddressed and unresolved skill needs, interpersonal struggles, and intrapersonal doubts and concerns.

Double-entry journaling was an effective strategy for Roma to gain awareness, insight, and choicefulness for self-regulation of her dissertation issues. Roma knew the technique and had taught it in her composition

classes. She adopted it in the early months of the study and used it consistently to work through issues as they emerged.

Roma herself stated the effectiveness of the intervention at her dissertation defense. She prefaced her presentation of the data with comments about the guidance she had received: “Before I begin, let me tell you how I got to this table.” She elucidated her disappointment with her dissertation experience, and stated that she thought she would not have completed the degree without intervention to support her writing process.

Roma’s dissertation committee members, which may have perceived themselves as a source of support for her dissertation process, were perceived by Roma more often than not as interruptions of that process. Roma’s struggles with her committee often provoked her latent self-doubts which in turn began interrupting her concentration on writing. This dynamic underscores the power of the interpersonal relationship in the dissertation process and points to the need for interventions for dissertation students which have the capacity to address these sensitive areas.

We imagine that many dissertation advisors hear stories from their students which they interpret as excuses and brush aside in favor of their own pep talks and skill tutorials. Kluever, Green, and Katz (1997) have pointed out the need for changes in types of interactions with the advisor. We offer this explanatory case study of one student’s experiences to show how skill, interpersonal, and intrapersonal aspects fit together into a coherent whole. We hope that it will help advisors to see the whole picture and make a referral to an educational or gestalt therapist, or recommend dialectic journaling, or refer the student to literature on dialectic dialogue in the academic process.

Writing anxieties such as Roma’s are the same as that of many students struggling with skill, interpersonal, and intrapersonal issues. She never got the writing conference with her advisor before her defense. She reported that her remaining sadness was that she was never able to engage her committee members in substantive discussion at a point where it could have stimulated her writing process. When the committee members were motivated for such discussion at the defense, Roma found herself lacking enthusiasm. Reframed as a dialectic, her choice to simply be there and participate bespeaks concentration, however, her fresh memories of not being supported in way she needed dampened her energy to relate. Perhaps emotionally she was angry and behaviorally she was withholding.

Roma’s experience underscores that the writing conference is a vital part of the writing process. Roma showed us that her experiences as a professional journalist or composition teacher were not sufficient to support her through the issues that emerged in the dissertation process.

Similar to the case of Roma, we resonate with Maloch’s (2005) “Moments by Which Change is Made . . .” report. It is a hopeful analysis of how a classroom teacher mediated the participation of two disenfranchised

third graders in literature discussion circle, supporting all members of the circle as they confronted and resolved each skill, interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts as they arose. We believe such work is therapeutic because it results in the resolution of conflicts and results in students having more awareness and choice in their learning and relationships.

We look for a time when the joy that we see in the learning process of the toddler can be sustained throughout education. When concentration is interrupted, as in the case of Roma, we believe that the dialectic dialogue has merit as both explanation and intervention and can contribute to teaching a student how to recover concentration, thereby actualizing the postulate, "Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient. . ." (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1994).

References

- Aristotle. (1994). Book I. In *Nichomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.), (Original work written circa 350 B.C.) [Online]. Available: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nichomachaen.1.i.html> [1999, November 15].
- Arnkoff, D. B., Glass, C. R., & Robinson, A. S. (1992). Cognitive processes, anxiety, and performance on doctoral dissertation oral examinations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 39*(3), 382-388.
- Association of Educational Therapists, 1804 W. Burbank Blvd., Burbank, CA. 91506. (818)843-1183.
- Beisser, A. (1970). The paradoxical theory of change. In J. Fagan & I.L. Shepherd (Eds.). *Gestalt therapy now*. New York, NY: Science and Behavior Books.
- Bowen, W. G., & Rudenstine, N. L. (1992). *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cesari, J. P. (1990). Thesis and dissertation support groups: A unique service for graduate students. *Journal of College Student Development, 31*, 375-376.
- Davis, M., Eshelman, E., & McKay, M. (1988). *The relaxation and stress reduction workbook*. Oakland, CA: Harbinger.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Toronto, Ontario: MacMillan.
- Elbow, P. (1987). *Embracing contraries: Explorations in learning and teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Emig, J. A. (1983). *The web of meaning: Essays on writing, teaching, learning, and thinking*. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.

Garcia, C. L. (1985, December). *Integrating principles from gestalt psychotherapy and reading education: Educational therapy*. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference Annual Conference, San Diego, CA.

Garcia, C. L. (1986). Extending reading tradition: Educational therapy. *Reading Psychology*, 7(4), 305-311.

Garcia, C. L., Abrams, J. A., & Carlson, K. A. (1991). *Educational therapy: Theory, research, practice*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Gestalt Journal, Los Angeles.

Garcia, C. L. (1994a). *Awareness and dialogue in cases of reading anxiety: A multimedia presentation*. National Reading Conference, San Diego, CA.

Garcia, C. L. (1994b). Client-centered staff development. In M. Castle, & E. Cramer (Eds.). *Fostering the life-long love of reading: The affective domain in reading education*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Garcia, C. L. (1997, Summer). Educational therapy: An ancillary to family therapy. *Progress: Family Systems Research and Therapy*, 6(1), 13-25.

Garcia, C. L. (1998). *Too scared to learn: Overcoming academic anxiety*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Garcia, C. L. & Baker, S. M. (1998). *Dissertation support group*. [Videotape.] Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, (Available from the authors, 6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045-1590).

Garcia, C. L., Baker, S. M., & deMayo, R. Gestalt Educational Therapy. In Woldt, A.L. and Tolman, S.M. (2005). *Gestalt Therapy: History, Theory, and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Garcia, C. L., Carden, C., & Staples, K. (1990). The promise of student-centered practices. *California Technology Project Quarterly*, 1(3), 1-15; 43-45.

Germeroth, D. (1990). *Lonely days and lonely nights: Completing the doctoral dissertation*. Unpublished manuscript, presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago

Henderson, R. H., Clarke, J. E., & Reynolds, M. A. (1996). *Summary report 1995: doctorate recipients from United States universities*. Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 404 911).

Herzig, A. H. (2004). Becoming mathematicians: Women and students of color choosing and leaving doctoral mathematics. *Review of Educational Research* 74(2), 171-214.

Kerlin, R. A. (1997). *Toward a theory of women's doctoral persistence*. Unpublished dissertation, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, Ontario, Canada.

Kluever, R. C. (1995). *ABD's and graduates from a college of education: Responsibility, barriers, and facilitators*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Kluever, R. C., Green, K. E., & Katz, E. (1997). *Dissertation completers and non-completers: An analysis of psycho-social variables*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago. (ERIC Reproduction No. ED 407 885).

Kratochwill, T. R. (1992) Single-case research design and analysis: An overview. In Mertens, D.M. (1998) *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative & qualitative approaches*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mahiri, J., & Godley, A. J. (1998). Rewriting identity: Social meanings of literacy and “re-visions” of self. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 33(4), 416-432.

Mallinckrodt, B., & Leong, F. L. T. (1992). Social support in academic programs and family environments: Sex differences and role conflicts for graduate students. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70(6), 716-722.

Mauch, J. E., & Birch, J. W. (1993). *Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation: A handbook for students and faculty* (Rev. ed.). NY: M. Dekker.

Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Palo, S. (1990). An interview with Mike Rose: “Imagine a writing program.” *Writing On The Edge*, 1(2), 7-22.

Perls, F. S., (1973). *The gestalt approach & eye witness to therapy*. Ben Lomond, CA: Science & Behavior Books.

Rogers, C.R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Rose, M. (Ed.). (1985). *When a writer can't write: Studies in writer's block and other composing-process problems*. NY: Guilford Press.

Staton, J. (1980). Writing and counseling: Using a dialogue journal. *Language Arts*, 57, 514-518.

Sternberg, D.J. (1981). *How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation*. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Suinn, R. M. (1995). Clinical practice, university research and students: A historical perspective on anxiety management training. *American Psychologist*, 50(4), 287-292.

Tyler, R. W. (1949). *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Yin, R. K. (1984). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

DIALECTIC DIALOGUE FOR ACADEMIC ANXIETIES IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

Cara L. Garcia, Ph.D.

Professor of Education, Pepperdine University

Ph.D., University of Arizona; M.A., California State University, Los Angeles; B.S., Central Michigan University

Dr. Garcia came to Pepperdine University from the Los Angeles Unified School District where she was a teacher and teacher-advisor. She teaches methods courses, chairs dissertations, and supervises educational therapy services offered through the clinic. Her research interests focus on academic anxiety, specifically reading and writing blocks, test anxiety, stage fright, and math anxiety. She is the author of *Too Scared to Learn: Overcoming Academic Anxiety*, published by Corwin Press.

Contact: cara.garcia@pepperdine.edu

RESPOND TO THE AUTHOR BY E-MAIL.

TO RESPOND OR DISCUSS THE ARTICLE ON THE FORUMS OF THE GESTALT THERAPY NETWORK GO TO:

[The Neighborhood Forums](#)

The Forum for Professionals and non-Professionals — Open to ALL persons interested in Gestalt theory and practice.

[The Gestalt Practitioners Forums](#)

The Forum for Gestalt practitioners and trainees in ongoing Gestalt therapy training programs.