

Road to Completion: An LIS Graduate Student's Reflections on Research Writing

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Abstract

The article is a self-reflection of the author on his thesis journey. The author wrote about his lived experiences within the context of his enrolment in UP SLIS as an MLIS student who chose the Thesis track option. The purpose of this article was to document his positionality and show how it shaped his perspective on his research topic. The author notes four points of positionality that influenced his perspectives. First, the author noted that he is bound by the structures of UP School of Library and Information Science in the research classes and its programs' Thesis writing requirement. Second, the author acknowledged that he had experienced a unique approach in his research methods class that may not be the same as what other classes have done. Third, the author has experience with having a "thesis buddy." The thesis buddy was a classmate going through the same rigors, and they helped each other in their respective theses. In addition, the author also hoped to shed light on what LIS graduate students go through in writing their theses. The author highlighted two challenges: isolation and time and energy management. The author found that the Master's thesis was designed as an individual endeavor that led to a feeling of isolation among LIS graduate students. The author also found that while time management is indeed one of the main challenges in thesis writing, energy management had more weight in limiting the progress of writing research.

Keywords: research methods, LIS graduate students, thesis writing

INTRODUCTION

Research is a staple exercise in higher education. Most undergraduate and graduate degree programs have a thesis as a final requirement (Commission on Higher Education, 2012). Master's degree programs expect graduate student applicants to have advanced research skills and a general direction to a research topic they will have to pursue to finish the program. Unlike undergraduate programs, whose main objective is to train the student for the profession, graduate programs shift the focus from mastering skills and knowledge of the trade to teaching the student to contribute to the knowledge of the profession, implying a difference in objectives, engagement, and practice in doing research. Graduate students are encouraged to take courses,

electives, and cognates related to their research interests. By the end of the graduate program, the student conducts a final research requirement in the form of a master's thesis or special problem.

Graduate programs in Library and Information Science (LIS) are the same. One of the salient features of CHED CMO 24, s2015 (Commission on Higher Education, 2015) prescribes LIS undergraduate and graduate curricula to include research as a final requirement in relation to the expected competency of LIS graduates in conducting a significant research project that will benefit the library and the organization.

The article presents my reflections on my experiences and challenges as an LIS graduate student in writing and completing my thesis. The article primarily aims to

present my context and positionality towards my thesis writing in-depth. This is important as I am an LIS graduate student where my thesis is on determining the research culture of LIS graduates. I am investigating my fellow LIS graduate students who are going through or have gone through the same thing—conducting a thesis. This article hopes to shed light on what we, LIS graduates, go through in finishing our respective master's theses/capstone projects as a final requirement in our respective LIS graduate programs. While I present my personal experience and perspective, the concerns and experiences herein may be observed and experienced by other LIS graduate students. LIS faculty who handle the thesis writing classes may use the information presented in this article as points for discussion in improving the research classes and the fulfillment rate of graduate theses in their LIS programs.

SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection refers to an after-the-fact contemplation on meaningful events and one's reactions towards them with the intention of better dealing with future encounters. It is also defined as "having an ongoing conversation with your whole self about what you are experiencing as you are experiencing it" (Nagata, 2004, p. 140-141). While not at the forefront of disciplines, many self-reflective studies exist. Xu (2018) explored cross-cultural adaptation as self-formation through a self-reflective approach. She analyzed her personal experiences when navigating her overseas study trajectory as an international Ph.D. student. Her study provided empirical support to the notion of self-formation. On the other hand, Saban (2000) wrote his reflections on his experiences conducting his dissertation research to provide an example of using self-reflection and writing processes as two important means of personal and professional growth. In my case, the self-reflection was used to document my positionality.

Positionality is understood as position and positioning of the researcher in both the academic and social fields which pervade their production of knowledge (Marguin et.al., 2021). Positionality is the author's stance, perspective, and context in his/her research. It reflects on the author's background as against the subjects of his/her research. It acknowledges that no research is entirely objective or neutral. If positionality is the acknowledgment of the author's context or "position" in the research process, self-reflection is the acknowledgment of the author of his/her positionality while acknowledging the perspective/positionality of the respondent. If positionality shows where the author is coming from in assigning meaning to the data they

gather, self-reflection shows the sensitivity and sincerity of the author. It communicates to the audience how the author saw the process and findings of their research while acknowledging that their perspective may not be the same as other perspectives. Self-reflection and positionality are essential aspects of qualitative studies.

RESEARCH WRITING EXPERIENCE

Literature on research writing and research classes abound and most discussed time as a challenge in research writing. Baylen and Buenrostro-Cabbab (2023) described the typical background of LIS graduate students. One of their reflections is that most students work full-time while pursuing their master's degrees. This naturally leads to difficulties in time management. Lindsay (2015) found that difficulty in balancing studies around family and work commitments was one of the hindering factors in thesis writing. Austria and Cabonero (2020) found that the top challenge encountered by academic librarians in research writing was time and stress management, and financial problem (both 83.30%). Another study by Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) also found that their participants found time to be a challenge in completing their theses. They also stated that it undermined the quality of their writing. Apolinario, (2014) surveyed Filipino librarians on their research involvement and found that among their challenges include: no time to regularly read research articles and perceived lack of expertise in conducting research among others. D' Couto and Rosenhan (2015) found that time management was such a challenge that it became a strong influence in how students approached research activities and efficiency was a primary requirement for research resources. Valentine's (1993) had similar findings, her study found that undergraduate library students reported using methods perceived to be as quick as possible and that the reason for this is due to lack of time due to pressing schedules or to the last-minute nature of their efforts.

I concur with the findings of previous researches cited earlier. Juggling research writing with other important responsibilities is a top challenge. In my case, I am working full-time as a librarian and involved with church ministry. I also place family responsibilities as my top priority. In addition, I changed jobs from a school librarian to an academic librarian when the thesis was being completed. I had to adjust to new work while conducting data gathering for my thesis, and managing other circumstances in my family. I agree that time management was a huge part of my thesis's progress. While there are numerous other challenges in thesis writing, time management is a top hindering factor. The next section shed light on the circumstances of my research journey.

THE CONTEXT

Personal Context

At the time of writing, I was a part-time graduate student enrolled in the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) at the UP School of Library and Information Studies (UPSLIS). I was admitted in the MLIS program in 2021 under a remote learning set-up. At that time, I was a school librarian for a Christian private K-12 school in Pasig City. One of my duties included being heavily involved in the senior high school research classes. I was part of the topic defense and final defense panels, where I evaluated research instruments, and mentored students in conducting senior high school-level research. I chose to take the Thesis option for the MLIS program early on because of my personal interest and experience in qualitative theoretical research. This was rooted in my good experience in doing my undergraduate thesis. I also developed a personal interest in meta-research and research culture which stemmed from my experience mentoring senior high school students in their introductory research classes as a senior high school librarian. I observed distinct behaviors and the interplay of different factors in students doing research. This led to the question of what would happen if, instead of senior high school students, who are first-time researchers, I studied about LIS research graduate students—who should already have plenty of research experience. This became my research topic for my Master's thesis: Research culture of LIS graduates and its implications on research pedagogies.

Before the Master's thesis, I had little experience writing research which included writing my undergraduate thesis and a related paper that was accepted at a conference. To improve on my experience, I enlisted in the following courses: Seminar in Education in Librarianship, the Seminar on Information Literacy, the Seminar on Philippine Librarianship, and Educational Sociology as part of my graduate program. These courses all had individual research as a final requirement for which I studied senior high school students' research behavior and research outputs from my school library work.

Structural Context

The UPSLIS was formerly known as the Institute of Library Science (ILS) and the Institute of Library and Information Science (ILIS). It has been recognized in the Philippines as the premier higher education institution providing education and training for future and existing library and information professionals (UP SLIS, n.d.).

The MLIS is a 36-unit graduate-level program that includes a 36-unit program thesis option or a 37-unit program special problem option (Baylen & Buenrostro-Cabbab, 2023). During the application process for the program, prospective students are already asked about the final research they plan to conduct for the degree. I proposed to build upon my undergraduate thesis on Christian librarianship and look in-depth into its practice and implications. While the proposed topic was sufficient to be accepted in the program, I did not push through with it because I was not able to find a clear direction to refine what I would like to study about Christian librarians. Upon our acceptance in the graduate program, we were advised on the tracks that most suit our intended final research. We were also advised to take LIS electives and cognates that will be useful in our final research. The thesis option and the special problem options are differentiated in terms of the following: the special problem course is taken in one semester, whereas the thesis course is taken within two semesters where the first instance is the thesis proposal and the second instance is the thesis defense. The special problem option requires 21 units of electives while the thesis option requires 18 units of electives. This curricular difference adds to the importance of choosing the intended final requirement later on.

It is important to note that the final research/capstone project presented in the application process is not set in stone. Students are free to explore other topics based on their interests and contexts during their time in the degree program. However, it is ideal to already have a well-defined choice at the start of the program so that the courses taken by the students are suited to equip them to develop their final research. Most graduate courses at UP integrate research in the form of academic papers as a final requirement. Ideally, the papers passed in the different courses build up to the final research. As for my case, I proposed to study about Christian librarians and their practices in my application. I was not able to find a clear and decisive direction on what I would like to study about the presence of Christian faith in LIS practice. This became apparent when I had to write research papers for the courses I was enrolled in. But during my enrollment in Seminar on Philippine librarianship, we were asked to conduct research as a final requirement. I was also taking the Seminar on Information Literacy and Seminar on Education in Librarianship which also required us to conduct research. I decided to conduct research that could satisfy the three courses I was taking. I came up with a study about my research support program at work it has an education, information literacy, and Philippine librarianship elements. I passed a paper on the

evaluation of the research support program for the Seminar on Philippine librarianship. I passed a paper on the outcome of the research support program through analyzing my students' research outputs for the Seminar on Education in Librarianship. And I passed a paper on the information literacy practices of my students for the Seminar on Information Literacy. The three-pronged study developed my interest in research practices that led to my thesis topic.

After finishing the core subjects, LIS electives, and cognates, the program culminates with the final research courses. Students first take the Research Methods course, where foundational concepts, frameworks, models, and research methods on LIS research are discussed. At this point, students must officially choose between two options based on their interests and perceived capabilities in conducting either the Thesis or the Special problem. The students are formally required to prepare their proposals for their final research. Upon passing the Research Methods course, the students may enroll in either the Thesis course or the Special Problem course, depending on the nature of their final requirement. The Special Problem track is intended for applied research, while the Thesis track is for more theoretical problems.

The Thesis is taken for two semesters. The first instance is 3 units and is dedicated for the conceptualization, presentation, and approval of the research proposal. Ideally, within the semester, the student prepares a topic proposal that consists of the background of the study, review of related literature, and methodology. The students are assigned a pre-adviser based primarily on the faculty member's expertise and availability. The pre-adviser and student then coordinate to refine the research proposal. At the end of the semester, the topic proposal is presented in front of a panel that evaluates the value and feasibility of the proposed research. Once the panel approves of the topic, the student may proceed to the second instance of the thesis. There are instances when the presented proposal is not approved by the panel for which the student is given another chance to revise their proposal and present this to a panel once more.

In the second instance of the Thesis, the student formally conducts data collection, data analysis, writing the findings, and draw conclusions. The student writes the complete manuscript that generally consists of the background of the study, review of related literature, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion. The adviser reviews the manuscript for revisions and recommendations. Once the adviser deems the manuscript sufficient, the adviser endorses it to the

reader, another faculty member. The reader also reviews the manuscript for revisions and recommendations. Once the adviser and the reader approve the manuscript, the adviser endorses the student to the faculty handling the Thesis course, usually the Dean of UPLIS. The Dean then schedules the final defense for the research. The student presents and defends his/her research findings to a panel that decides if the research meets the program's requirements. Once approved, the student finalizes the manuscript, addressing revisions and recommendations of the panel, and prepares it for binding and ultimately to the completion of the Thesis course and the program.

I only discussed the parameters of thesis writing as this was the option I have taken. I have discussed the special problem option only in general terms which is a limitation of this article.

THE JOURNEY (SO FAR)

Conception of the thesis topic

While my thesis journey officially began in the Research Methods course which I have taken during the second semester of academic year 2022-2023, the starting point happened earlier. I primarily enrolled in research-oriented LIS electives and cognates. The courses all required doing research as a final course requirement. While bound by the content of each course's curriculum, all instructors encouraged us to conduct research that would eventually be used for our final theses. The conception of my thesis topic was a variation of the studies I conducted for the Seminar in Education in Librarianship, the Seminar on Information Literacy, the Seminar on Philippine Librarianship, and Educational Sociology. These "smaller" studies helped conceptualize my thesis topic, and most of the literature read for them was also used in my master's thesis.

My thesis topic was on the prevailing research culture among LIS graduate students. I wanted to probe into the perceptions and lived experiences of LIS graduate students in doing research. When I took the abovementioned courses, I was working as a school librarian for a private K12 Christian school in Pasig City. One of my roles was to support the senior high school research classes. I worked with the research class teacher as a research adviser, as a guest lecturer in information literacy and literature review, as an evaluator of research instruments, and as a panelist in the topic defense and final presentation. In years of fulfilling this role, I observed trends in the behavior and outputs of the senior high school students in their

research. When the abovementioned courses required individual research as part of their respective requirements, I formally studied these observations in the classes. In doing so, I wondered what would happen if I studied a different population for my thesis–LIS graduate students.

THE RESEARCH CLASSES

The Research Methods course aimed to re-introduce the frameworks, models, and research methods in library and information science. The course was held online. Our class met only a few times in the semester. The instructor held lectures for each thesis chapter and then gave two-week reading/writing breaks. He required us to pass the corresponding chapter before the next session. He allotted time during sessions to critique the student submissions. He encouraged us to touch base with other LIS faculty members who will eventually be our advisers. He also encouraged the class to message him for advice during the reading breaks. The final requirement of the course was a full thesis proposal. I recalled the instructor mentioning that this approach differs from previous course iterations. I do not know how the course was handled before. Personally, I was satisfied with how the course was handled. We were given free rein in doing their respective thesis proposals. Our instructor gave ample support and was available for correspondence during the semester.

How the Research Methods course was handled greatly affected the first part of the Thesis course. Apparently, the final output of the first half of the Thesis course was the thesis proposal, which was already done in our Research Methods course. With the proposal mostly done, I had a smooth and light semester. The lighter load was greatly appreciated considering my other responsibilities. However, the downside is that I did not think much about my thesis for the one-semester period. I had to re-read and re-familiarize myself with the literature and my proposed draft when the proposal defense came near. Thankfully, the topic was approved without issue.

I proceeded to the final half of the thesis. My study sought LIS graduate students with experience doing their final theses regardless of progress. I had just finished collecting data and was in the process of analyzing the data.

THE CHALLENGES

Throughout the Research Methods class, I thought that the research class structures were designed for individual

research. This makes sense as the master's thesis was done individually. Each student has different contexts and research topics. Students have no business with their classmates' research. This led to a feeling of isolation among the students, further aggravated by the online modality adopted at that time. This is one of the challenges that I wanted to highlight. Even as students are doing individual research, some do not want to be alone in facing the rigors of research. There is comfort in the presence of other people going through the same thing.

I took note of this in my experience with a “thesis buddy.” One of my classmates initiated contact with me and suggested being thesis buddies. My thesis buddy shared that she does not have much experience in doing research and asked for my help. Being thesis buddies meant that even with different research problems, we would go through the process together. We asked each other questions, became accountable to each other's progress, encouraged each other, critiqued each other's submissions, and conducted mock defenses. The mutual help was constructive and eventually helped approve both our proposals. It also gave us a sense of camaraderie, having someone going through the same rigors and pressures. Our setup addressed the feeling of isolation from the course setup. The setup carried on to the succeeding thesis courses. I realized that even as an individual endeavor, thesis writing still has a social aspect.

Another challenge I want to highlight is juggling full-time work, volunteering in church ministry, and other responsibilities while finishing my thesis. A lot of things needed my urgent attention at the time. I observed that this was a common issue in my thesis respondents as well as the literature (Austria & Cabonero, 2020; Baylen & Buenrostro-Cabbab, 2023; D' Couto & Rosenhan, 2015; Dunne, 2016; Valentine, 1993). This challenge is something that most students have to live with. Not everyone is privileged to be a full-time student who can focus most of their time, energy, and resources on their studies. Most students have full-time work and other responsibilities.

While I also found limits in my available time, I observed that energy is the more limiting factor. There were many days when I went home early after work and had plenty of time but found no more energy left to do some critical thinking. I realized that there is a “mental stamina” that is spent during the day at work. Even if I tried to tough it out, there were many times when my head already felt heavy, and I could not think coherently. This means that the challenge of time management is

not just a factor of how much time or when to allot the time to do one's thesis but also to consider one's mental state at the given time. One must ask, "Do I have the mental capacity to do my thesis at this certain time? How taxing is the work for today, and how will it affect my capacity to do my thesis after?" I had to schedule the tasks I planned for the day more carefully. I had to be careful not to be physically or mentally fatigued when I scheduled to do my thesis after work. I noticed that I worked best when thesis work was one of the first things I did in the morning, having a fresh mind. This is a luxury, as there are a lot of days as employees that we do not get to choose the tasks we need to accomplish for the day. I was only able to do this reliably on my days off. On work days, I had to find time to rest before doing my thesis or doing less. I had to learn to acknowledge that my progress does not necessarily need to be the same every day.

DISCUSSION

In exploring the research culture of LIS graduate students, I was shaped by my perceived unique experience in my research journey. First, I acknowledge that the structures of UP SLIS have shaped my thesis journey. The classes and the surrounding processes of conducting my thesis may be different in other LIS schools. I also acknowledge that I only experienced the Thesis option of our program and, thus, have no experience in the Special Problem option.

Second, the Research Methods class I experienced was different from previous batches. I expected the class to be mostly the same as my undergraduate research methods class. My undergraduate research methods class had lectures and activities every week about the different parts of the research process. We also learned about different research paradigms and research methods so we know what options we have for our respective research topics. From what I know this was how the graduate Research Methods class was handled as well. But our class instructor tried a new approach in our batch. He tried to streamline the course to meet the requirements of the Thesis class. He required the class to draft a thesis proposal already, which is also the requirement for the first half of the Thesis class. I found merit in this new approach as it streamlined the thesis writing process.

The instructor discussed a specific part of the thesis, and then we immediately wrote it for our intended thesis topics. Instead of recalling what was discussed the previous semester (Research Methods class), we had the opportunity to apply what we learned in our thesis proposals immediately. I acknowledge that this is different from other batches within UP SLIS.

Third, having experienced having a thesis buddy, I place great value on the social aspect of thesis writing. I realized that it is a big part of the research journey. Research is not just an academic exercise but it is also a social endeavor. Human relationships involved in conducting research is part of the research experience.

This seems evident in collaborative research as well as discussions about the stakeholders of a research project. Even if a researcher is the sole author of a study, there are often other people who contributed to the completion of the study. These include the co-researchers, advisers, panelists, mentors, respondents, and other stakeholders directly involved with the research topic. However, there are other people who may not be directly involved with the research but are still a great help in doing the research process. People involved in support and accountability include family and friends. These are the people who are often put on the acknowledgment page of the thesis manuscript. This led to the inclusion of asking my respondents about the people involved in their respective research.

Fourth, I took note of difficulties in time and energy management. I firmly believe that many researchers experience this. Several articles have included time as a difficulty in research writing (Apolinario et al., 2014; Lindsay, 2015; Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020). Most LIS graduate students have full-time jobs at the least. Thesis writing is a time-consuming process. However, I observed that energy has more weight as a challenge. There are many days when I had plenty of time after going home from work but could not write effectively because of physical and/or mental fatigue after what transpired during the day. While this has been discussed alongside time management (Lindsay, 2015; Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020), I observed less inclusion of this challenge in the literature I reviewed. This may be due to the mindset of "just powering through it" or that it's something that everybody has to live with. However, I think there is much to explore in discussing energy management as a significant challenge in thesis writing.

CONCLUSION

I acknowledge that these reflections have shaped my perspectives in exploring the research culture among my fellow LIS graduate students. I took note that it is evident in the questions I posed during the interviews with my respondents. I carefully asked my respondents from LIS schools other than UP how their research classes and theses were conducted. I asked about who were involved (directly and indirectly) in the respondents' respective research. This shows how a researcher should reflect upon his/her positionality and how it could possibly affect

his/her research. Researchers should continuously reflect on their context and acknowledge that their experience, perspectives, and expectations might differ from what their respondents will answer. Acknowledging one's positionality shows due respect and sincerity to not misrepresent their respondents, especially in qualitative research. It keeps the researcher grounded, making his/her biases and tendencies to make hasty generalizations in check. Lastly, it communicates to the readers what biases may be in play that one, even with effort, could not fully diminish. Thus, acknowledging one's positionality also shows due respect to the readers of the researcher's work.

On the other hand, I highlighted two challenges I experienced in writing my thesis. First, thesis writing and other research activities have a social aspect. Some students who are doing their thesis as sole authors do not want to be alone. Being with people going through the same rigors of research develops a sense of camaraderie that can translate to mutual help. Students do not just know that their classmates are going through the same thing; they can actively build each other up. It is important for the research courses to provide opportunities for the class to interact with each other and go through their journeys together, such as critiquing each other's work and brainstorming. Second, time management is more than the management of one's schedule but of energy as well. As with any other human activity, writing a thesis requires energy. Thinking critically requires energy and a state of mind. Students must be self-aware of how they are and how they will be in the time they will set within a day to do their thesis.

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