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**The Qualitative Report**

Volume 17 | Number 30

Article 1

7-23-2012

# From “Bitch” to “Mentor”: A Doctoral Student’s Story of Self-Change and Mentoring

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## Recommended APA Citation

Gearity, B. T., & Mertz, N. (2012). From “Bitch” to “Mentor”: A Doctoral Student’s Story of Self-Change and Mentoring. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(30), 1-27. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss30/1>

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# From “Bitch” to “Mentor”: A Doctoral Student’s Story of Self-Change and Mentoring

## Abstract

For several reasons, the process of writing and completing the doctoral dissertation has been identified as the most frequent road block for many promising scholars. The goal of this study is to help improve doctoral student dissertation completion by focusing on the crucial, central concerns of effective student writing, faculty mentoring, and the student-advisor relationship. Using an experimental, evocative autoethnographic approach, the following study shows the struggles and successes of a doctoral student managing himself, the university, “life”, and most importantly, his doctoral dissertation chair. The findings weave together strategies from storytelling (e.g., plot, characters, and scene) with the personal experiences of a doctoral student and advisor to show a highly contextual narrative and the influence of multiple factors. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the value of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as an approach to help students learn to write. Lastly, as a pedagogical tool, the narrative itself may be of practical value to graduate students, dissertation chairs, and policymakers for the purpose of improving graduate student success.

## Keywords

Autoethnography, Experimental, Doctoral Student, Dissertation, Narrative, Committee, Mentor, Identity, Learning, Relationship

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## From “Bitch” to “Mentor”: A Doctoral Student’s Story of Self-Change and Mentoring

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*For several reasons, the process of writing and completing the doctoral dissertation has been identified as the most frequent road block for many promising scholars. The goal of this study is to help improve doctoral student dissertation completion by focusing on the crucial, central concerns of effective student writing, faculty mentoring, and the student-advisor relationship. Using an experimental, evocative autoethnographic approach, the following study shows the struggles and successes of a doctoral student managing himself, the university, “life”, and most importantly, his doctoral dissertation chair. The findings weave together strategies from storytelling (e.g., plot, characters, and scene) with the personal experiences of a doctoral student and advisor to show a highly contextual narrative and the influence of multiple factors. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the value of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as an approach to help students learn to write. Lastly, as a pedagogical tool, the narrative itself may be of practical value to graduate students, dissertation chairs, and policymakers for the purpose of improving graduate student success. Keywords: Autoethnography, Experimental, Doctoral Student, Dissertation, Narrative, Committee, Mentor, Identity, Learning, Relationship*

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For about the last 40 years the attrition rates of doctoral programs in America have been estimated to be between 40-50% (Lovitts, 2001). These rates differ among disciplines, departments, and universities (Golde, 2005; Janson, Howard, & Schoenberger-Organ, 2004; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). While the body of evidence on undergraduate persistence and attrition is modest and guided by some theoretical frameworks (see Tinto, 1993), doctoral education has been described as largely overlooked (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000), poorly understood (Golde, 2005), and utterly lacking in theoretical frameworks (Liechty, Schull, & Liao, 2009). Golde (2005) provides three reasons why it is important to understand doctoral student attrition: (a) we currently cannot explain the low doctoral graduation rates, (b) high attrition may be a signal of departmental, university or societal problems, and (c) the significant economic and human capital costs of high attrition rates.

Researchers who have studied doctoral student persistence and attrition have tended to look at personal characteristics of doctoral students (e.g, intelligence, learning styles, motivation), the environment (e.g., faculty, department, university), or the interaction between the two (e.g, academic and social integration, relatedness, faculty-

student relationship; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Emerging from this line of inquiry have been the challenges posed by the faculty-student or dissertation chair-student relationship and the dissertation process itself (Tierney & Hallett, 2010). The dissertation may be considered a “major challenge” (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000) in the progression towards degree completion. Moreover, the style of writing required for a dissertation can cause even bright, emerging scholars significant delays and problems (Liechty et al., 2009). In order to identify global policies and solutions to the issues of high attrition, problematic interpersonal relationships, and satisfactory writing, researchers could use interpretive approaches that study local contexts with penetrating depth (Pascale, 2011) and vivid, concrete experiences.

Although a few research studies (Grant & Simmons, 2008; Heinrich, 2000; Tierney & Hallett, 2010) have presented “narratives” of the experiences of students or mentors during the doctoral/dissertation process, overwhelmingly the research on doctoral student persistence has been guided by traditional research methods that follow the typical scientific, passive (Ellis, 2004), and realist (VanManen, 1988) style of writing. Even these narrative approaches have relied more on analyzing and subsequently telling a story, rather than showing a story by emphasizing emotion (Ellis, 2004), multiple interpretations, and dialogue in order to create a “messy text” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Resources exist to support faculty and doctoral students through the challenges of doctoral education and the dissertation, such as: advising guides by experienced dissertation chairs (Gordon, 2000) or a group of faculty within a specific department (e.g., social work) (Liechty et al., 2009), and articles from doctoral students about their experiences of doing doctoral education (Janson et al., 2004), and the dissertation (Riebschleger, 2001). Yet, we still lack a candid, thick, and rich description of what is happening from the perspective of both graduate student and committee chair during the dissertation process. While researchers have noted that the dissertation process can be non-linear and messy work (Gordon, 2000), the entire body of literature has failed to capture and describe this significant slice of reality.

What are the doctoral student and the committee chair thinking, feeling and doing during the dissertation process? What are those possible barriers or facilitators to persistence? This study proposes to address this gap in the literature by examining the case of one doctoral student and his committee chair by explicitly showing a story of the dissertation process (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). At a time when more are calling for a better understanding of what works in graduate student education, and in particular the dissertation process, this study provides insight into these concerns. First, this story, written from the perspective of the doctoral student, is the first to *show* what it was like for a doctoral student and a dissertation chair to work together. Rather than telling a one-sided story, this study provides a layered (Ellis, 2004) and multivocal (Tierney & Hallett, 2010) narrative that could be of great instructional value by more accurately reflecting the interpersonal and complex social nature of the dissertation process. Storytelling has been recognized as a way of “breathing” the complexities of social actors and acts into research (Smith & Sparkes, 2009) for the benefit of increasing empathy and diverse understandings (Smith, Collinson, Phoenix, Brown, & Sparkes, 2009). In what easily could have been a study of “failure” in the dissertation process, this study interestingly shows how a doctoral student persisted to graduation, developed a close mentor-mentee relationship with his advisor, and came to the conclusion that he desired to become, and

was capable of being, a professor. Second, while the dissertation has been identified as a significant challenge in doctoral education, this study extends previous research by showing the interaction between doctoral student, chair, and committee members. By specifically focusing on the dissertation process, and given that both doctoral student and chair were so honest and willing to co-construct and share this story, pedagogical recommendations may be meaningful.

### Situating Ourselves

The idea for this study was borne out of the doctoral student's (Brian) lived experience of the dissertation process. After about one year of (re)writing the dissertation, at one of our regular meetings Brian proposed to Norma (dissertation chair and doctoral advisor) to co-author a story of their experiences working together. At the time, a straight-faced and a bit exasperated Norma replied, "Finish the dissertation first." Upon defending his dissertation, Brian immediately took up the idea of this narrative by reviewing the literature and writing a full draft of the manuscript. Unsure of Brian's intentions for this research study, Norma completed the tasks requested by Brian and through multiple email, phone, and in-person conversations, helped to shape the overall focus and goals of this study. While Brian's original idea was to have his and Norma's voices equally presented around the plot, Brian's voice became dominant. Brian's narrative resonated with Norma—it had verisimilitude—yet it differed in some ways from the story she would have told. Together, we made the decision that the purpose of this autoethnography would be Brian's (auto) narrative (graphy) of the relationship with Norma and other important phenomena (ethno). A fuller construction of Norma's story would have to wait.

While the next section describes the methods and procedures used, our purpose for sharing our story is consistent with Ellis and Bochner's (2000) goals of autoethnography to, "encourage compassion and promote dialogue...if we understood our whole endeavor as a search for a better conversation in the face of all the barriers and boundaries that make conversation difficult" (p. 748). Indeed, we can think of no more appropriate and needed place for these conversations than between a doctoral student and his/her chair and higher education in general. In what easily could have been a study of "failure" in the dissertation process, this study interestingly shows how a doctoral student persisted to graduation, developed a close mentor-mentee relationship with his advisor, and came to the conclusion that he desired to become, and was capable of being, a professor. The use of story (Ellis & Bochner, 2006) is particularly appropriate to show these rich complexities while purposefully avoiding theoretical abstraction, reductionism, and other analytic autoethnographic tendencies (Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, this study extends previous research by *showing* the interaction between doctoral student, chair, and committee members. Thus, including this narrative in the education and training of both doctoral students and dissertation advisors is likely to be of pedagogical value (Merriam, 1998).

## Methodology

### Qualitative Research & Autoethnography

In general, qualitative research is a broad term for diverse and multiple interpretive, naturalistic approaches to human understanding and knowledge generation of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). One of those approaches, autoethnography, is a written (graphy) research study guided by an investigation of the self (auto) in relation to culture (ethno) (Ellis, 2004). In spite of having roots in other, more traditional forms of social science inquiry (e.g., biography, personal narratives) (Chang, 2008), autoethnography has emerged as the agreed upon label given to a genre of inquiry that privileges a deep understanding of self, culture, and the interaction between the two (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004). Furthermore, this study situates itself as an evocative autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2006), which means the findings are presented as an impressionist tale (Van Manen, 1988); one that attempts to use “moving writing” (Denison & Markula, 2003) through the use of a, “text(s) that grip(s) readers and invite them to engage in the subject matter” (Denison & Markula, 2003, p. 6). Autoethnography is uniquely appropriate for showing emotion *and* reason in a story that weaves together complex topics such as individuals, environment, relationships, learning, mentoring, and identity. This study was approved by the first author’s Institutional Review Board. With the exception of Brian, Brian’s spouse Cayla, and Norma, the remaining characters were given pseudonyms and the authors strongly considered their portrayal while being authentic to our purpose and interpretation.

### Data Collection

In order to provide a “layered” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) story, data were collected from multiple sources. In May 2009, I<sup>1</sup> wrote a self-reflective narrative on “doing” my dissertation. Written immediately after I had successfully defended my dissertation, this 30 page narrative was my “lived experience” of the dissertation process which included: choosing the doctoral chair, competency exams, the dissertation prospectus and defense, working with my chair and committee, and the dissertation defense. Data were also collected from emails sent or received by me, Norma Mertz (doctoral committee chair), and the three other committee members, which totaled approximately 55 pages once converted into Microsoft Word. While writing my dissertation I saved a folder of earlier drafts (approximately 65 of varying lengths) on my laptop, which included feedback from Norma, other doctoral committee members, and two editors I used during the process. I also kept hardcopies of drafts with extensive written feedback from all of my committee members. When I first started writing my lived experience I wrote as much as I could remember and then I used these other data to recall events accurately and richly.

Employing the technique of “unmediated co-constructed narrative” (Ellis, 2000), in the spring of 2010, I asked Norma to write her own lived experience of being the chair of my doctoral committee and working with me. I also created a chronological timeline of dissertation events and milestones. Next, Norma and I exchanged first drafts of our

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the pronoun “I” refers to the graduate student in the narrative and the first author, Brian Gearity.

own lived experience narratives for three purposes. First, each of us used each other's narrative to fill in the gaps and add to our own narratives of the experience. Each of us only slightly amended our narratives as we both felt that we had already covered all of the meaningful or symbolic actions that occurred. This is fitting within the methodological approach of autoethnography which is grounded in phenomenology (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969).

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed by Brian in order to develop an evocative story (Ellis, 2004). Brian's struggles with university and work life, emotional and academic support, and identity management were secondary plot lines to the major issue of his relationship with Norma and learning how to write. Scenes, characters, and dialogue were written around the plot, respectively. To borrow from Chang (2008), Brian's "custom-tailored" analysis involved identifying personally meaningful experiences (i.e., learning to write, mentoring), connecting present with the past (i.e., flashback), analyzing relationships between self and others (i.e., student-advisor), frame with theories (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and epiphanies (Denzin, 2001).

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To enhance the rigor of this study, several steps were taken. As detailed earlier, Brian collected emails, rough drafts, written feedback, and immediately after his defense, he wrote a timeline and a journal of the dissertation experience. This step enhanced his memory and the story by providing authentic details, events, and nuances (Ellis, 2004). Norma's narrative of her experience and subsequent interviews helped to provide further authenticity, focus, and description to the story.

In order to provide transparency (AERA, 2006), an "audit trail" of when and how the data were collected, analyzed, and represented is presented in this section. These steps help to ensure that the research topic, chain of evidence and subsequent findings are explicitly known. As an evocative autoethnography, validity, in the sense of one right interpretation, is abandoned in favor of other ethnographic criteria such as the five standards (e.g., substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality) of CAP (Richardson, 2000). As we have done our best to tell a good and meaningful story, if our findings provide guidance on effective writing practices and student-faculty relationships that resonate with readers, then we indeed achieved a fruitful study.

### **Presentation of Findings**

"There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story" (Ellis, 2004, p. 194). The results of data analysis led to the construction of a good story; one emphasizing reason *and* emotion (Ellis, 2004), thick, rich description (Geertz, 1973), and naturalistic (Stake, 1995) or reader (Merriam, 1998) generalizability. The findings, or story, are mainly presented chronologically and show the relationship of the main characters Brian, the doctoral student, and Dr. Norma Mertz, his dissertation advisor, as they worked on

Brian's dissertation. Reference to situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is provided in the narrative to explain how Brian was mentored by Norma and how he best learned how to write. Excessive referencing and theoretical abstraction is intentionally withheld to emphasize the pull the reader into the story and so the reader may also develop their own (multiple) interpretations (Ellis). In summary, the need for this study has been established by the gap in the literature on showing what the dissertation experience is like and the theoretical justification of narrative analysis (Ellis). Finally, no discussion of the findings is given *after* the story as the contribution is the story itself, not, to borrow from Ellis and Bochner (2006)—its autopsy.

## Findings

*March, 2007*

What a bitch! Who says that to one of your doctoral advisees?  
 “Brian, if you would be more comfortable with a different chair you are free to do so.”

Why is she telling me that? What good can come out of saying that? I don't have any other options...viable options at least. It's not like I had much choice in picking her to be my dissertation chair.

“I have provided you with an abundance of feedback related to your dissertation prospectus. To be frank, it needs a lot of work. If you would be more comfortable with a different chair you may want to look into that.”

There it is again! I wish she would stop saying that. That's the third time. I can't do anything but just sit here and listen to her beat me up; beat up my writing and then tell me I should take a hike in some quasi-polite way. Silence as resistance...this evil woman, Dr. Mertz, must not be having a good day; there must be something wrong with her. *My writing is not that bad.*

“Here, you take this and look at my comments.”

Seated in Dr. Mertz's office, she hands me back my dissertation prospectus. Casually flipping through the pages I easily see pencil marks consume the margins. I've been in Dr. Mertz's office before for advising, but it has been some time since we last got together. Apparently after four years of being a doctoral student I have become completely incompetent. I don't need this shit.

Gripping the pages of my prospectus tightly, I leave Dr. Mertz's office more than upset—I'm boiling. She told me three times to change chairs. I can take some criticism, but my writing is not that bad. She has to know that I don't have any other options. I didn't expect this at all and I don't have time for it. I have an interview for a head coaching position in a few weeks and my wife and I are expecting our first child this July. I clench my teeth and think to myself, ‘Whatever, Dr. Mertz.’



Heading back to the athletic complex I flip through Dr. Mertz's hand-written comments. Who still writes in pencil anyway? 'Ch. 1—Lacks evidence of a need for the study,' 'Ch. 2-Equivocal.' What's that mean? 'Ch. 3-Lacks the attention to detail and specificity required.' I don't see a sentence she didn't cross out, re-write, or put a '?' near. What does she mean by 'So, what?' Why is everything 'unclear'? She says she cannot follow what I'm writing—that's her problem, not mine. Damn, maybe I *should* switch chairs!

I'm supposed to start coaching a group of baseball players now, but I can't seem to shake Dr. Mertz from my head. That night when I arrive home I wait for my wife, Cayla, to ask about my meeting today. Growing impatient, I quickly realize she is not going to ask. She must be consumed with her own schooling issues.

"So. I met with Dr. Mertz today," I lead off.

"Yeah, how'd that go?"

"She basically told me I cannot write and she said at least three times that I may want to change chairs," I say mocking Dr. Mertz.

"Oh my God, that's awful," she states with her back facing me while preparing dinner. After handing Cayla my proposal to see she replies,

"Wow," with little inflection.

"Alright. Thanks." I reply with obvious frustration trying to get out of the room. "Well, I'm going to look at this and start fixing it." I say storming off to the living room. I open up my laptop and read over Mertz's comments...yes, I can see that; I could have been clearer. But she didn't even read this part, I wrote what she said was missing on the next page. Here's another critique—but how do I fix that? There are so many problems that I'm not sure where to start. My chest feels heavy. I slouch my shoulders. I start revising...

A few weeks go by and I set up another meeting with Dr. Mertz. She is, of course, *so busy* writing her own book, and with other students, that she has to put me off for weeks. How is it I can rearrange my life for her, but she cannot find 20 minutes for me? I just fixed everything she wanted so it's not like I need a lot of her time. And besides, I have to get busy collecting data. Finally, we have a second meeting in her office in June...Dr. Mertz speaks slowly, meticulously, "Brian, to be honest, I didn't anticipate having to spend this much time on your proposal. Your writing still needs a lot of work."

What? Not again. How can that be? *I fixed everything!* Handing me back my proposal I discover the second edition, compared to the first, has *more* edits, *more* comments. She begins to take me through the paper page by page, interrogating me and my every word. I'm stunned, defensive, confused. I swallow what feels like a golf ball down my throat. My edits did not suffice...the meeting is quickly over, but before I go she says those same dreaded words, "If you would be more comfortable with another advisor than please feel free to go that route."

Of course! I should have seen that coming. I walk out in despair, disbelief...how did I get to this point? I'm done.

*Flashback: Spring 2003-Summer 2006*

I went to The University of Tennessee (UT) to be a strength and conditioning coach in men's athletics. I was swayed by some more experienced coaches to enroll in an "easier" program like sport management, but ventured outside sport management to satisfy the required ethics course. This course, EAPS 670 Values and Ethics in Educational Leadership, was when I met Dr. Mertz—a short, round woman who walks with a slight limp and has a New York accent. Surprisingly, she reminded me of a mix of my father, who is from New York, and my mother, a former school superintendent with a PhD in Education who was best described as "tough, but fair." Although Dr. Mertz served as my doctoral adviser, the Ethics course turned out to be the only one I took from her.

From 2004 to 2007, Dr. Mertz and I would meet occasionally, usually around advising time, when she would ask, "So. Now what are you going to take?" To which I would reply a series of statistics, qualitative research, or philosophy of education courses, and obviously, the occasionally required higher education course. Dr. Mertz even helped me to obtain a graduate assistant position with a new higher education faculty member in 2005. All the while, I was working full-time in athletics as a strength and conditioning coach. I even taught a couple of courses for the Exercise Science/Physical Education program. Sharing a pleasure for coffee, Dr. Mertz and I would meet at Panera Bread to discuss coursework and to tell wry jokes that only we transplanted Northerners could do so well living in the South. She talked about growing up not far from my father in New York City. I shared about my childhood in a mostly white, upper-middle class, Jewish suburb in Cleveland, Ohio. She was one of a few faculty members I really talked with of matters of substance and depth.

Yet, when I finished my coursework in the summer of 2006, until I emailed Dr. Mertz in the spring of 2007, I went for months without talking to any other faculty members or graduate students in our program. I had no cohort to collaborate with and I was caught between graduate students and faculty specializing in Higher Education or Sport Studies. I often wondered if I should have enrolled in a PhD in Sport Studies, but I was happy with my decision and the freedom to choose much of my coursework. However, I was put-off by the lack of *any* faculty member reaching out to me. In athletics it would be wholly unacceptable to not know the whereabouts of your athletes for one day let alone several months! I had come this far and wanted to finish the PhD, so in February of 2007 I emailed Dr. Mertz, "When you have a moment, I'd like some morning to meet about my dissertation. I'd like to switch my topics and pursue a more feasible study. I'd like to graduate. How bout that?"

She replied, "Hey, stranger. I am most pleased to hear from you and to read of your commitment to graduate. Would you like to meet Monday (Feb. 19) morning at 10 am?" Reading her email I thought, it was funny, ironic perhaps, she said, "Hey, stranger." If I'm such a stranger then why haven't you reached out to me? Did I slip through a crack or is it that you just don't give a shit if I write the dissertation? What does she mean "commitment"? For the last six years I've been attending graduate school while holding down a full-time job, and I thought I was excelling at both.

*Flash Forward: Summer, 2007*

I left Dr. Mertz's office mad and confused. She rejected me and my writing. That summer I may have worked on my dissertation proposal a bit, but in July my wife gave birth to our first child, a beautiful daughter named Lorelei. I sent out an email to numerous friends, family, and faculty members. Interestingly, the same faculty members that I had heard little from in the past year wrote back short, quaint replies, "Congratulations," "That's great," or "Very cute." It struck me as odd that none of them were like, "Hey, that's great. Now where the heck have you been?" Did anybody really care if I graduated? I had plenty of other things that needed my attention. I spent more time coaching, with my expanding family, and seemingly like everybody else at the time, I even dabbled in real estate on the side. I gave serious consideration to staying away from the university, permanently.

*Fall, 2007*

One day I got an odd phone call from one of the guys working in the compliance office for athletics. He had heard about my statistical skills and asked if I could help him.

"What's this data for?" I inquired.

"Oh, I'm ABD," replied the compliance officer.

"What's ABD?"

"All-but-dissertation," he replied.

I didn't like the sound of that; it sounded derogatory. I wanted to be Dr. Gearity. I really thought I could manage working on my dissertation while coaching full-time, dabbling in real estate, and caring for my wife and baby. I wanted to finish my dissertation for my daughter. I wanted to finish for the memory of my mother. My dad—consistently, annoyingly, lovingly—encouraged me to "finish the damn thing." Collegiate coaching is an unstable profession, here today gone tomorrow. I needed career options for myself and my family. In December, I got a rather curious email from Dr. Mertz:

While I often do not hear from you for long periods of time, I must admit I am becoming concerned. I realize you must be much taken up with attention to your child, and that is not a bad thing, but I also hope you are revising and moving ahead with your planned study. What's happening?

Well, well, well, she does remember me. We had exchanged a few pleasant emails over the summer regarding the expected child, birthing classes, and her sage advice on parenting and being a supportive spouse; I appreciated her advice. I hated to admit, but I had not been working on my proposal. I better do something about this now I thought to myself. Quickly, I sent out an email to Dr. Butler, a professor in sport studies who I never had for a course, but with whom I had some interaction. She always appeared to be thoughtful and helpful. At least she would be nicer, and perhaps easier, than Dr. Mertz.

Knowing I would have to reply to Dr. Mertz's email, I quickly set up a meeting with Dr. Butler. Unfortunately, I came to the disappointing conclusion that my chair had

to come from my home department, although Butler could serve as a committee member. I did, however, reply to Dr. Mertz:

...since last year I became disheartened and was basically “over” academia. Mixing my personality and intelligence with anger and apathy is not a good mix for finishing a dissertation. I'd much rather spend time with my new born daughter then writing my dissertation. With all that said, next semester I will be registering for dissertation hours. Thanks for checking in. I was beginning to think I was forgotten.

Dr. Mertz's reply seemed to come faster than usual:

I realized you were frustrated, and perhaps angry, and I thought I would give you some time to cool down and perhaps focus on some other aspects of your life. However, you can forget about my forgetting about you. It just won't happen. You have too much to offer. I am glad that you have a plan and that you have support from the athletic department. I realize you don't necessarily agree with my feedback, but hopefully, we can arrive at an agreement that allows you to move ahead. You have a good potential study and I would like to see you realize it. In the meantime, happy holiday.

Well, at least she understands what I'm feeling and said some nice things.

*Spring 2008*

My usual routine consists of coaching from 6:00a.m. until about 6:00p.m., hurry home to do my part in child-rearing by feeding, reading, and rocking the baby to sleep, and then, finally, I would work on my proposal. One night, as I finally began to make revisions to my prospectus, I pulled out my laptop and reached for the latest edition of my proposal sitting on top of the others in the corner of the dining room. Feedback adorned page after page. Dr. Mertz wanted me to fix so many things I wasn't sure where to begin. It looked good enough to me. That's why I sent it to her in the first place. She crossed out entire sections, circled words, asked what one thought had to do with the one preceding and following it, and put question marks next to paragraphs to indicate a total lack of clarity or relevance. The feedback was sometimes short and direct, “Much too abrupt” or long and questioning, “How do you get from a dictionary definition of coaching to roles, successful coaches, and how successful coaching is characterized?” If I were to believe her feedback, not much, if anything, was right. It appears she skipped over entire sections when she grew tired of my writing or perhaps she was so frustrated that it was just easier to give it back to me and tell me to fix it again. This was our cycle—revise and resubmit.

Since my master's thesis topic was related to my dissertation topic, I recycled some of that material in the review of literature. It worked before and I assumed it would suffice for Dr. Mertz. I attempted to address her concerns and usually in about a week, or two at the most, I emailed off an updated edition. It was good enough. In my emails, I

would intentionally prod her about setting up the comps defense. I wanted to proceed. Again, I waited several weeks for her to provide me with more hand-written feedback. One night I drove over to her house to pick-up her edits that she left for me in an envelope in her mailbox. I opened it immediately and I was, of course, surprised to see that she once again identified so many problems. Did she even know what she wanted? I sulked for a few days and on my own I attempted to make the necessary changes. I emailed her an updated proposal after a couple of weeks and asked again about a date for the comps defense. She caved. I knew it was good enough.

*April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Comps defense (the first one)*

It took weeks to schedule comps with my “rock star-like” lineup of committee members. I’m not sure what my expectations were for the “defense,” but I remember at my master’s thesis defense the three committee members and I sat around a table, they asked me questions, I responded, and after about an hour I had a master’s degree. My dad, who had an MBA, and long ago taught business courses in college, edited my proposal and I also received some words of support from a sport psychologist with a PhD who had read my proposal. I was ready. Upon entering the conference room I noticed a large round table and the four committee members all sitting on the same side, across from me. Then it began...

Dr. Mertz spoke first, calmly, “I’d like to thank-you all for coming to the doctoral comp defense of Brian Gearity.”

This whole situation seems surreal—a bit like court, and Dr. Mertz is presiding.

“We are here today to review and pass judgment on the responses Brian has provided for his comps. Upon successfully completing this stage, Brian will be able to move on with his dissertation proposal.” Dr. Mertz continued, “Let me start by opening up the discussion for any of the committee members to comment on Brian’s response.”

“I’ll start,” said Dr. Morgan, a bit too eager.

“Brian, I really don’t follow your methods sections at all. It’s really not clear. On one page you talk about a ‘bracketing interview’ and then on another page you talk about a written bracketing statement. You do not detail how you will collect or analyze the data. And your APA is a mess. This really needs a lot of work,” he concluded.

“And I have several questions regarding the focus of the study,” spoke up Dr. West. “You say you are going to study ‘poor coaching,’ but you provide no definition of poor coaching and you use terms like effective/ineffective, unsuccessful/successful, good/bad interchangeably. So, I really do not know what it is you are going to study.”

Dr. Mertz is looking at me square in the eyes. I'm trying to listen to my committee members and what they're saying, but I am also uncomfortably aware of her penetrating gaze. Now it is time for my third committee member to speak, Dr. Butler.

“Brian, I'm really concerned about the level you are studying and some of the differences that may arise. For example, you do not differentiate between youth, high school, collegiate, or professional levels. Also, you do not discuss issues of race or gender. If you intend to interview both men and women, I wonder how, or if, you will address any differences between the two.”

The bell rang and nearly two hours later I had taken the worst beating of my life. We proceeded in an almost section by section, page by page manner with each committee member jabbing me with their endless supply of criticism. They didn't pull punches and I couldn't throw in the towel: “Change this,” “What do you mean here?” “This doesn't make sense,” “This is unacceptable for doctoral work.” And still, Dr. Mertz is quiet, staring at me with such omniscience as to appear to be saying, “I told you so.”

I was asked to leave the room for a few minutes while my forlorn fate was decided. I had unnecessarily contributed to the early death of several trees with my poorly written proposal. Indeed, it was a dissertation *defense*—and I had forgotten my armor. Dr. Mertz thanked the committee members for their time and said, slowly, “Brian, the committee has decided at this point that you have not passed your doctoral comprehensive examination. Given the substantial feedback you have been provided, you and I will discuss how you will go about making the corrections necessary to pass comps and move on with your study.” Looking at me disappointed and a bit angry, I got the message from Dr. Mertz loud and clear—I was wasting their time.

I walked with Dr. Mertz back to her office, plopped down, slouched my shoulders and looked up defeated. She started, “Brian, I was afraid this was going to happen, but to be honest, I'm not sure there was any other way. You were just being too damn stubborn. You know I like you, okay, right? I think you have a potentially tremendous study here and I want to see you finish, but it's going to take a lot of work.”

I nodded my head, not wanting to talk, but comforted in her commitment to me and my study. She continued, “You understand things, I know you do. You are one of the few graduate students I have encountered over the years that deeply engage the research and struggles with the issues. We just need this to come out in your writing.”

“Okay. I know. I'm sorry. I really want to...you know—write better. I've always struggled with it.”

Nodding her head she says, “Well, we're going to work on it. Okay? You have all of the committee member's individual feedback?”

“Yes, right here,” I reply.

“Good, let's take a look and make sure you know what you need to do.”

We spent the next 30 minutes writing down on a sheet of paper, front and back, all of the major issues that needed to be fixed. Dr. Mertz gave me a hug and told me she would see me soon. In the past she had told me when to email committee members, what to say in those emails, and how to be respectful of their schedules. Later that day, on my own, I emailed my committee:

While you all have busy schedules, I want to thank you for your constructive comments today. I will look over them shortly and begin my attempt to re-work chapters 1-3. I will probably be in touch soon to make sure I am on the right track as much editing need to be done. Again, thank you for your time and helping me write a better dissertation

Humble pie, cold reality, and then a paradigm shift—three scholars whom I respect told me, “NO.” But it was more severe, more like, “Not even close. You’re not worthy.” I was in serious danger of not graduating, but more importantly, they let me know I was not at their level. It hurt. My grief and melancholy ameliorated after a few days and I arose to edit. Comps defense was an epiphany (Denzin, 2001). *I really started listening to Dr. Mertz. We began working together.*

I’m not sure when I noticed, but even my emails were not well written. I was, as Dr. Mertz said, “Sloppy with my words.” I needed to be more careful and conscientious with my writing. Upon her suggestion, I sought out an editor at the writing center, which eventually led to a second and third. Although the committee believed I knew my comps material, the organization and flow of chapters one through three were essentially incoherent, filled with serious gaps and ambiguities.

### *Summer and Early Fall 2008*

By this point it was clear that I was not going to be able to ramrod my poor writing through Dr. Mertz or my committee. Trying to fix everything the committee asked of me was difficult, if not impossible; sometimes they asked for different things. I had a strategy this time. I would have my editor review my writing and solicit feedback from individual committee members before I would go to Dr. Mertz. I had asked Dr. Morgan to review my revised methods section and I immediately walked over to retrieve it when he emailed stating it was ready for pickup:

“Oh. Hey, Dr. Morgan. I didn’t think I would see you here.”

“Yeah. Actually I’m trying to get out of here. I had to come in to do a few things, but I need a break. It is improved Brian, but you know, you really need to work closely with Norma on this. I went ahead and read chapters one and three as well and it needs some polish.”

“Okay. Well, that’s good it’s getting better.”

“Yeah, just really work with Norma on this and you will get there. I know you can do it buddy,” he smiles and shakes my hand.

Pleased with my progress, I make the changes requested by Dr. Morgan and proceed to send it off to Dr. Mertz. Her latest round of hand written feedback included the following smattering of rebukes, “So, what?,” “What does this mean?,” “How does this relate?,” “I don’t follow your argument,” “What are you talking about?,” “Does not convey,” “Who cares?,” “Irrelevant,” “You have lost me,” “Where did this come from?,” “You are constantly switching tenses. Pick one,” “Dump this.” I didn’t need polish, I needed a new car!

When is enough, enough? Was Dr. Mertz leading me astray? Surely, if I was in another department I would be done by now. How can what’s expected of me vary so much? I went back to the proposal and realized her feedback is dead on. I’m a bit dismayed that she critiques parts of the paper where I had literally copy and pasted her exact words. But, as she said before, sometimes it’s such a mess that it just doesn’t work at all.

To help matters, I was now limiting myself to coaching, dissertation writing and family. My wife was pregnant, again, and was due in September. I needed to progress on the proposal if I wanted to finish. I believed I could defend in November. Anticipating success, my mood was optimistic, even a bit jovial. Towards the end of August I sent Dr. Mertz a playful email:

Not since the release of Batman: The Dark Knight has the whole world waited on the edge of their seats...It is with great joy and jubilation that I present to you an updated copy of my dissertation. Whatever, all I can hope for is that this caught you at the right time and I at least got a little chuckle out of it. Did my best job thus far with APA--probably still a few things...

This was it! I was getting close now. Then, ten days later I got her response:

I am sorry it has taken me so long to get back to you with feedback. When I did get to it, I did not anticipate the staggering amount of time that would be required to edit what you had written, and I only got through the Table of Contents, chapters 1 and 2, and the Bracketing Interview. (I have attached the entire document, but I will go back to review the references, the letter of consent and chapter 2 sometime next week. To be brutally honest, I am afraid to just accept what you have in these without reviewing them.) After all of the previous feedback you have had, and your assurances that you had double-checked what you had done, I expected to receive a more careful product... At this moment, I am anything but sanguine about the amount of editing your document needs...

“Sanguine?”...oh no...the hell with APA...I fixed it, I fixed it! No, no, this isn’t fair. What’s wrong with me? What can’t I get it right? WHY CAN’T I WRITE?! I reply:

I am sorry for wasting your time and my lack of progress. I have read through your comments several times and I have been sloppy in too many places...I am very concerned that my writing does not allow my thoughts



and abilities to conduct research to be “heard and understood”...I will not send you any more proposals until everything is corrected. I am very disappointed in myself at this point.

Perhaps sensing my sorrowful tone, she responded to the implicit plea-for-help in my email:

Okay, now the self-flagellation must end. I am glad you understand the problems and recognize that, for example, if you do not explain something to the reader, s/he will not have any way of knowing what you are talking about....I am not worried about your getting it together. I know you will. What I do not want to have happen is for you to slack off or become depressed over it and so you do not continue working. I want you to move forward---and do so rapidly, if I have any say about it. I look forward to seeing the edited material.

Self-flagellation? Dr. Mertz told me this summer that as a child she “loved words.” Well, I didn’t. It was at this time I started using more sources to help improve my writing such as [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) and [www.visualthesaurus.com](http://www.visualthesaurus.com). I even started a journal called “Gearity Writing Well” to record tips and reminders such as, “flow of paragraphs; plain language; explain thoroughly; say what you’re thinking; make each word, sentence, paragraph count; don’t begin with the conclusion—build the argument...”

*Interlude: Typical Summer/Fall 2008 Meeting*

Walking to Dr. Mertz’s office I know she is going to let me have it. I don’t like it, but after a couple of days I would get over it. I find this a bit odd and highly ironic, since as a coach I’m the same way with my athletes. I know she is really pushing me to do my best, but it’s a hard road to travel. Arriving at her door I smile, it’s probably my last for the next hour.

“Come in, come in. Sit down,” she says, sternly. For a small, older woman she is intimidating, but I’ve also enjoyed our conversations recently about higher education, intercollegiate athletics, teaching—anything.

“Hey,” I reply, unsure what else to say.

“Well. Let’s just get to it and then we can save the pleasantries for the end. Okay?” she smiles, and I agree. What else would I do?

“Tell me Brian,” she says, as we begin to look over her comments. “Do you understand when I say something isn’t clear or that the flow of the paragraph doesn’t follow?”

“Yeah, I do...*after* you say it, but I swear when I look at it its fine. This isn’t close to the crap I turned in earlier this year or last year—I’m serious,” I say defending myself.

“No, no. I believe you. I just want to know what’s going on inside that head because verbally you explain yourself very well, but in writing it’s

just terrible. I wonder if you have a learning disability,” she says a bit hesitantly.

“That’s funny. My mom was a superintendent and had me tested when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade because I wasn’t doing very well in school. It turned out I was gifted.” I continue, “My math scores were really high so they put me in GT math, but since my reading comprehension scores were borderline they didn’t put me in that advanced class.”

“Aha,” she says nodding, knowing she was on to something. “There’s just something going on and we have to fix it.”

“I’m all for it. I’ve been wondering how I got this far without writing better. Then again, in all the courses I’ve had in graduate school they’ve been about research, not writing research.”

Pointing to page 50 she says, “Well, in the methods section of your proposal you say that you conducted a bracketing interview and that it helped enhance the dependability of the study,” I nod my head in agreement and she continues, “HOW?” as her New York accent flares.

Taken aback by her directness I respond quickly, “Well, in the philosophical phenomenology founded by Husserl, bracketing and all of its variant forms were used to help the philosopher to get to the essence of things; to have phenomena reveal themselves as they really are. Qualitative researchers have taken this and used it as a method to help remove bias, if that’s possible, but always to become more conscious of their own biases.”

“So what the hell does that have to do with dependability,” she pushes.

“Well. If I’m more aware of my biases when I’m collecting and analyzing data then we would be, to an extent, assured that my findings represent those of the participants.”

Pointing to the paper with her right hand and gesturing towards me with the left, Dr. Mertz cackles, “So why don’t you just say that!?”

“I don’t know,” I reply.

“You know these things. I know you do. You have GOT to write more clearly for the reader. [pointing to my bald head] We cannot get inside your head. Put exactly what you just said on paper. Don’t force your writing. It may help for you to just think about having a conversation with somebody and how you would explain it to them like you just did to me,” she smiles, thinking we are making some progress. “Can you do that?”

“I’ll try. I’m getting better. Sometimes I put a lot of pressure on the written word rather than just thinking of it as a conversation. I understand you. I just need to get it out on paper.”

She continues her inquisition into my writing habits, “How do you write? Do you outline what you’re going to write?”

“Huh? No. I guess I just sit down and start writing. I know the research and I’ve seen what others have used as a need for their study or how they write their reviews of

literature and I just kind of start writing,” I reply, realizing how unorganized my writing process has been. “Well, why not try that? Organize your thoughts. Write an outline of what it is you need to do, then the paragraphs and their main points,” she states so plainly that it is painfully obvious.

Yet, I wasn’t doing anything of this. Suddenly, I think about all of the graduate courses I have completed and recognize the lack of critique, feedback and instruction on my writing. It has been years since Dr. Mertz harshly criticized my writing in her course. Why wasn’t I getting the same help in my other courses? Maybe I was. Maybe I just didn’t get it?

Dr. Mertz and I continue reviewing my proposal for the next hour or so. She walks me through each section, paragraph by paragraph, nearly every sentence one at a time, and then each word. If it isn’t tight, strong, and relevant, then, as she would say, “It has got to go!” When we’re finished she asks, “So. How are Cayla and the baby? And the other baby?,” she laughs.

“They’re good. Everybody is healthy. They are so cute, but so much work too.”

“Ah yes, the joys of parenting. I know that well, and it doesn’t get any easier.”

“Well, as long as I can get some sleep, I’ll take it. You have two daughters, right?” I ask a bit hesitantly. She has told me this once before, but I cannot recall.

“Yes. And they are good.”

“Wasn’t one of them ill?”

“Yes, but she is doing better now. Thank you. Look, I have to go because I have two master’s students who will be defending in a month and I must attend to them. Okay? Bye-bye,” she replies with a smile as I walk out.

As walk down the hallway I realize how selfish I’ve been. She has her own work, family, other students—a life. She has a life and I’m not the center of it, nor should I be. Meanwhile, my dissertation has been the center of my life, kind of. This is it, Brian—after your dissertation you are supposed to be a scholar. I’m supposed to be able to do, and that means write, research. This is not a class project; I’m not a research assistant. I’m the researcher and I have got to be able to do this. What a jerk I’ve been; another epiphany (Denzin, 2001).

*November 17th, 2008. Comps defense (round two)*

On September 18<sup>th</sup> 2008, Dr. Mertz gave the go ahead to set up a committee meeting. While waiting for my second comps defense I updated my CV and talked briefly with Dr. Mertz about applying for jobs. I cringed asking for a recommendation considering the dire state of my writing, but to my surprise she graciously agreed. I sent her a copy of my CV to review and, naturally, she provided an abundance of feedback. I thought listing every graduate course I completed was a nice touch—she disagreed, and I changed it. This time around for the comp defense I knew what to expect and Dr. Mertz and I were on the same page. We kept tinkering with things and she asked me to be on

the lookout for potential problems. I emailed Dr. Mertz that morning about one methodological question that might arise. When we met that morning to walk over together she nodded in agreement, but we knew how to fix it. We sat down on the same side of the conference table and the committee members sat across or to the side.

Like before, Dr. Mertz spoke first, “Well, I thank you all for coming again. As you may recall, we had agreed that if Brian re-wrote his competencies in a typical proposal fashion with chapters one, two and three, he would be able to proceed with his study.”

Like before, the floor was opened for discussion, but things limped along. The committee brought up a few problems—a word change, a question regarding APA, a clarification, but nothing of substance...until we got to chapter three. All of the committee members had a question regarding the ambiguity with the terms perception and experience.

Dr. West spoke sharply, “So, what is it again you’re studying? Athletes’ perceptions of poor coaching, like, what they think poor coaches do, or qualities of poor coaches?”

Looking at the other committee members Dr. Morgan added, “Yes. I had a bit of trouble with this as well. You switch between the two like they’re synonymous and clearly they’re not.”

This was the methodological issue Dr. Mertz and I had discussed this morning. We were on the same page and we had a response. I speak up, “Merleau-Ponty (2003) talks about perception as primary to the lived experience. And here at UT, Dr. Pollio (1997) and all the books we’ve used in his existential phenomenology course discuss getting at the lived experience. Perception is a basic process that leads to experience, but experience is richer, it’s layered. It is thoughts, feelings, and bodily responses. I’m not studying perceptions, like what they think about some topic, but rather their own specific experience of the topic. It’s not a reflective method, but rather seeks to get at the phenomena directly. So that’s why I’m calling it an experience, but I will change them to be more consistent.”

Coming to my defense, Dr. Mertz adds, “What’s the issue here? As I understand, Brian will be asking athletes to describe a time when they experienced, and thus also perceived, to have been poorly coached. This was discussed at the first defense. What is not clear now?”

“Is it a study of perceptions or experiences?” asks Dr. West.

“Experiences,” replies Dr. Mertz.

I fade away and for the first time I watch four professors have a bit of a go at it. They talk fast and forcefully. This wasn’t merely a methodological battle, that issue would be resolved shortly. Rather, Dr. Mertz is invested in me, my project—*she’s got my back*. We knew what we were doing and it made sense. After a few minutes, the discussion was over and it was settled.

Pending the committee’s decision I wondered how many errors or problems I could have and still pass. When I was invited back into the room the environment was different than at my first defense. The committee seemed less anxious and their bodies were relaxed. Dr. Mertz smiled, “You passed. BUT, you still have a few things to fix.”

As each member gave me a hardcopy of their feedback they told me how much the proposal had improved. Dr. Mertz and I stayed awhile in the room to chat. She was most pleased with my progress and by the lack of problems raised by the committee. Agitated, she said, “I still do not understand their problem with the whole experience/perception concept.”

“I tried my best to answer it. I think if I would have used the term experience throughout the paper then they wouldn’t have said anything.”

Nodding approvingly, “You’re probably right. You have to be careful about those types of things since they open up a whole can of worms. But hey, it’s small potatoes. And when you write the damn thing up for publication you’ll say experience and that’ll be that.”

“It’ll go much better, faster now. I really like doing interviews and analyzing data.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time. Make the corrections, but yes, proceed with collection.”

At home later that night as I pulled out my laptop and the three hardcopies from the successful defense, the stacks of drafts in the corner caught my eye. My very first proposal from over a year ago looks nothing like the current one. My current proposal was quite good. I searched my laptop for my master’s thesis and was shocked, and embarrassed, about what I got away with then. What is quality writing? What are high, but also realistic, expectations?

*Chapters four and five, Spring 2009*

Dr. Mertz and I continued to revise previous chapters, while I worked on chapters four and five myself. Dr. Mertz continued to press me on the research and to strengthen my writing, logic, and argument. I had order and re-read related research more thoroughly. My grasp of the research became more complex, and my writing improved to reflect this deeper understanding. We meet at her house, office, and at times, we would email each other minor corrections or suggestions throughout the day. We basked in each other’s insights that moved the paper forward. Small victories were meaningful. The meetings in her office were long, tedious, but productive. Rather than going over the written feedback together, Dr. Mertz found it more productive to give me the paper copy while she sat and worked at her computer with the most recent edition of my proposal up on the screen. I was a young apprentice learning to write from a master (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I learned to write by watching Dr. Mertz write; how she labored over words, sentence structure, and flow. She was still directing at times, “Cut this,” but more frequently she asked me what I thought of the written product.

“Something here just isn’t right,” she states.

She wants to fix it—I want to move on. It’s just one word, but yet the paper would be improved if it were changed. Her cursor blinks incessantly. I squirm in the hard wooden chair trying to get comfortable. Finally, she moves to grab a thesaurus, “No, no. That isn’t it.”

I wonder if I am supposed to help?

“This is my problem when I write. I cannot move on until I get the right word. It just drives me nuts.”

“I don’t have that problem,” I say smiling. “But I’m beginning to.”

A bit annoyed she glances at me stating, “Yes, I know. But I want to get this damn thing just right.” (silence) “Here, this is it. ‘...their winning legacy is cemented with a photograph in front of the White House.’ Your sentence was good, but this is better. You have got to be descriptive, otherwise it’s boring! Illustrating some points with strong language grabs the reader and shows them the value of your study, especially in qualitative research.”

“Yeah, that sentence is a lot better than the plain one I had before. You just added a couple of words and reordered it too. You didn’t do that much with it I guess.”

“What about this point here? What’s the issue?”

“Well, so much of what we know about coaches is from the ‘pioneering’ study on John Wooden (Tharp & Gallimore, 1976). Researchers have, for the most part, looked at coaches who won a lot. Plus, most, if not all, the research looks at ‘positive’ aspects of coaching like effectiveness, expertise, excellence—aside from athlete’s satisfaction with certain coach behaviors we haven’t really heard more from athletes’ experiences, especially ineffectiveness.”

“See. You first have to review all of that and then draw the connections. The flow and logic has to be so apparent to the reader that it becomes obvious.”

And so we wrote, together. In her office she would ponder over paragraphs, sentences, and words. She would take what I wrote and modify it. She would ask me questions and transcribe my response. When writing on my own I began to ask, “What would Dr. Mertz do?”

“Can I ask you something?” I asked near the end of one of our sessions.

“Of course.”

“How do you know you are really improving the writing versus just putting in your own style or personal preference?”

Leaning back in her chair Dr. Mertz smiles, “Ah, yes. I’ve often thought about that with you. That isn’t something I usually concern myself with doctoral students. Some of them need to fix so many things that it’s not even an issue. Some doctoral students I’ve worked with are able to take my feedback, go fix it, and it’s better. That didn’t work with you. And I’m not certain why. The editors you used seemed to have helped with word choices and grammar, but the structure, logic and flow needed a lot of

work. I struggle at times providing you with feedback. Not because I don't know what needs to be fixed, but to get you to see it."

I reply, "To be honest, I know this is taking a long time now, but this has been the most helpful thing; to just sit here and watch you think about writing, to write together." And so we did. We spent countless hours working on the dissertation until finally on the last day of March 2009 Dr. Mertz emailed me:

I am very pleased to report that with a very few fixes (3 or 4 small ones, I believe) the first three chapters and the attendant appendices and references are ready to go to your committee. Congratulations! I think it really reads well now.

I passed comps months ago, but I hadn't passed Dr. Mertz until now. Having had the courage to suffer thus far, I bask in this brief moment of existential fulfillment. It was also at this time that I received a formal job offer. Dr. Mertz was the first person I called.

While working on chapters four and five I began to anticipate what Dr. Mertz might say. I read out loud. I wrote once and re-wrote half a dozen times. If I'm not happy, I fix it. I had writing epiphanies, brief moments of clarity while showering, driving, or coaching. My draft of chapter four was a massive 80 pages of "thick, rich description" (Geertz, 1973). To gear up for the defense Dr. Mertz and I met almost daily.

"Brian, while your chapter four is much better than your earlier work, we need to cut it substantially. Did your editor review this?"

"Yes. She helped with the grammar, but left the content alone."

"Well, you may want to get rid of her," Dr. Mertz says disapprovingly, a bit of disgust on her face. "I think you may be better off on your own."

I'm a bit taken aback, especially considering how much I've had to pay this editor. I'm also pleased, and surprised, that she feels I would be better off on my own. Once again though, Dr. Mertz is right. The editor rarely says anything about the content of the paper. Writing is very discipline specific and I've come to realize the usefulness of an editor will not be for substance, but for grammar and formatting.

"I want to talk with you about some of your themes. Tell me more about this notion of coach as manager and coach as instructor."

After a brief discussion I agree to join two of my subthemes under a larger theme. I concur with her and see how two smaller components are likely to fall under one larger category.

"Also, you need to cut down some of these quotes. You cannot copy and paste half-page responses and use those as paragraphs. It must be much tighter. Go back and select only the strongest quotes."

"Ok," I reply, happy to have been told to 'cut it' rather than 'fix it.'

Handing her an Excel spreadsheet I say, "Here, I've been working on this as well. I've taken the participant's responses and tabulated them with the themes. This way you can see how many participants responded to each theme and a bit of what they said."

Scanning the document over she asks, “Did you do this for all of the data?”

“No. It was just something I started part of the way through that made sense. It is kind of like a code map used in Anfara, Brown and Mangione (2002).”

“This is quite good. I’ve never seen something like this before. Can you go back and do this for all of your themes.”

Hesitantly, I reply, “Yeah, but it’ll take some time.” While I’m most pleased she enjoys this code map I am well aware that it will require several more hours.

“That would be great. At your defense I don’t want there to be any problems. I want to ‘wow’ the committee members, and the audit trail you created is very good, very detailed.”

“Thanks.” I reply, recognizing I had not received many compliments until this spring. “I told you chapter four would go better!”

“Yes, yes. But we need to talk about chapter five. (Oh no). You repeat too much of the findings at the beginning. It’s called a discussion section. You need to discuss the findings within the extant literature. You are back to jumping around again. Chapter five is not as good as four, but it is also not as bad as chapters one through three were.”

Writhing again in the 1980’s blue upholstered wooden chair, I watch Dr. Mertz sit at her computer meticulously examining chapter five. I feel bad about taking up so much of her time although working this way helps me learn to write. As our nearly three-hour meeting comes to a close I ask hesitantly, “How many hours a week do you work? Like, how busy are you?”

Sighing softly, showing her age, she replies, “I used to be able to work all day and into the night. Now, I simply cannot. I just get too tired. I do work a lot. Some students take more time than others. You were a lot of work, but I’ve enjoyed it,” she says smiling.

“I’m kind of scared to be a professor after seeing how much work you put into me and this dissertation. To think that later this year I’ll be sitting where you...knowing that it was only a few months before that I was getting coached up on my writing.”

“You’ll be fine—you’ll do great. But yes, it is a lot of work. Alright, I have got to do a few things to get ready for some masters students. When are you available later this week? I want to continue our meetings to get chapter five looking good. In the meantime, email your committee members about their availability for a defense date.”

Knowing that Dr. Mertz will not let me defend until the dissertation is completely ready, in a humble, but eager tone I ask, “I was hoping to be able to defend in April. That way I can make the late spring graduation deadline.”

“Uh, hmm. I don’t know about that. And besides, you still need to see about the availability of your other committee members. I really must go now.”

“Okay. Thanks again. I’ll work on this and see you soon. Bye.”

In the following month we continued our weekly meetings and I also made edits on my own. A college-wide email was sent out announcing my defense date and time. The immediacy of being exposed in front of my peers was frightening. Dr. Mertz helped



guide my transition from a graduate student who could think to a scholar who can write. Her mentoring, my constant (re)writing, changed who I am (Foucault, as cited in Rancevskis, 1987).

We met at her office to walk together to the conference room the morning of the defense.

“You ready?” she asks.

“Yeah, I guess.” She is smiling, beaming of a confidence that is reserved for few. She grabs my hand, like your grandmother grabs it when she needs a little help, and gives me a comforting shake.

She reminds me of the meeting’s itinerary. She tells me that after the introductions I will speak, “briefly.” We anticipate what the committee’s response to chapters four and five will be and how to handle potential issues. Ironically, she is now the coach and I am the athlete trying to make it to the big leagues.

The defense proceeds in a similar fashion to comps. Dr. Morgan queries my APA formatting—I cite the section in APA justifying how anonymous electronic sources are cited. He calls me out on how the review of literature may now be out of date. Dr. Mertz lets out a little gasp of disbelief that Dr. Morgan even brings that up. Dr. West calls one of my themes confusing and ambiguous—I argue for how the theme was coded and a small battle ensues. Dr. Butler asks me a poignant question regarding the origins of the qualitative framework guiding my study—existential phenomenology.

I stutter over my response, “Phenomenology, seeks to get to the essence of phenomenon. Ah, qualitative researchers...” After 30 seconds or so I stop, but I’m not happy with my oral response. My written methodology section is much clearer (that’s ironic). Dr. Mertz speaks often, strongly, and we argue valiantly on the same side, but concede certain points to the committee. I’m sweating, my heart races—I don’t think it’s going well. They don’t miss any detail. I’m asked to leave the room.

Four members of the baseball team had taken up my invitation to come to the defense, along with Dr. Martin, whom I had taken several graduate courses from.

Dr. Martin smiles, “Hey, good job Brian.”

“Really? I didn’t think so.”

The baseball players laugh out loud, smile and then cringe having watched the power-figure-coach get raked over the coals. A bit uneasy about what to say, one of them speaks up, “Hey Coach G, we’re used to you beating us up, but you took the beating in there!” The conference room doors open. Dr. Mertz appears. No expression, poker face, then...a smile.

Her face begins to spread wide, “You did it!”

The tension that once engulfed the room dissipated and rather than defending, I am now having a discussion with my peers. They compliment me on the thoroughness and reporting of qualitative methods and the richness of my data. Dr. Mertz expresses her amazement about forgetting to have me include a piece in the discussion section about

implications for higher education. We both had forgotten, so tied up in other sections we missed a key point. We all shake hands; they wish me good luck at my new career. As I plop down in a chair, drained, Dr. Mertz says goodbye to Drs. Morgan, Butler, and West.

“Brian, I am so proud of you,” says a more than satisfied Dr. Mertz; she looks at peace.

“Thanks. I didn’t think I passed.”

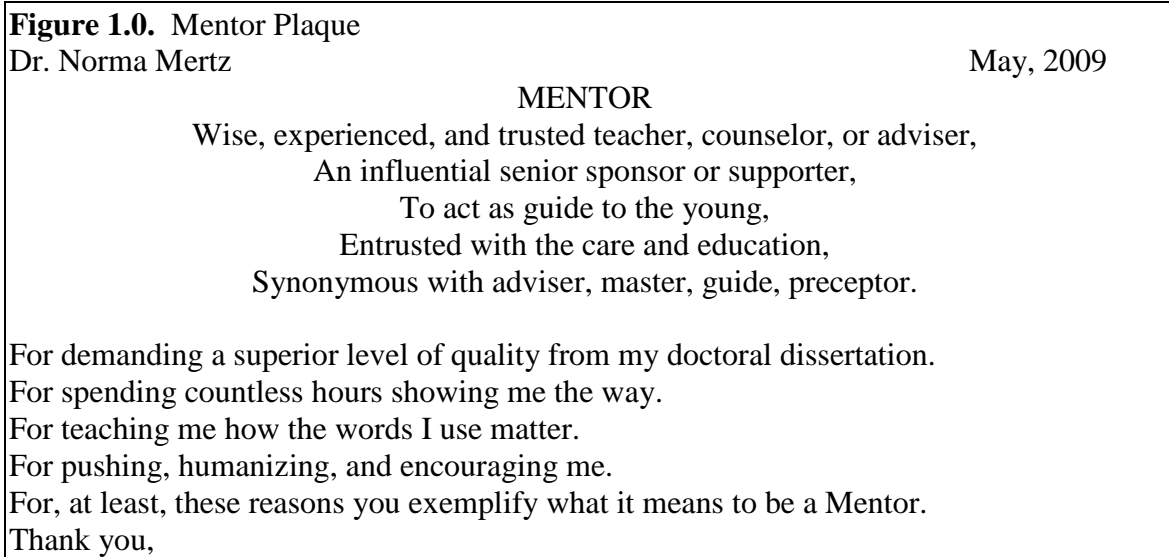
“What? Oh no. This went quite well...”

“Wow,” I say a bit surprised. “It’s always tough to know what everybody is thinking.” As we stand up our discussion continues and we lay out a course of action to make the revisions.

“Oh no. I forgot something. Will you be in your office for a few minutes?”

“Uh, yes. Okay,” she replies, a bit stunned by my sense of urgency.

Breathing heavily from sprinting from and to the building I return to her office, “Here you are,” I pant, while handing her a plaque (Figure 1):



Reading the custom engraved plaque she begins to get teary-eyed.

“Thank you. This is very (pause) very nice. You sure know how to make a girl blush.”

“You deserve it. I mean it. I remember how you said you wrote a paper a few years ago on mentoring. I went to the library and looked up the etymology of mentor. See—I learned how much words matter.”

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### Article Citation

Gearity, B. T., & Mertz, N. (2012). From “bitch” to “mentor”: A doctoral student’s story of self-change and mentoring. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Art. 59), 1-27. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/gearity.pdf>

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