Bunch of Nerves: Fears, Dilemmas and Academic Performance in Research of Graduate School Students

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Abstract

Research is not easy. This is a common perception which most students would voice out. This was proven by the researcher when students enrolled in Methods of Research in their master’s program were asked about their fears and dilemmas and were evaluated by the proponent. This research utilized both the quantitative and qualitative type of research. Fears and Dilemmas were gathered through a survey questionnaire while performance of the graduate student researchers were evaluated through the submitted research proposals by the student-respondents. Responses to the questions in the survey were categorized and presented in tables through frequency and percentages. The performance of students were analyzed based on their contents. Fears included three categories: financial aspect, innate skills and instruction. The dilemmas, on the other hand, include: choice of topic, choice of title and whether to continue or not because of other equally important choices. Only few showed excellent performances based on their outputs. Weaknesses were culled from the participants' outputs. These include technical, aesthetics (grammar and punctuation) and ethics. In spite of the lectures provided, some of the students relied on old formats and disregarded the procedures provided during discussions. Their performances showed that the participants are less compliant in the technical aspect and still had few lapses in terms of aesthetics and ethics. Their fears and dilemmas were only based mostly on pre-conceived ideas and these were eventually surpassed as they went on attending the course until the end of the semester. Thus, the researcher recommends that professors and administrators must implement key measures that would improve instruction and capacity building for their students who will undertake the research course.

Key Words: Research, fears, dilemmas, performance of graduate students

JEL Classification: Educational Research and Social Science
1. Introduction

Veit (2004) defines research as nothing more than finding out what you need to know. This implies that research is encountered by people even in their everyday undertakings; when they want to satisfy their curiosity, when they want to find answers to questions and in most instances, when they need to find solutions to problems. However, research is also more than just seeking solutions to problems. It could be regarded as something complicated like when scientists and inventors perform tasks to create an innovation or something that would resolve mankind’s illnesses and practical problems.

Research as a complex process is also undertaken in the academic field. Its procedure is systematic and therefore it is regarded as a scientific research. Supporting this view is Tejero (2011) who wrote that research is something that needs to be solved using scientific procedure. The same author expounded that it is therefore a systematic, controlled, empirical and a critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about presumed relations among natural phenomena.

In the academe, the usual output of this endeavor is the research paper or the thesis manuscript. After a series of lecture, students are required to prepare for the writing phase and present their research problem.

According to the Prevention Research Center at Case Western Reserve University, a research problem (phenomenon) is the topic that one would like to address, investing ate, or study, whether descriptively or experimentally. It is the focus or reason for engaging in research. Thus, it is typically a topic, phenomenon, or challenge that someone is interested in and with which one is at least somewhat familiar for easier facilitation and organization of content.

The content of a research paper must be evidence-based. It requires a massive reading of literatures and studies for one to be well equipped in supplying content for the paper. A researcher also needs to be knowledgeable in organizing data and in analyzing content in order to be able to come up with valid and reliable findings, conclusions and recommendations.

With the foregoing process done in a research undertaking, research is not easy to accomplish. This has also been a common perception among takers. This is why participation in research is seldom complied with by students. This has been affirmed by the study of AlGhamdi, et. al. (2013) which revealed that even if majority of students believe that research is important in their medical field, only around half of the students participated in research during their medical school.

The researcher posits that this scenario is true even in other fields of specialization. The lack of participation and interest in research could be brought about by fears and other notions
about research; this is why the researcher aimed to find out the fears, dilemmas and performance in research of graduate school students.

2. Literature Review

Writing a research paper as mentioned in the introduction is not an easy task. Many students would regard Research as a difficult subject because of its writing phase. In an online article of Litmoren (nd), this difficulty was confirmed as the author wrote that most students find that writing a research paper is the toughest challenge they encountered before earning a college degree. The same author mentioned that writing a research paper is time consuming and brain draining.

The above author enumerated common challenges encountered by students in writing a research paper. Researching and gathering data is the first challenge that students face in writing their research papers because they do not know how to find the best sources. The next challenge cited is the development of the thesis statement as they fail to recognize that it is simply the topic they are covering.

Litmoren furthered that coherency and consistency is another problem encountered by students in writing their research papers. Finding evidence to support the research paper is also a common challenge. What was considered by Litmoren as the most challenging part of writing a research paper is the citation and following formatting standards which at times would result to the commission of plagiarism.

However, like any other paper, a research also follows the usual pattern of having an introduction and the rest of the content serves as the body which will eventually end to the conclusions and recommendations.

Writing the introduction under the problem and background of the research must not be feared if one has a good outline. Bautista, et.al. (2012) suggested the OPILOT acronym as a guide where O stands for overview, P for problem, I for importance, L for literature, O for objectives and T for time and Place. Following the said acronym, the researcher can now begin by providing for the background or the overall situation of the study through several means like describing the past and existing conditions relative to the main topic which will lead to highlighting its significance as supported by initial literatures related to the study. This will be followed by citing the objectives and the time and locale of the study.

The introduction is usually followed by stating the statement of the problem. In their website, Prevention Research Center at Case Western Reserve University, cited several ways of stating a research problem. The following are some of the options:

Option 1. A question or questions. It could be a single question, several questions or a single question followed by several sub-questions.
Option 2. Declarative Statement. It could be through a single statement, a single statement containing several phrases, a series of complete statements and a general statement followed by subordinate statements.

Option 3. Statement followed by restatement in the form of a question

Option 4. A statement followed by a series of theses

After which, the significance of the study must emphasize why the research is worth pursuing. This part presents the possible beneficiaries and as to how they will benefit from the results of the study.

The scope and delimitation of the study then is next. It is the portion of the paper where limitations and coverage of the study are mentioned.

A paper’s development varies. This depends on the format being implemented by the institution where the researcher is enrolled. In some formats, the need for a theoretical framework is vital as it “serves as the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study. It also introduces and describes the theory that explains why the research problem under study exists,” (Trochim, 2006).

In addition, further readings is needed for a researcher to get a rich review of related literature. The discussions here are taken from published and unpublished materials relevant to the study; all these will strengthen the arguments that the writer inked down to support the research.

Except for purely descriptive and qualitative researches, a paper needs to have hypotheses or specific statements of prediction which will later on accepted or rejected by the researcher depending on the results of the study. Based on results or findings, conclusions will be drawn; and based on the conclusions, the researcher will then come up with recommendations.

Despite the simple procedures mentioned, which are also being taught in classrooms, many students still fear the thought that they are to conduct research and thus find less interest to write a research paper even if it is a course requirement. This is why some researchers became interested in finding out the reasons for this lack of interest in research.

Some studies dwelt on obstacles and reasons why students have less interest in research. For instance, AlGhamdi, et. al. (2013) stated that the obstacles that prevented students from conducting research included lack of professional supervisors, lack of training courses, lack of time and lack of funding.

On the other hand, Jusoh, R. and Abidin (2012) revealed that the enthusiasm to be actively involved in the research is less pronounced; respondent-students do not think they learn most when they are fully involved in a research project. Findings in this study also showed that most students think that in their programs, too little time is devoted to the development of research competencies.
The above literature establishes how a research is being carried out while the studies presented findings why students have little interest in research. All these served as fundamental support to the current study which will tackle the fears, dilemmas and academic performance of students enrolled in the research course.

3. Methodology

This research utilized both the quantitative and qualitative type of research. Fears and Dilemmas were gathered through a survey questionnaire while performance of the graduate student researchers were evaluated through the submitted research proposals by the student-respondents. Survey responses were presented in tables using frequency and percentages. The performance of students were evaluated based on the rubric prepared by the researcher. Manuscripts’ consistency with the criteria in the rubric were checked and sorted based on their categories.

3.1 Research Questions

This study sought to find out the fears, dilemmas and academic performance in Research of graduate school students. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following:

1. What are the fears of the student-respondents in Research?
2. What are the dilemmas of the student-respondents in Research?
3. How did the student-respondents perform in their Research course?

3.2 Data

The researcher gathered data from select 50 graduate students enrolled in Research in a state college in the Philippines. The data came from the initial orientation of the student-respondents in their research subject. The data on performance, on the other hand, were based on the research proposals submitted by the student-respondents which were evaluated by the researcher based the research rubric below:

- **Technical Content** (Articulation of a specific, significant, and novel problem with a well-established connection with literatures and studies and is consistent with the research design and ethical principles in research that would lead to a valid and reliable result) ----- 65%
- **Aesthetics** (grammar and punctuations) ----- 25%
- **Ethics** ----- 10%

To present the respondents’ performance in their manuscript requirement for the research course, the ratings were given verbal interpretations (see Table 1).
Table 1: Rating and Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Verbal Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>96-100</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-95</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-89</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-80</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-74</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data on the respondents’ academic rating were based on the compliance or consistency of the manuscript with the rubric used by the researcher.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Fears of Student-Respondents in Research

Fears included three categories: financial aspect, innate skills and instruction.

Table 3: Fears of Student-Respondents in Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>NO. OF RESPONSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aspect</td>
<td>Expensive</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to Hire Experts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Budget Yet</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Might not Sustain</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innate Skills</td>
<td>Not a Born Writer</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Way of Teaching</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aside from simply stating that thesis writing is expensive, 1 respondent is bothered by the thought of hiring experts such as research consultants and statisticians because of the corresponding professional fees while an equal number of respondents admitted that the fear to pursue their research is because of financial constraints and sustainability concerns.

“I wasn’t born a good writer,” was a similar response from among 8 respondents implying that they fear writing because it is not innate in them.

On the other hand, the way of teaching is feared by 6 respondents, 5 of them had this fear based on their previous experience in their undergraduate studies, 1 who is taking the subject as a refresher course based this fear to pursue research because of his previous experience in his first research class. The following are the summary of their responses:

“There are professors that would reprimand a writer in front of the class.”

“The professor has no inputs in the reports.”

“I was hesitant to enter the class because of the way the professor talk in class before and I fear it might happen again.”
4.2 Dilemmas of Student-Respondents in Research

The dilemmas, on the other hand, include: choice of topic, choice of title and whether to continue or not because of other equally important choices.

**Table 4: Dilemmas of Student-Respondents in Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>NO. OF RESPONSES (f) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice of Topic</td>
<td>Thinking of so Many Topics</td>
<td>18 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of Title</td>
<td>Having Difficulty in Choosing</td>
<td>14 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from the three titles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Continue or Not</td>
<td>Hesitant to Start Writing</td>
<td>6 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Might not pursue anyway</td>
<td>3 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have to prioritize work</td>
<td>9 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be gleaned from the table above that student respondents had difficulty in the choice of topic. One respondent explained that the choice of topic is hard because of the comprehensiveness of the topic being decided upon.

"My topic is broad, I would like to limit it but I don’t know how to do it, I also preferred my topic because of its relevance but it is not my interest” he said during the one on one verification of responses.

The above dilemma is rooted from the participant’s lack of interest in the subject because choice of topic could be easier when a writer decides to pursue what his or her interest is. Lester (1999) emphasized this and from a broad topic, one could easily narrow it down. For instance, the interest is about women, then this could be narrowed down to any of the following: ‘women in politics’, ‘women in art’, ‘women in business’ or ‘women in medicine’. Lester further explained that from the chosen topic, title could already be formulated. Under women in politics, the following titles were provided as examples: 1. Gender differences in support for women candidates: is there a glass ceiling in American politics? [Dolan, K. (1997)] and 2. Might women have the edge? Open-seat house primaries [(Bernstein, R.A. (1997)].

Simply, the “title must contain the subject matter of the study. In a complete title, it includes the locale of the study, the population involved and the period when the data were gathered or will be gathered” Calderon and Gonzalez (1993). An example of a long title provided by the authors is ‘The teaching of science in the high schools of province a as perceived by the science teachers and students during school year 1989-1990’. The title, however, must be brief and concise as possible. Therefore, the above title can be restated as ‘The teaching of science in the high schools of Province A’.
As regards title, the respondents seemingly found it easy to follow because 28% of the respondents have the dilemma as to which title must be chosen by them. The rubric from Glatthorn & Joyner (2016) served as the respondents’ tools of weighing and deciding as to which title should they pursue. The three titles were assessed based on the following criteria: professional significance; continuing professional interest; personal interest; career advancement; knowledge, experience & skills; likely support, time required and accessibility.

The above authors explained that “a professionally significant study makes an important contribution to the field in one of the following ways: tests a theory, contributes to the development of a theory, extends existing knowledge, changes prevailing beliefs, suggests relationships between phenomena, extends a research methodology or instrument, provides greater depth of knowledge about previously studied phenomena.”

“Continuing professional interest involves the extent to which the topic will continue to be of interest to the profession in general while personal interest involves one’s great interest on something.” Glatthorn & Joyner (2016).

The same authors added that career advancement involves the impact of the paper to the profession of the researcher. Title, according to them, is also good when the researcher has existing knowledge on the topic contained in the title and has support from the place of work and other possible sponsors; time criteria, on the other hand, means that the paper must be finished in a reasonable time and is easy to access.

4.3 Academic Performance of Student-Respondents in Research Based on Submitted Research Proposals

The academic rating of the respondents in research is based on rubric compliance. The drawbacks (Table 5) were reflected on the grading of the student-respondents.

Only few showed excellent performances based on their outputs. Weaknesses were culled from the participants’ outputs. These include technical, aesthetics (grammar and punctuation) and ethics. In spite of the lectures provided, some of the students relied on old formats and disregarded the procedures provided during discussions. Their performances showed that the participants are less compliant in the technical aspect and still had few lapses in terms of aesthetics and ethics.

Table 5: Academic Performance Drawbacks of Student-Respondents in Research Based on Submitted Research Proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>NO. OF RESPONSES (f)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>Old sources (1935, 1937, 1945, 1963)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion is not clear &amp; not well presented</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wrong citation of sources</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wrong format in the presentation of the chapters and discussion
Conceptual definition has no source
No operational definitions
Very long abstract
Insignificant and familiar terms were defined
Significance of the study contained recommendations
Aesthetics
Wrong tense of verb
Misspelled Words
Wrong usage of verbs
Ethics
Sources not cited

Notwithstanding the drawbacks noted as basis for grading, majority of the student-respondents still obtained a rating of ‘very good’ while there is only 1 who manifested a lower rate of performance, which is ‘good’.

Table 6: Academic Performance Rating of Student-Respondents in Research Based on Submitted Research Proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Verbal Interpretation of Rating</th>
<th>Number of Student-Respondents</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>96-100</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-95</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-89</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-80</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-74</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The student-respondents’ fears and dilemmas were only based mostly on pre-conceived ideas and these were eventually surpassed as they went on attending the course until the end of the semester. This is clearly manifested as all were able to produce sample research proposals. However, most of the technical aspects of writing their papers were not complied by them as a result of the assessment. Thus, the researcher recommends that professors and administrators must implement key measures that would improve instruction and capacity building for their students who will undertake the research course. Professors, for instance, can utilize the lecture write-shop method and perform an individual, one on one critiquing of outputs. In addition, trends in research must be integrated in the lessons being taught to researchers.

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