

# LOSING & FINDING VOICE: A *CURRERE* JOURNEY INTO AN EDITING PROCESS

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## REGRESSION: WORKING WITH DAWN

In July of 2016, I had been working as an academic editor for a few months and, on several occasions, had been hired by doctoral students who needed a little extra help in finishing up their dissertations. I received a call from Dawn, who had been urged by her committee to seek out my services, and she explained the daunting task that was before her. She had been in a doctoral program for going on 10 years, had been granted an extension for completing her dissertation, and was only weeks away from the deadline for finishing the work, defending it, and submitting it to the graduate school. If she did not make this deadline, she would never be able to finish, and all of the doctoral work she had done—all of the classes, comprehensive exams, and data collection—would be for nothing.

From her dissertation proposal, pre-proposal course work, and comprehensive exam papers, Dawn had most of the writing that would be needed for the first three chapters of the dissertation (i.e. the introduction, literature review, and method/methodology chapters). She still needed to write the data, analysis, and conclusion chapters and get it all proofed and ready to go to her committee in a few short weeks. When she sent me her documents, I saw that we had a lot of work to do on what she already had written, but I also saw great value in the work, which was a study of a professional development program on Whiteness that Dawn had run for a select group of colleagues in her school district. I began to proofread and correct minor grammar and spelling errors, and I also identified clarity as the major issue with the writing she had completed. I highlighted sentences that were vague or unclear and marked them with a comment about why I found them confusing. This was a frequently recurring problem, with the writing often leaving me unsure of exactly what Dawn was trying to say.

Dawn and I met a few days later. Jumping into our work, we began performing what I have come to think of as our symbiotic editing ritual. I would scroll to a highlighted sentence that had been noted as being vague or unclear and would say to her, “Let’s look at this one sentence. What you have written is this...,” and I would read the sentence aloud. I would then say something like, “I have no idea what you mean by that. Can you explain to me what you were trying to say there?” Then, Dawn would talk, and I would type what she said as close to word-for-word as I could manage. Once she stopped talking, I would spend a couple of seconds cleaning up typos and comma errors, and then I would say, “This is what you just said,” and I would read back to her what I had just written down. “Is that a good representation of what you mean?” She would affirm that it was or would make changes to it to get closer to her meaning. I would likewise affirm that the new version made sense and was clear, or I would ask follow up questions and continue the process until she was satisfied that her writing said exactly what she meant. I would delete the original sentence and replace it with the new material, and we would move on to the next spot that needed fixing. That first day, we spent a couple of hours engaged in this ritual of replacing her unclear writing with clear, specific thoughts on her topic, and by the

end of that session, we had fixed all of the problem spots in the original material.

Next, we made a plan for Dawn to follow to add needed material to the first three chapters and to complete the final chapters. Over the next two weeks, we passed her draft back and forth, her completing sections and me doing the proofreading, and when the draft was complete, we met one last time to go through the editing ritual of reading unclear text and replacing it with her vocalized explanations of what she had intended to say. In the end, Dawn completed the draft in time to send it to her committee, and shortly thereafter, she successfully defended her work and was able to graduate.

That autumn, I ran into Dawn's dissertation chair at a conference, and naturally, conversation turned to Dawn having just completed her degree. The professor smiled and asked, half joking but also half serious, "What did you do?" I smiled and blinked and sputtered and finally had to admit that I didn't know exactly what I had done or why it had helped her. Of course, we both knew that I hadn't pushed some magic button and that Dawn finishing was not necessarily about me or anything I had done at all, but I realized that, if I wanted to continue to improve as an editor and be of service to other students like Dawn, I really needed to make the effort to think deeply about that process and figure out what those experiences might mean for graduate students, for advisors, and for my own understanding about the nature of the dissertation writing process and how to best help students over that giant hurdle. I decided to embark on a *currere* journey to try to reactivate the experience I had with Dawn and to figure out what it might teach us.

I asked Dawn if she would meet with me to talk about what happened, and she agreed. The resulting conversation was long and winding, so I will simply highlight what I found to be significant moments in the conversation and topics that came up repeatedly. With Dawn's permission, I recorded our talk and later transcribed the conversation and sent a copy to her for her approval. All of the quotations that follow in this section have come directly from that transcript.

One of the most obvious answers to the question of why Dawn finished when she did was simply down to timing and the pressure of facing the final deadline. Setting those issues aside to see what we could say about the role of our work together, Dawn talked of the process as a "teacher/student relationship," rather than as an editor/writer relationship. She appreciated that I asked questions more than I provided answers, that I guided her to choices that needed to be made, rather than simply changing the text for her. She commented, "If I'm setting out on this journey, why would I want somebody else to do more than what I'm doing?"

Dawn connected my process of walking along side her as she made changes, of drawing out the clear content that she had inside her, to a growing confidence in her writing. At one point in her drafting process and again in her defense, she was questioned by a committee member about the openness with which she discussed the participants in her dissertation, expressing concern that some of what Dawn had said might be taken poorly should her colleagues read her work. Dawn said she remembered me telling her that it was her work, that she was the owner and ultimately responsible for the content, so, she remarked, "I didn't change it...I felt comfortable and confident at that point." In continuing along those lines, she circled back around to the process of clarifying her content, saying, "You helped me really to focus in on—What are you really trying to say? I still think back to you saying, 'This is what I'm reading. Is that what you are saying?'"

In contemplating why it took her so long to complete her degree, Dawn and I discussed the difficulty of completing a PhD program as a part-time student and full-

time teacher. Thinking back on her time in the department, she couldn't think of many in her cohort who were part-time who finished the degree. I asked her what was particularly challenging for her as a part-timer, and she responded, "Everything." She went on to say that it all boils down to "not being immersed in the space." Not only did that physical separation from the learning sphere make it easier to procrastinate, it highlighted what she called a "disconnect" between her two worlds.

I walk out of the [university] space, and I have to walk into my public school's world. It's like apples and oranges... You don't talk the same lingo... If people are thinking like you, they tend not to voice it... And, you go try to sit at home and write, and you've got to get into the zone, and that takes awhile.

The absence from the physical space created a difficulty in vocalizing the thoughts that were needed for the writing, causing her to need to create a "zone," a place where she could return, mentally, to the space where her identity as a graduate student could be found, accessed, and from which she could then speak or write.

Dawn also discussed fitting into the graduate department as an issue of being able to speak the language and know the vocabulary of that world. She said,

I remember taking the first class.... I kept, literally, a running notebook of words, like, don't know what that means, don't know that one, don't know that one. I don't fit in here.... It was like a foreign language.

Dawn's feelings of being unfit for the journey are nothing new to those who have worked with graduate students. She related a conversation she had with her dissertation chair, who encouraged Dawn by confirming that she knew the material. Dawn said that her response to that was, "So how 'bout we just talk about it and call it even." How many students over the course of history have wished that they could skip the writing process altogether and just have a nice long chat about what they know? Dawn and I discussed the sizable scope of a dissertation and how trying to get one's thoughts around that sizable scope could be, in Dawn's words, "overwhelming." The subject of that feeling of being overwhelmed and a fish out of water circled around to being in the program part-time.

I asked Dawn whether or not she thought the writing she had been asked to do as a part of her PhD coursework, her comprehensive exam writing, and oral exams had prepared her for writing her dissertation. Dawn was firm that the various parts of the program "naturally flow from one into the other" and that "everything has made sense. I felt like I knew what to expect." Dawn also confirmed that she was on track with the program right up until she finished her comprehensive exams, so she felt like the program was moving her in the right direction, but the physical and mental distance that happened after becoming ABD (all but dissertation) created a barrier that was very hard for her to push through. She mentioned how she and a friend in the department met everyday in the department building while working on their comprehensive exams and how being there together helped keep her moving forward through that process. It was a combination of being in the right physical space and being there with people who spoke the language of the academy that kept her grounded and moving forward.

In reference to working with me, Dawn said, "You were able to bridge my worlds, if that makes sense. I don't know how you did that." She went on to say that working with me was a process of continuing her education and that she learned so much from

me. To try to get more at answering that issue given that I hadn't really realized that bridging her worlds was what I had actually done, I asked, "What did I teach you in the two and a half weeks we worked together?" She responded:

Allowing me to hear my voice. It was such a disconnect for me. I would write, but I couldn't hear myself. I had this block that I wasn't allowing myself to hear it. And, you really forced me to think about what I was really trying to say. I remember you saying to me, "Is that what you really want to say? Because here's what I'm hearing, but I can also hear it this way, so what do you really mean?"

This process of hearing her writing spoken in my voice and clarifying her writing and coming to a place where she once again heard her voice in the text was, Dawn explained, a real learning experience for her. She argued that it didn't just fix the text but let her see why it needed to be fixed and how she could fix it.

### **PROGRESSION: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

At about the midpoint of our conversation, our discussion turned naturally away from our past experiences and into a discussion of the future. Dawn talked about how she had been looking forward to our meeting and talking about the work we did together because she hoped that the process would result in help for other people who were struggling with dissertation writing. She said she believed that I could be an excellent resource for students who needed assistance and also possibly for faculty who wanted to learn more about helping their students with their writing. In discussing the possibility of me working with future students, she further clarified her stance on the role and importance of the physical learning space. She said that one of the things that was recommended to her when she was having trouble making progress was a university "writing boot camp" program, where a quiet space on campus is provided for people to come and where "you just sit and write." She said her response was, "Okay, I respect that, but is that... is that just like a fancy name for a location to get holed up in?" While being "immersed in the space" is important, it is obviously only one part of the picture.

I mentioned that I was working on developing writing workshops that I wanted to do. Dawn liked the idea and encouraged thinking about small scale workshops that would track along with a student's progress in the program, teaching different things, from how to write a literature review to how to use the university library for research and more, depending on what the students in a particular year might need. Although previously she had said that she felt like the program prepared her well for writing the dissertation, at this point Dawn admitted that she could have benefited from someone simply saying to her, "Here is what a literature review is." She said that those sorts of topics were covered but that she always felt like she was "dabbling" in the research and writing methods and processes and that it was difficult to see a continuity in the writing and research that was building toward the dissertation.

Dawn also discussed the future of her work. The professors on her committee encouraged her to take the program on Whiteness that was at the center of her dissertation into other schools. She had also been approached by a person in the department who ran a program for student teachers interested in working in inner city settings. She wanted to discuss how Dawn's work might be useful for those students. We talked about the differences in our university's undergraduate teacher education program and the doctoral program of which we both now were alumni, specifically

how much more diverse the student body in the doctoral program was than the undergraduate program, which is almost completely made up of White young women. We talked about the work I had helped Dawn complete and her hopes for the good it might do in the future.

These ruminations about the prospects for her research circled back around to my role as her editor and what she felt like she had learned from me. She talked about the importance of having someone say to her clearly and boldly, “This is a problem,” and “That’s not going to work,” while also providing her the encouragement to know that they were hurdles that she could successfully clear. According to Dawn, outlining a clear plan that was focused on a set of priorities, naming each problem and organizing a way to tackle the biggest problems first, was key to her being able to imagine herself as succeeding in her writing task, which was something that she had lacked up to that point.

### **ANALYSIS: AUTHORIAL LARYNGITIS**

One of the issues at the heart of Dawn’s inability to finish was the physical distance that she felt once she no longer had the need to appear in the department building. During her comprehensive exams, she maintained momentum by meeting in the department building with her friend. From Dawn’s disinterest in the idea of a “writing boot camp,” though, we can assume that it isn’t only about being in the right physical space. It is about being in the space and engaging in conversation, getting and giving encouragement, with those who share the common experience and language of the program. It is about both speaking and being heard in a language that is specific to the experience.

The importance of this physical aspect is also directly connected to the physical nature and process of writing. In analyzing my time with Dawn, two themes recur as central to her difficulties and her ultimate success, the physical element (distance and proximity to the program) and the issue of finding her voice in her writing (editing to hear it and the confidence that process brought). Peter Elbow (1994), one of the foremost scholars on the teaching of writing, argues that, “To talk about voice in writing is to import connotations of the body into the discussion—and by implication to be interested in the role of the body in writing” (p. 2). In one sense, the act of writing conjures the physical world, giving intangible thoughts physical form. In another sense, when we refer to the process of hearing our voice in our writing, we call up the notion of the physical body that makes the sounds that are associated with the metaphor of a voice (Elbow, 1994).

Davies (2000) argues that we “speak ourselves into existence and thus become objects of our own and others’ discursive practices” (Davies, 2000, p. 62), and in my own previous work, I have argued that, “graduate students write themselves into existence as people who are worthy of carrying the title of doctor” (Waldrop, 2016, p. 13). The writing process, in the case of the doctoral student, makes the dissertation tangible but also makes the author tangible as well, a physical, real presence, someone who can speak and be heard. Dewey (1934) writes that, “Without external embodiment, an experience remains incomplete” (pp. 58-59). It is possible, and perhaps even necessary, for us to view the dissertation as an external, tangible embodiment of the experience of becoming a PhD, a person who is not only visible and hearable, but who is, therefore, capable of communicating with a real, tangible, visible, and hearable audience.

Ronald and Roskelly (2002) argued that the “physical and present” nature of

voice, as it is outlined by Elbow, works “in ways that bring an audience close” (p. 210), which reminds us “of the bodily act of writing and connecting with other people” (p. 222). Dewey, (1934) wrote, “Language exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken. The hearer is an indispensable partner” (p. 112). This is all to suggest that there is a deep connection between the physicality of graduate study and the ability to create the dissertation (the physical embodiment of one’s academic work), to connect with the physical aspect of writing (the voice), and to call up for oneself a physical, present, and engaged audience (that “indispensable partner” without whom writing seems pointless). This is also to suggest that there are clear reasons why it took my physical presence in a room with Dawn, reading aloud the words she had written, for her to be able to identify the problem, that her voice was missing from her writing, and to correct it by speaking and being heard by me. This inability to locate herself in her own work had created a crisis of confidence and a disconnect between herself and the ability to use the language needed to create the writing that was required. An absence of voice, and the restoration of that voice, had become for her the cause and a solution to the problem of completing her work.

Elbow (1994) wrote that, “...most of us are unconscious of how deeply our culture’s version of literacy has involved a decision to keep voice out of writing” (p. 5). Elbow (1994) argued that the schooling we receive as we become literate encourages us to be less sensitive to the relationship between the text and the author, as if the text would be the same no matter who was writing it. When we ask graduate students to become authors, that relationship between text and author can feel mysterious and unconnected. Perhaps, writers like Dawn are considering, for the first time in a long time, the relationship between themselves and the text they have created, and when they finally are able to see and hear themselves in it, it comes as a delightful surprise to them and can actually spur them on to continue.

I want to make it clear, as does Elbow (1994), that I am not arguing for a natural voice that springs from a tangible, fixed, essential identity. I agree with Foucault (1996) when he suggests that, “there is a danger in thinking of identity and subjectivity as quite deep and quite natural and not determined by political and social factors” (p. 298). To the contrary, Elbow (1994) argues that what we call an “authentic voice” in writing is not some residue of an essential identity, but one that resonates as belonging legitimately to the author—one that is clearly chosen by the author and recognizable by that author as “sounding like me.” Elbow (1994) suggests that a distinctive or recognizable voice in writing is not about identity, but rather about a comfortable and easy, unforced way that a person may express herself in writing. He adds that, in much the way Dawn found herself unable to recognize her voice in her dissertation, “there are certain conditions where we don’t notice whether our textual voice feels like ours: if we have been somehow trained not to pay attention to the sound of our textual voice at all...” (Elbow, 1994, p. 18). When we worked together to edit her work, Dawn reconnected with her voice—hearing her ideas expressed in a voice that she could recognize as authentically of her own choosing—and, perhaps, having an editor sanction those thoughts in that authentic voice as good, clear communication helped. Dawn had about half of her dissertation written the first time we met and worked on her writing. Over the next two and a half weeks, she would write the remaining two and a half chapters. It was as if editing those first few chapters allowed the dam to break and the rest of what she new to flow out of her much more easily than had the work she had done prior.

The idea of reconnecting with voice is one that might be comforting and helpful

for doctoral students who are struggling with their dissertations. Davies (2000) wrote,

The effects of being positioned differently within new discourses can bring about observable dramatic personal changes. But there can also be deep resistance to such changes, even when at a rational or intellectual level the change is regarded as desirable. (p. 65)

Going through a PhD program, even when a student is deeply invested in succeeding in the program, can be a scary thing and can make a student feel as if she is having a hard time holding onto what sounds like her voice. Perhaps these students are trying so hard to become something new that they end up leaving useful bits of agency in their wake. Dawn talks about entering her first class and being overwhelmed by all of the new vocabulary, but then she mentions the difficulty of going back into her school with a new set of vocabulary that she can't use there. It is easy to see how she could feel as if she didn't fully belong in either world, as she struggled to live in one world while trying to write as if she were still living in the other. It also makes sense that helping Dawn hear her voice allowed her to reconnect with her identity and maybe to write herself into a new identity that would let her use a voice that felt authentically hers to say things that had previously been said only in language that felt foreign.

#### SYNTHESIS: REGAINING VOICE

Going back to the work of Elbow (1985, 1994, 1998) allowed me to start to see why this editing process had been so useful. According to Elbow (1994), "We identify and recognize people by their voices" (Elbow, 1994, p. 2); there is something social that relates identity and voice. "The best writing has *voice*: the life and rhythms of speech" (Elbow, 1985, p. 291), and "'having a voice' has traditionally meant having the authority to speak or wield influence..." (Elbow, 1994, p. 10). It makes sense that a student who no longer hears her voice in her writing would have trouble feeling as if she had the authority needed to do the kind of writing necessary to complete a PhD program.

Elbow (1985) also speaks about the experience common to many teachers, when they get writing from a student that is unclear to the point of being incoherent and engage the student in a conversation about the topic to find that she is perfectly capable of explaining herself vocally in a clear and coherent manner. Elbow (1985) argues that this is due, in part, to the fact that students have not been coached to "speak the thought onto the paper" (1985, p. 292), to "exploit the speech-like quality possible in writing" (1985, p. 299). The editing process in which Dawn and I engaged allowed her to connect that feeling of speaking her ideas to the process of writing her ideas, and the physicality of my reading her words to her and her editing them by explaining herself out loud encouraged her to reconnect her physical voice with the voice in her writing. The ultimate result was a growing confidence in her writing and her ability to speak about her topic with authority, all of which allowed her to imagine the possibility of successfully completing and defending the writing project. I have, on several occasions, heard professors say of student writing that they don't "see the student" anywhere in what has been written, and I hear them ask the student, "Where are you in this?" I suspect what they are trying to say is that they are not hearing the student's voice, that they are looking for the same clarity and coherence of thought that the student is capable of producing when participating in a class discussion or in a chat during office hours. For many reasons, that student may have come to the conclusion

that her spoken voice, that thing by which she may be identified, is not good enough for the gravity of the subject or for the immenseness of the ultimate goal of the writing, which is to be accepted as worthy of being called doctor. Perhaps what these students need to hear is that their voices are good enough and that they should use the same language they use in a class discussion in their papers.

Elbow (1998) also argues that a second major hindrance to student writing is the false notion that writers should try to get what they want to say written down just right the first time. Elbow (1998) explains that our schooling has caused us to be overly sensitive to making errors in our writing, which can cause paralysis as we sit at our keyboards trying to be sure we get exactly the right wording while making zero spelling or grammar mistakes. This, he argues, is one of the reasons we tend to think of speech as a less burdensome thing; it is why students like Dawn would prefer just to tell us what they know rather than being made to write it. When we speak, we are less likely to burden ourselves with the expectation of immediate perfection and allow ourselves to make mistakes, to say the wrong thing in the wrong way, and keep talking until we have made our point, but in writing, we can be hampered by that very expectation of immediate perfection that we would never impose on our speech.

Elbow (1998) believes that this has serious implications, especially when it comes to complicating the issue of voice in writing. "The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page" (Elbow, 1998, p. 6). To help students get beyond the need to write perfectly, I encourage students to engage in what I have taken to calling, "writing ugly." Especially for students who have completely stalled in their attempt to write their dissertations, I encourage them to get anything on the page, no matter how hideous it may be. I affirm for them that we can work together to make it pretty, but to do that, we have to have something ugly to work with. Speaking onto the paper, as Elbow suggests, and not giving a care for correctness or polish can actually help students create writing that is, in the end, pretty good and not really ugly at all, but being given permission to "write ugly" can help allay fears of getting it wrong the first time. To the contrary, getting it wrong the first time is the first and absolutely necessary step in ever getting it right.

This experience with Dawn has also highlighted the need for continuing education on the writing process itself that would accompany the work that graduate students are doing. Whether this came as part of the course curriculum or in a series of workshops, given that successfully completing a PhD program is going to require a student to spend a large portion of time writing, some sort of direct focus on how that can be done and how it can be made less burdensome and scary could be helpful to students who are having trouble engaging with that last, big writing assignment.

During this process, I also came to see what may be the most significant implication of this work, which is that the research and writing of students who fail to complete their program is research and writing that will never impact the world. Dawn's research, about teachers examining their Whiteness, has been seen by many who have read it as important for teachers in schools, for teacher education majors, and beyond. The future of her work has great potential to make our schools more equitable places, and I am glad that I could be part of helping her find her voice so that she could say something that so many need to hear.

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