# A DISCOURSE OF DOCTORAL QUALIFYING EXAM: A SELF OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION

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**Abstract:** This study, concern itself with a discourse of doctoral qualifying exam, an underresearched area of doctoral studies in the Indonesian context, concerns itself with a discourse of doctoral qualifying exam. The data for this study were drawn from naturalistic observations taking place during the doctoral ventures of the present researcher. Another methodological characteristic of the present study is the employment of selective self-reflections on the personal narratives of the researcher. The researcher attended some ten doctoral qualifying exams at one graduate school of one of Indonesian universities. The study arrived at two conspicuous features characterizing doctoral qualifying exams. Results of some comparative observations taking place in Thailand, Australia, and the United Sates are also presented to help clarify the characterization of the doctoral qualifying exams in the Indonesian university. Some recommendations for future research concerning doctoral studies will conclude the article.

Keywords: discourse, doctoral qualifying exam, doctoral studies.

There have been quite a number of studies addressing the issues surrounding the ventures of doctoral students (e.g., Barnes, 2005; Bingman, 2003; Comfort, 1995; Cox-Peterson, 2004; Ellis, 1997; Falkner, 2001; Filippelli, 1997; Homma, 1998; Mehra, 2004; Notaro, 2000; Pullen, 2003). Most of the sample studies on issues akin to doctoral studies have taken place in the U.S. These studies cover a variety of problems, which can roughly be classified into matters centered on the students, the advisors, the relation between the students and the advisors, and the doctoral program in general. Studies concerning the doctoral students can be further specified as those dealing with ethnic or racial issues (e.g., Bingman, 2003), ethnic and gender problems (e.g., Comfort, 1995; Ellis, 1997), and student experiences (e.g., Homma, 1998; Mehra, 2004; Pullen, 2003). Doctoral projects by Filippelli (1997), Hsing-I (2004), and Scott (2000) can be rendered as having concerns about the relations between the doctoral students and the advisors. Evaluative studies of doctoral programs are represented by those of Cox-Peterson (2004), Falkner (2001), and Notaro (2000).

Bingman (2003), for instance, explored the factors attributable to the success of African American doctoral students to complete their Ph.D. in Michigan State University. In the research, Bingman conducted interviews with ten African American women and men who had completed their Ph.D. within 4 years prior to the research. Among the findings, it was documented that emotional and academic support from their minority academic community members (administrative staff, professors, and peers) play a vital role to enthuse their doctoral studies. This point, as Bingman claims, counterclaims the long standing scholarly belief that racial issues are counter productive to the success of individuals of minority ethnic background. Different from Bingman's, yet still about African American students, Comfort (1995) explored the enactment of identity in academic writing; she worked with seven African American women doctoral students at the Ohio State University. This project shows that African American women students, as writers, are struggling against the predominant White European male voice in writing. Within the same spirit as that of Comfort, Ellis

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(1997) found, *inter alia*, that Black women, compared to Black men and White men and women students, tend to be unsuccessful in developing a good socialization during their doctoral studies. Subsequently, they also reportedly tend to be dissatisfied with their graduate study experiences.

Whilst Bingman (2003), Comfort (1995), and Ellis (1997) were concerned with African American doctoral students' issues, Mehra (2004) dealt with issues of international doctoral students. Mehra looked at the process by which the international students undertake their cross-cultural learning in a U.S. college. Apart from the findings she came up with, one aspect worth noting is her involvement in the research process as a participant-researcher. As a researcher, she explicitly acknowledges that she made some reference to her religious background in her efforts to understand the process by which international doctoral students undergo cross-cultural learning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

As the success (and failure) of doctoral studies relies on various factors, another interesting study deals with the relationship between the students and their advisors. Filippelli (1997), gendersensitive in her approach, raised questions on how and explored the extent to which male and female scientists' mentoring influences the performance of, among others, doctoral students. Hsing-I (2004), different in focus from that of Filippelli (1997), investigated the relationship between the doctoral students and the advisors/professors, particularly, with regard to the writing of doctoral candidacy, which includes, among other factors, the crucial factors of genre knowledge and authorship. In other words, Hsing-I has touched into the (re)setting and settling or negotiation of the rhetorical norms and expectations on the part of both the doctoral candidates and the professors, which can be rendered as disciplinary enculturation. Whilst Hsing-I paid attention to the "terminal" of doctoral candidacy, Scott (2000) explored the enculturation of ESL doctoral students into the discursive disciplinary practices as they write their dissertation.

Cox-Peterson (2004) worked on a qualitative analysis of a newly established doctoral program. Among the findings which have to do with the administration or organization of the program, the study found out that selection of the incoming students is of great import; it is imperative to guarantee collegiality among the cohorts, collegiality being vital to the success of the students. Another crucial finding is that the subjects produced some suggestions that the program administrators work about ways so that the students are geared to completing the first three chapters of the dissertation upon the completion of the coursework. This latter point conjures up the notion that the writing of the first three chapters of dissertation is crucial for the success of the doctoral candidature.

Different from the studies above, Barnes (2005) qualitatively investigated how exemplary advisors provide their advice for their advisees. Barnes incorporated 25 exemplary advisors from the areas of social sciences, humanities, education, and natural sciences into the pool of the research subjects. In the study, Barnes came up with four features of the advising mode of the exemplary doctoral advisors. First, the building of partnership in which both the advisors and the advisees develop a sort of responsibility for the success of the advisory process. The second point pertains to the notion of care; the exemplary advisors provide the advisees with necessary attention. Thirdly, the advisors tend accentuate the advising undertaking with "personal", instead of automatic, arid, impersonal touch. In other words, the advisors generate vibrant warmth in the advising relationship. The last point is that the advisors are active to engage in self reflections on their execution of the advisory tasks.

Despite the ample amount of research on the single theme of doctoral studies, all tend to be carried out in the U.S. and very few took place in Indonesia. I am aware of Rohmah's (2006) project only which had to do with Indonesian doctoral students. Along with the ramification of the unavailability of enough research on doctoral studies in Indonesia, Rohmah's is limited to investigate the student strategies in expressing disagreement within the confines of classroom discursive practice. So, despite its insightful illuminations, it has nothing to offer vis-à-vis the discursive practice of the doctoral qualifying exams in the Indonesian context of graduate studies. Hsing-I who has even dealt with doctoral candidacy writing, does not provide the pictures of the discoursal practice of the candidacy or doctoral qualifying exam.

The above point about the lack of research on doctoral studies in the Indonesian context is one issue. Another issue is that researchers outside of Indonesia have also been reported to make use of self-reflective interpretive approach to their works (see e.g., Knee, 1999; Papp, 1999; Orbán, 1999; Butling, 2002; Mehra, 2004). Whilst Knee and Papp stretch ideas stemming from their teaching experience in settings culturally different from their origins, Orbán presents her observation as a student. While Papp and Orbán have been concerned with academic settings in Eastern Europe, Knee's concern has been that in Asia—Bangkok, Thailand. Butling has a different matter and different observation setting which are different from the studies by Knee, Papp, and Orbán. She selectively inspected her own narratives and tried to place her personal narratives within the larger context of feminist discourse and thus came up with the notion of legitimacy of her endeavors.

In light of the above line of argument, the present paper has some similarity of research methodology to those of Orbán and Butling, which seems to be overlooked by researchers in Indonesia. This signifies that the present paper boasts its own significance of addressing two overlooked areas of research in the Indonesian context, that is, the study on the doctoral qualifying exams and the use of (selective) self reflection(s) as an approach to the understanding of the object of research.

#### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This article did not come up from a "hard" and "fast" sense of methodology; rather, it is based on my natural observations as a student at a graduate school of one of Indonesian universities. The observations spanned for some three years, since my study commencement in 2003 up till the conclusion of the study in 2006. During my study, I produced some 10 times of attendance to doctoral qualifying exams from which I can figure out some salient features. It should also be added that other than attending the qualifying exams in the university I went to, I also happened to record some anecdotal observations of some graduate student meetings in one of Thai, Australian, and American universities. The latter will be used to make comparative delineation when discussing the findings based on my observations at the university in Indonesia I noted earlier.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

My observations produce two conspicuous features characterizing the qualifying exams at the abovementioned university in Indonesia. We shall discuss the two issues shortly.

#### **Provision of Meal**

One of the noticeable configurations of the doctoral qualifying exams is the provision of meal worked about by the candidate. A relevant and interesting question arising is as to what extent this situation is similar to or different from other academic venues. Here a comparative account will be provided.

During my one-month stint of research at one of Thai universities, in the southern part of the country, I happened to attend an academic meeting in which some renowned Thai scholars were addressing a quite big audience. The meeting was held at an amphitheater of the University. What is interesting was a comment from an expatriate scholar (an Australian) working for the University. Partly jokingly, partly contemptuously, he said some words like, "Hey, you've got to go to the meeting. It's on Islam and some food." Startled by the observation, I asked for clarification and he smilingly replied that academic meetings in Thai universities do not attract audience unless some meal is provided. This situation reminds me of the result of the voting conducted by the Forum Komunikasi Mahasiswa (The Forum for Student Communication) of the graduate school I have noted. The voting which was designated to affirm if provision of meal during the qualifying exam is necessary or not turned out to be in favor of those wishing to maintain the provision of meal. Imperative in this case is how to interpret the situation.

There are at least three possibilities why the Indonesian students retain the "tradition" of providing meal in a doctoral qualifying exam. The first point relegates to the economic problem tampering Indonesia. The hampering economic problem directly or indirectly bears impacts on the need of the Indonesian students (in general) to "wisely" manage their budget to sustain their "life" along the course of their doctoral studies. Here creeps in the need of the students to maintain that the doctoral candidate provides meal in the "ceremony" of doctoral qualifying exam. The provision of meal is often said in a jocular way by the audience to be the site for "nutrition betterment." Consequently, indirectly though, this situation suggests that Indonesian students, as the result of the voting shows, tend to meddle academic enterprise (that is of doctoral qualifying exam) with the more basic need for meal (in Maslowian hierarchy of needs).

The second potential interpretation is that Indonesian students are still within the constraints of their traditions in which (religious) rituals to seek for and preserve safety by means of providing some offerings (including meal) are still prominent. Since a doctoral qualifying exam is consequential within the wholesale doctoral career of the candidate, she or he seems to be quite mindful of the notion of "safety" which is comparable to "success." In order that she or he can secure the safety (success), the tradition of providing some offerings (meal) is applied. So, the provision of the meal in the doctoral qualifying exam is driven from two sides, the audience and the doctoral candidates themselves—the audience being in a decisive position in that failure on the part of the candidate to provide meal likely results in the candidate's failure to keep the audience (from abandoning their seats), thus the academic meeting of doctoral qualifying exam is not productive.

The other interpretation is that possibly the doctoral candidate equates her or himself to a host(tess) who, in an Indonesian sense, is responsible to work on hospitality. In this context, meal is a prominent means to show her or his cordiality towards her or his guests, in this case, the audience and examiners attending the qualifying exam. This situation insinuates that a doctoral qualifying exam does not seem to be an academic setting needed badly by the audience to entertain on their own thinking faculty; rather, it can be rendered as a place whereby the doctoral candidate needs the attendance of the audience to guarantee that it has the flavor of "academicness."

The foregoing discussion has touched upon the meal provision within academic meetings seen from two Southeast Asian regions, Indonesia and Thailand. An interesting question that might help clarify the picture is: "How about other settings, say in the West?" As far as I am concerned, in one Australian university, there might be some provision of refreshments instead of the "heavier" version of Indonesian food. This also bears some truth with an American university. Another distinctive feature is that in both the Australian and American universities, it is not the candidate who provides the meal.

In a nutshell, within the business of qualifying exam, Indonesian doctoral candidates can be rendered as bearing two different duties: academic, that is, the writing and defense of the doctoral research prospectus or proposal, and non-academic, namely, meal supply. So, based on the tradition, Indonesian doctoral students seem to assume more burdens compared to their counterparts in Western universities. If this conclusion bears some veracity, it might help explain why some students think that undertaking graduate studies in Indonesian universities is more burdensome.

## **Copies of the Doctoral Proposal**

It is natural that for the sake of generating interactive and insightful discussions during the qualifying exams (preliminary exams or prelims, prospectus exams), the examinee (*promovendus*) provides the audience with ample copies of his or her dissertation proposal. What is interesting to look at is that usually the copies distributed to the audience are different from those for the examiners. The copies for the audience are the simplified ones in which the section or chapter on the "extensive" review of the related literature is omitted; only those for the examiners are the complete ones. In this case, perhaps the students apply the economical principle. This seems to be natural, for the students also need to allocate some amount of his or her budget for the meal.

Another interpretation bearing some relevance is that the student does not think that the inclusion of the section or chapter on the literature review is quite necessary. In other words, the exclusion of the section or chapter is not thought to jeopardize the flow of the discourse in the proposal text. To tease out this matter, I would refer to the basic formulation of academic advancement. In a simple (metaphorical) formulation, academic endeavor (research) can be deemed to be attempts to add a "second story" to the "first story" of the existing academic discourse. Research proposal is the means by which the doctoral candidate shows the significance (in a broad sense) why she or he proposes to conduct the project, significance in the sense of offering a "second story" to the established academic discourse or the "first story."

Germane to this discussion is Swales' (1990; 2004) formulation of *Create a Research Space* or CARS model of research articles. Stipulated in the model is that a researcher, particularly in developed countries, is compelled to show, in order to convince the audience, that she or he knows what is going on in the scholarly discourse (first story) within her or his topic of the proposed research. By the same token, back to the case of the doctoral candidature, the prima facie the doctoral candidate has to deal with is to convince the examiners, as part of their audience, that she or he knows the "first story" and knows how to add the first story with a "second story", that is, the one she or he is proposing. This is what constitutes the significance of her or his proposed project. In this case, review of related literature is critical, for the review is the aspect which allows the candidate to know the "first story." In other words, as long as the candidate is able to convince the audience with her or his introduction and methodology which shows her or his promise of a "second story", she or he is done. So, tentatively, the inclusion or the writing of review of related literature (usually presented as Chapter II) can be concluded not to bear real significance in the process of qualifying exam as long as the introductory section or chapter presents explicitly the candidate's knowledge of the "first story" and her or his promise to offer the "second story." In other words, the usual lengthy dissertation proposal can be substantially shortened by eliminating the second chapter (review of the related literature) if the second chapter does not directly show the "first story."

## **Some Further Delineation**

If we accept the above tentative conclusion, what is really needed by the doctoral candidate in writing proposal for qualifying exam is to show the significance of her or his study, which can be accomplished by, particularly, review of related literature, especially empirical studies of some relevance or affinities, which can be presented in the first chapter, or introductory section. However, indirectly, as reflected on the way how Indonesian writers write research articles, Indonesians tend to fail to show this research significance (by indicating research gap, or research space after reviewing others' work) in the introductory section (Mirahayuni, 2001, 2002; Basthomi, 2005, 2006; Safnil, 2000). If this also occurs in the writing of doctoral research proposal, Indonesian candidates are likely to fail to show the significance of their proposed project and subsequently tend to fail to convince the audience, particularly, the examiners.

To help clarify the issue, I shall relate it to another phenomenon of a different setting. At the end of my second semester, while waiting for the examination result of my M.A. project, I found myself approached by one of my Indonesian fellows grappling with her Ph.D. proposal at an Australian university. She seemed to show some degree of frustration, for her proposal had not met the expectation of her supervisor. She showed me all of her drafts with all comments from her supervisor. I concluded that my friend had a similar problem to that of my Master's project, that is, what made the topic, methodology, and theoretical framework different from or similar to others'. Therefore, I applied my tentative conclusion consisting of the three questions (triple-question about the topic, methodology, and theoretical framework). Since I did not have enough time to meticulously read through her proposal, I just addressed my triplequestion to her. She seemed to be shocked to learn my questions. But, eventually, after mulling over for some moment, she learned that she had the

needed materials to answer my questions. She showed me the answers to the first, second, and third questions. Literally, fortunately, she had the resources (literature review) to answer my questions.

The situation above led me to think that she already had the necessary content of the proposal. What was left out was the wrapping of the content, that is, the rhetoric (albeit my failure at the time to come to the word "rhetoric" instead of the "wrapping" metaphor). The undertaking which followed was sorting out the materials to answer the triplequestion and fabricating them in a more explicit way (the fronting of the materials to the introductory section) in her proposal text of doctoral candidacy. Since both of us are non-native speakers of English, we did not do much about the accuracy of the English expressions; it was beyond our reach. I particularly tried to make sure that the three issues were addressed explicitly. When we were done with this rhetorical issue, she decided to show it to her supervisor before finding a native English speaker proofreader for the language accuracy. To our surprise and happiness, her supervisor gave a very short comment, "Well done!"

Although, to my dismay, I received only a mediocre grade for my own M.A. project, I found myself starting to develop a feeling that I could do a further graduate project; my "wrapping" metaphor which consists of the three points of question or checklist seems to work, particularly, for my friend. Therefore, arriving back home, I felt determined to embark on a doctorate. Along my doctoral probation, I have changed my topic of research three times in three semester terms. I feel I could do it swiftly without significant problems. In this case, I did not really think of any crucial issues other than the triple-key questions I have developed, which relates to rhetoric. To me, my failure with my first and second topic of research proposal was a matter of suiting the topic with the available expertise. This is a blessing in disguise, for eventually, I could resort to my experience, that is, I could select rhetorical problems as my topic of research. Since rhetorical problems have been intertwined with endeavors in the realm of scholarly academic writing, I started searching reading materials pertinent to the writing of academic pieces. Fortunately, I came across Flowerdew's (2001) article about the attitudes of international journal editors towards the research article contribution of non-native speakers of English.

At this juncture, the word rhetoric had not yet come to my mind. After reading through Flowerdew's article aforementioned, I realized the necessity to show a "research niche." The term "research niche" further directed me to find Swales' CARS model. In short, Flowerdew's and Swales' works provide supports to my tentative triple-key issues of the rhetoric of research article and/or research proposal writing. The triple-key issues are then clear to me to be centered on the idea of *Create a Research Space* (CARS) in Swales' (1990) book-length treatise (revised in his recent, 2004 book).

Hence, so long that the Indonesian doctoral candidates can articulate the CARS formulation in their research proposal, they are not really in need for the writing of Chapter II, review of the related literature, especially if it does not really add to the articulation of the "first story" and "second story" metaphor above. If this can be achieved, the burden of the doctoral candidate in the construction of the doctoral proposal can be aptly reduced without worrying about jeopardizing the academic quality of the research proposal.

#### CONCLUSION

Research on issues of doctoral studies in the Indonesian context has not been on a par with that in the U.S. This bears some open areas of research on the issues in Indonesia. Since the pertinent research in Indonesia is still scanty, theoretical issues surfacing have not been attended to as critical. On the other hand, varied theoretical outlooks have emerged in the execution of studies in the U.S. Racial and gender considerations have been intricately articulated in a number of studies on doctoral studies. In addition, cross-cultural learning process or

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enculturation have also been adequately attended to in U.S. academic settings. Such subject matters might be rewarding insights for the execution of similar studies in the Indonesian context, owing to the fact that the center of excellence has still been hitherto deemed by far to be universities in Java (Adnan, 2004). This being the case, cross-cultural enculturation might be a crucial research topic, for a number of doctoral students in universities in Java come from areas outside of Java.

Another issue might relate to the self-introspective mode of study such as those of Mehra (2004) and Butling (2002) briefly reviewed above. This methodological issue seems to have been burgeoning in the West (see also, e.g., Canagarajah, 2001; Bhatia, 2001; Enkvist, 2001), but seemingly, on the other hand, has not been in fad in the Indonesian academe. Still yet other issues pertain to the evaluative research of the Indonesian doctoral programs such as that of Cox-Peterson (2004) and the mentoring or advisory relationship between the doctoral students and the supervisors such as those of Filippelli (1997) and Hsing-I (2004). All these can be initial resources to instigate more flourishing studies on doctoral studies in the Indonesian context.

This reflective-introspective paper has come up with two salient features of the doctoral qualifying exams in an Indonesian graduate school. This means that further substantiation of the claims and/or interpretation in this cursory study is imperative if more rigorous claims are deemed crucial for the betterment to be harnessed to the academic endeavors in Indonesia.

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