Genre Innovations in Dissertation Writing: Trends and Recommendations for Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Programs

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Abstract

Concomitant with calls from scholars to pluralize academic writing to reflect diverse social realities (Canagarajah, 2013; Dryer et al., 2014; Horner, 2011; Martinez, 2020; Palmeri, 2007; Weisser, 2002) and with advocacy efforts by industry specialists to make dissertation writing more in tune with a rapidly changing professional world (Futures Initiative, 2014; Porter et al, 2018), several Rhetoric and Composition graduate students have been creating innovative dissertations. However, research on graduate-level dissertation writing programs shows that genre innovation is not explicitly taught in such programmes (Autry and Carter, 2015; Baillargeon, 2020; Habib et al., 2020; Sundstrom, 2014). To assist graduate programme directors and instructors in responding to calls to transform dissertation writing by creating curricular reforms, data on the type of dissertations considered to be innovative by disciplinary members would be helpful. Welch et al. (2002) conducted the last such survey but more recent surveys are required. In this paper, I present results from a study where I collected (n = 21) Rhetoric and Composition dissertations written between 2000-2020 that are considered to be innovative by disciplinary members. Findings show that narrative discourses (76%) and multimodal artifacts (62%) are the two biggest types of innovation in this dataset, while translingualism (9%) does not make a prominent presence. The discussion section contextualizes these findings and provides recommendations for graduate program directors as well as researchers.

Keywords: genre innovation, genre analysis, dissertation-writing, doctoral thesis, PhD, translingual, multimodal, counterstory, graduate education, Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS)

Introduction

Recently, the Rhetoric, Composition, and Teaching of English program (RCTE) at the University of Arizona updated its program handbook for graduate students. Among the many changes made, one of the most significant ones was the shift in options that students now have for writing their final dissertations. While earlier versions of the handbook describe dissertations simply as texts that "tend to be 200-300 pages long and are broken into four to six chapters" (RCTE Program 2020, p.2), the updated version "offers three alternative formats for the dissertation: a traditional monograph dissertation, [...] a portfolio dissertation, [...] a multimodal dissertation" (RCTE Program, 2021, p.26). This major transition mirrors the recent call for entries for the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (CWPA) dissertation award which invited both traditional as well as "multimodal and digital dissertations" (Johnson, 2020). These developments are concomitant with expansive shifts happening in the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition (henceforth referred to as Rhet-Comp) with students in many doctoral programs

experimenting with innovative new forms of dissertation writing. Various scholars have also been advocating for academic writing and knowledge-making to be pluralized in Rhet-Comp and allied fields to reflect diverse social realities (Canagarajah, 2013; Dryer et al., 2014; Horner et al., 2011; Martinez, 2020; Palmeri, 2007; Weisser, 2002), as well as for graduate education and scholarly communication systems across academia to to be transformed in sync with a rapidly changing professional world (Futures Initiative, 2014; Porter et al, 2018).

Since conventionally the dissertation genre has been a very conservative one as it "fulfills a rhetorical ritual for institutions" (Hyland, 2011, p.143), such major changes happening to it warrant our attention. It is important to keep in mind that scholarly writing or "what a researcher does to communicate the results of research to a field or discipline" (Williamson and Huot, 2012, p. 41) are rhetorical acts which reflect epistemic values that a discipline holds (Carter, 2007; Hyland, 2011), so any changes in the norms governing them become potent sites to study developments in the "shared understanding(s) between a group of scholars about the world and the work they do" (Williamson and Huot, 2012, p.41).

As graduate program directors and instructors in Rhetoric and Composition engage with these emerging calls, they need data documenting the kinds of genre features that get considered as being innovative by disciplinary members in order to make decisions about which genre innovations to encourage in their own programs and to persuade key stakeholders about the need for curricular revisions. While there have been impressive efforts recently to map common genre patterns in the research methods and content areas present in Rhetoric and Composition dissertations between 2001-2010 (see Miller, 2022), genre innovations in such dissertations have not been given enough attention in recent times. The last time such data was collected was in 2002 by Welch et al. (2002) thus there is a need to collect more recent data to study contemporary developments. In this paper, I attempt to fill this gap by answering the following research question—among dissertations considered to be innovative in Rhet-Comp over the last two decades (2000-2020), which genre features are prevalent? Answering this question will help graduate program directors and graduate instructors in Rhet-Comp make better data-driven decisions about which genre innovations to encourage and support in their own graduate level dissertation writing programs, bootcamps and courses.

Literature Review

Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) & Graduate Education

The study of genres has a long and diverse history across disciplines like literature, linguistics, applied linguistics, Rhetoric and Composition, education, sociology and media studies (Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010). Within this ecosystem, a specifical constellation called Rhetorical Genre Studies or RGS, developed in North America has been vital for the development of writing pedagogies across both undergraduate and graduate contexts. Central to RGS's conceptualization of genre is a social understanding that looks at genres as "as typified ways of acting within recurrent situations, and as cultural artifacts that can tell us things about how a particular culture configures situations and ways of acting" (Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010, p.78). This social understanding of genre has led to a wide range of conceptual precepts that have enabled a deeper understanding of academic genres which in turn has richly informed writing instruction. Among the many concepts popularized by RGS, some of the prominent ones include an understanding that genres don't exist in isolation but as genre sets and networks; they mediate

and distribute cognition across activity systems; they get "uptaken" or consumed by audiences who receive specific instances of genres; they involve complex acquisition processes through which people develop genre knowledge or expertise; and that they transform through a dialectic of innovation and stability over time (Bawarshi and Reiff, 2015, p.78-104).

There is a lot of research that utilizes genre theory, particularly Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) to study graduate level writing and graduate level writing pedagogy in the US. Autry and Carter (2015), for example, provide a profile of their graduate level writing support programs at the North Carolina State University where they use RGS to help their students "to make the genres of the dissertation visible to students" (Autry and Carter, 2015). Specifically, they conceptualize the dissertation genre as a system of genres which they argue contains many "occluded genres" or genres that are usually hidden from explicit instruction (e.g: proposals, grant applications, emails to committees, oral defense etc.). Their program provides explicit training in these occluded genres to their students. Baillargeon (2020) too provides a profile of "dissertation bootcamps" carried out at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and among their findings, they highlight the need to balance discipline specific dissertation writing instruction with universal dissertation writing instruction, thereby pointing towards the need to develop a deeper understanding of discipline specific dissertation genre norms. Similarly, Habib et al. (2020) provide a profile of graduate level writing instruction at George Mason University's bridge program for international, multilingual students. They specifically highlight the potential of utilizing Tardy (2009)'s model of building genre knowledge to develop such programs. In Tardy's model, genre knowledge or genre expertise develops at the intersection of rhetorical knowledge (the socio-cultural purposes that texts serve), formal knowledge (structural or lexico-grammatical features), subject-matter knowledge (disciplinary concepts), and process-knowledge (practices through which writing is enacted). Sundstrom (2014) also similarly profiles the use of RGS at a graduate level writing program at the University of Kansas where graduate students are trained to become ethnographers that study how genres operate in their disciplines.

Surveying this body of RGS research on graduate level writing and dissertation level writing pedagogies shows that currently, there is a dearth of explicit teaching of genre innovation that happens in such programs.

Genre Innovation and Stability within Rhetoric and Composition Dissertations

Tardy (2016) argues that since a major function of genres is to help us classify and make sense of our vast experiences with language across our lifetimes, they are usually conceptualized in terms of recognizable common features across multiple examples, with their consistent and stable conventions often being articulated as essential to them. However, paradoxically, genres are also known for being fluid and dynamic through which they evolve notions of what is acceptable genre usage. Specifically, genre innovations are "departures from genre convention that are perceived as effective and successful by the text's intended audience or community of practice" (Tardy, 2016, p.9). The type of innovations could be at different levels. They could be a simple surface level textual difference, like the use of emoticons in a formal genre, or they could be a deeper structural difference like a shift in the register of writing from academic to narrative throughout a formal text. There is no fixed list of features though that can be considered to be innovative as it varies from genre to genre and context to context. Further, whether genre innovations are accepted or rejected depends on power structures. Tardy (2016) stresses that "to be deemed "innovative," a text must not only depart from convention but also be perceived as effective and successful by the text's intended audience or community of practice"

(p.11). The study of genre innovations thus involves both a writers' "playful manipulations" of genre features as well as the "forces that may discourage such manipulations and that are marked by unequal structures of power" (Tardy, 2016, p.11).

Academic writing, especially dissertations are generally considered to be a relatively stable genre that is not very open to innovations since dissertation writers' primary goal is to satisfy their readers which are usually senior academics in order to gain acceptance into their disciplinary academic communities, a scenario in which departing from conventions can carry high risks (Tardy, 2016, p. 50). Yet, as documented by various researchers (Bailie and Parks, 2020; Bizzell, 1999; Bizzell, 2022; Eisner, 1997; Hebb, 2002; Shipka 2016; Wardle, 2014), academic writers and even dissertation writers do innovate across disciplines for a wide variety of reasons like foregrounding alternative ways of knowing, engaging in authentic self-expression and for resisting and changing dominant discourses (Tardy, 2016).

Within the field of Rhet-Comp, studies of dissertation genres can broadly be classified into two distinct but overlapping traditions: one that studies stability or norms in genre features and one that focuses on innovations in genre features. Benjamin Miller's work, which includes an article from 2014, his own dissertation from 2015, and his recent 2022 book, provides a great example of the first tradition that maps patterns of regularity and stability in dissertation writing. The other tradition on the other hand, exemplified by several studies that were documented in a collection by Welch et al. (2002) and at a doctoral consortium that was organized at the CCCC conference in 2001 (The Doctoral Consortium, 2001), map out patterns of innovation and change. While distinct in their specific focus of study, both traditions also overlap as endeavors within larger disciplinary efforts to map out and understand epistemic trends with a larger goal to craft a coherent disciplinary identity (Gallagher et al., 2023; Mueller, 2017; Adler-Kassner and Wardle, 2016; Mueller, 2012; Brown et al., 2008; North, 1987; Hillocks, 1986).

Since Welch et al. (2002), the second tradition in this body of work, i.e. the one that maps dissertation innovations, hasn't seen a focused inquiry in recent times, which is why, in this study, I wish to extend their work. In the range of essays present in Welch et al. (2002), discursive hybridizations between academic and narrative discourse, as well as new media experiments were the most frequent genre innovations. With regards to the first kind of innovation, we can think of "discourse" as the functions that a text performs which are generally classified into one or more of the following four categories, although these aren't conclusive: "description, or picturing; narration, or telling; exposition, or explaining; and argument, or convincing" (Crews 13). While exposition, description and argument are commonly used in dissertation writing, narration is less commonly so. In Welch et al. (2002), Cook and Fike (2002) reflect on their experiences mixing academic prose with narrative prose in ethnographic research (in Cook's dissertation), and the mixing of academic prose with poetry (in Fike's dissertation). Another article in this collection by Stremlau (2002) also looks at the use of personal non-fictional narrative writing in their dissertation writing.

In the same collection, Walker and Moxley (2002) studied dissertation innovations in the form of new media experiments which for them meant two things. To understand these better, it is important to first define terms like "mode" and "media". Mode "may be defined as the semiotic representation (textual, aural, visual) used to present information [...] Multimodality, then, refers to the use of different modes in an integrated fashion to communicate meaning (e.g., text and visual combined in a blog)" (Elola and Oskoz, 2017, p. 53). Media on the other hand are "the technological means of inscription and production that shape the ways any message is conveyed and accessed" (Elola and Oskoz, 2017, p. 510). In a digital story, for instance, a learner

would combine the visual mode (images), the aural mode (the sound, spoken word, music) and the textual mode (subtitles) through the digital story software (medium)" (Elola and Oskoz, 2017, p. 53).

In Walter and Moxley's (2002) work, we see two types of dissertation innovations involving modes and media. The first kind of innovation involved media in the form of ETD or Electronic Thesis & Dissertations. This means the online archival of dissertations enabling access by networked communities across the globe, creating much more global and diverse audiences. This innovation, which seems a common convention at our times, warranted for Walker and Moxley great possibility in terms of a wider readership for academic scholarship as well as concerns about potential copyright violations by unknown digital readers. The second innovation in their work involved the use of multiple modes like texts and images or videos to create dissertations. While there aren't many examples of this innovation in their work, their article is marked by excitement and hope about this type of innovation becoming more prevalent in the future and they urgently request their peers to adapt to these new technologies in order to remain relevant.

Together, such reflections in the essays collected in Welch et al. (2002) show us that narrative innovations in the form of personal autobiographical narratives and new media experiments in the form of ETDs and multimodality were the most prominent types of innovations happening in the early 2000s. At a doctoral consortium held at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2001, students like Tonya, Cindy, and Alys also confirm their discursive hybridizations between narration, poetry and academic prose as an important innovation type at the time (Doctoral Consortium, 2001). They also reflect on how their attempts to innovate were constantly met by graduate faculty presenting writing conventions as a responsibility they need to uphold as members of the field or risk not getting good jobs.

Since this collection in 2002, there hasn't been much research studying more recent trends of dissertation innovation in Rhet-Comp, even though calls to transform and expand academic writing have increased manifolds since then (see Canagarajah, 2013; Dryer et al., 2014; Horner et al., 2011; Martinez, 2020; Palmeri, 2007; Weisser, 2002; Futures Initiative, 2014; Porter et al, 2018). To help graduate writing directors and instructors respond to such calls and make data-driven decisions about potential curricular revisions in any genre based writing instruction they provide to their graduate students, it is thus vital to document more recent dissertation innovations attempts.

Methods

The study was designed to specifically respond to this research question—among dissertations considered to be innovative in Rhet-Comp over the last two decades (2000-2020), which genre features are prevalent? The processes of data collection and analysis are described in detail below.

Data Collection

To collect data, this study followed 'purposeful sampling' which refers to the targeted selection of samples by a researcher that most accurately typifies the kind of data they are interested in studying (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). This is different from generalizable research where a representative sample is gathered to arrive at an understanding of the average or

mean in a population. In purposeful sampling, on the other hand, one seeks to understand trends in unique, but representative cases. Since the purpose of this study was to understand the types of genre features considered to be innovative between 2000-2020 in the field of Rhetoric and Composition purposeful sampling was operationalized by reaching out to members of the discipline and collecting their opinions about which dissertations they considered to be innovative. According to Tardy (2009), genre innovations become innovative when accepted by ideal audience members, thus following this approach to seek out disciplinary members was most suitable for this study.

To operationalize this approach, I identified popular list-servs used by scholars in the field like the CWPA-listserv (which has recently been suspended) as well as popular Rhet-Comp, writing pedagogy, and translingualism groups on facebook. I then drafted the following message and circulated it in these virtual settings:

- *Hi all,*
  Could you please recommend some examples of graduate students innovating with the dissertation genre in Rhet-Comp beyond the traditional monograph dissertation written in standard english?
  I am exploring the different genre innovations that Rhet-Comp students have done so far in their dissertations to get a better sense of the range of options grad students have for knowledge making in the field. As of now, I know of A.D. Carson's "Owning My Masters" dissertation at Clemson University written as a rap album, and Aja Martinez' "Critical Race Counterstory" submitted to the University of Arizona which intersperses academic prose with counterstories.
  Any leads would be really helpful. Thank you.
  Warmly,
  <<Author's name>>
  <<Author's institutional affiliation>>

A wide range of people responded to this with suggestions of what they considered to be innovative examples of dissertations in Rhetoric and Composition. I sent follow up private messages to them to solicit further information about these examples as well as any other examples that they could suggest. Based on which I was able to collect 21 dissertations. While a more comprehensive data collection might have involved sending out surveys to a wider range of faculty and graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition, since this research was carried out during the peak of the Covid pandemic, it was logistically difficult to collect more data. Nonetheless even with the current approach, 21 dissertations were identified as innovative by disciplinary members identified through this strategy. Even though these members are not representative or mouthpieces of the entire discipline, they represent an important set of voices that shape virtual conversations about the discipline and thus have some representative value.

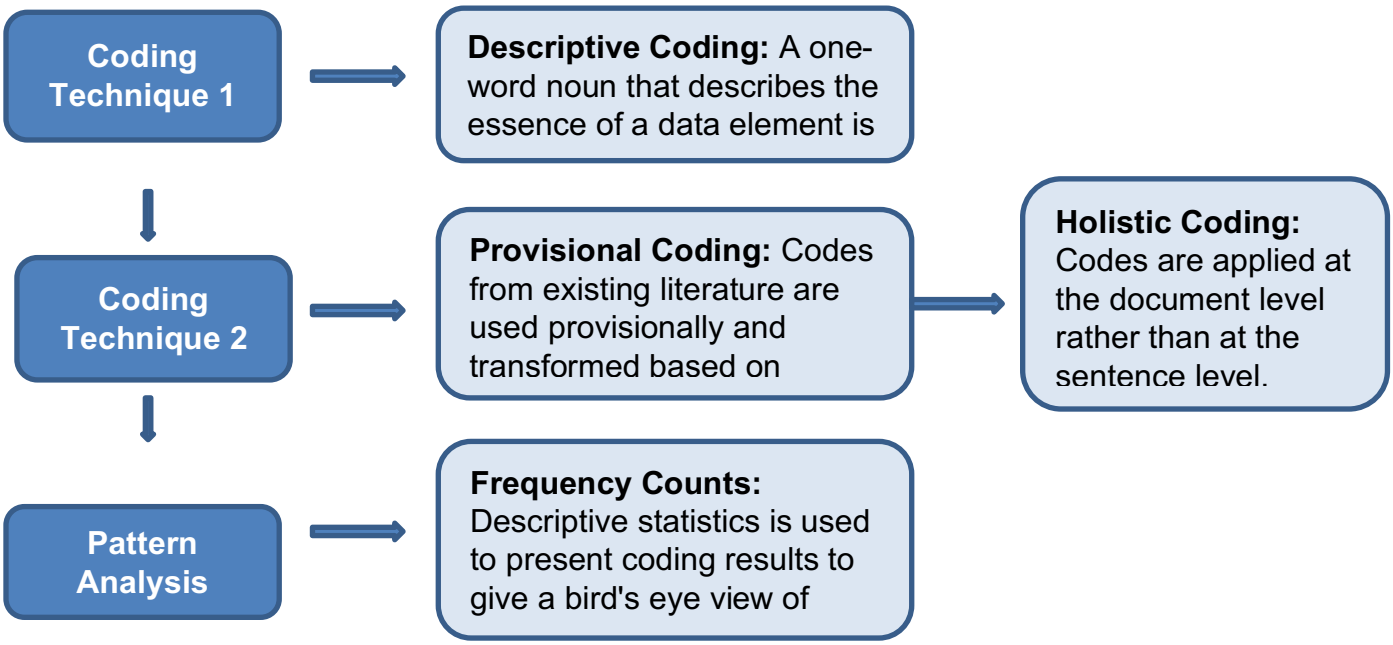
Data Analysis

To analyze this dataset, Saldaña's (2016) qualitative coding method was adopted. This is a form of qualitative analysis whereby codes which are words or short phrases that "symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data" (p. 4) are assigned to elements in a dataset using which patterns can be illuminated which help us understand relationships like similarities, differences, frequencies, sequences, correspondences, and causations.

A coding methodology involves the layering of several coding techniques that can be

carried simultaneously or sequentially till results that help answer a study's research question are achieved. For this study, descriptive coding was the primary coding technique carried out which was operationalized using a mixture of provisional coding and holistic coding, with the final results presented using frequency counts to help analyze trends in the data. The diagram below summarizes this approach:

Figure 1
Data analysis methods based on Saldaña's (2016) qualitative coding methods



Given the purpose of this project to help graduate program directors and instructors have data about the kind of genre innovations considered to be innovative by disciplinary members, "descriptive coding" was selected given its vital role in helping create "a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data's contents" (Saldaña, 2016, p.104). Essentially, this type of coding "summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2016, p.102) which can be used to create tabular inventories.

To decide what kind of descriptive codes to use to code a dataset, researchers can deploy multiple techniques. If researchers find that there are existing coding schemas or conceptual terms used in existing literature on their research questions, then they can use "provisional coding". This type of coding involves creating an anticipated list of codes based on "literature reviews related to the study, the study's conceptual frame-work and research questions, previous research findings, pilot study fieldwork, the research-er's previous knowledge and experiences (experiential data), and researcher-formulated hypotheses or hunches" (Saldaña, p. 168). Keeping this in mind, my initial list of provisional codes included "structure", "mode", "language", and "genre".

Another consideration that qualitative researchers have to keep in mind is the level at which to apply these codes. Should they be applied at the world level, sentence level, page level,

or document level? Since genre features often exist at the document level rather than at the sentence, I decided to use a form of coding technique called "holistic coding" to decide the answer to this methodological question. Saldaña explains that holistic coding is an attempt "to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole [the coder as 'lumper'] rather than by analyzing them line by line [the coder as 'splitter']" (Dey qtd. in Saldaña, 2016, p.166).

As the name of 'provisional' coding technique suggests, researchers transform their original codes as they start coding the data based on what they find in order to increase the sharpness of their coding process. These initial codes gradually expanded and contracted till they reached the form in which they are there in the current results section. For example, under the provisional "genre" code I was initially including sub-codes like "narrative" or "argumentative". However, I realized that I was also using the term "genre" to refer to the overarching focus of my study - dissertation genres. This lack of precision in terminology would be a problem so I consulted the literature and came across the term 'rhetorical modes' as more appropriate than 'genre' for coding things like "argumentative" or "narrative" etc. This seemed to fit perfectly, however, it was clashing with another code, "mode" where I was coding values like "audio", "visual", "textual" etc. So I decided to ultimately create a code of "discourse type" and put "rhetorical modes" in brackets next to it as the overarching code for values like "narrative" and "argumentative", replacing the original "genre" code.

It is important to remember that qualitative coding is not a "precise science, but primarily an interpretive act" (Saldaña', 2015, p.5). Such transformations as described above happened throughout the process indicating the slipperiness of coding. Saldaña (2016), in fact, mentions that coding is like "decorating a room; you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on" (p. 12). This is why it is important for researchers to document the various interpretive decisions they take at different stages which enables future researchers to audit their process, thus increasing the validity of their findings. This is why, a detailed, but rough codebook where all this data was coded can be found in Appendix A and my detailed coding memos can be found in Appendix B respectively.

Finally, in sync with Saldaña (2016) suggestions about appropriate methods to use to analyze the patterns developed through results of descriptive coding, a descriptive statistical technique, specifically, frequency counts was used to tabulate an inventory of dissertation innovations in the dataset to generate a bird's eye view of existing trends (p. 105).

Results

Code 1 (C1): Discourse

The first major type of innovation seen in the dissertations was at the level of discourse type. As discussed earlier, discourse refers to the to the functions that a text performs and is generally classified into one or more of the following four categories, although these aren't conclusive: "description, or picturing; narration, or telling; exposition, or explaining; and argument, or convincing" (Crews 13). Table 1 presents these results in greater detail.

Table 1

Code 1: Discourse Type

Sub Codes	Definition	Number of dissertations (out of 21)	Percentage	Description of genre features	Representative examples
Description-Exposition-Argumentation	a mixture of "description, or picturing; [...] exposition, or explaining; and argument, or convincing" (Crews 13).	21	100	five chapter structure: introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion	All
Narrative Supplements (NS)	"narration, or telling" (Crews 13) which includes characters, plots, and settings	16	76.2		
NS Type A: Fiction		4	19.1	counter stories; ghost tour; video game;	Martinez (2012)
NS Type B: Non Fiction		12	57.1	autobiographical reflection; participant data	Helms (2010)

In the data, over 76% of the dissertations included narrative elements which shows that there is an overwhelming acceptance of this innovation in rhetoric composition. Out of this, the majority or 57% were non fiction elements like autobiographical reflection or ethnographic data written in a subjective, narrative style, but interestingly, 19% also involved fictional narratives in the form of counter stories or video game storylines. This is an interesting new genre innovation that has developed during 2000-2020.

Code 2 (C2): Mode

The second major code that emerged was "mode". As discussed earlier, mode refers to "the semiotic representation (textual, aural, visual) used to present information [...] Multimodality, then, refers to the use of different modes in an integrated fashion to communicate meaning (e.g., text and visual combined in a blog)" (Elola and Oskoz, 2017, p. 53). Over 61% dissertations experimented with multimodality (with audio, visuals, and texts being the most popular modes). It is clear that this is the most commonly accepted area of innovation that Rhet-Comp dissertations have been moving towards in the recent past. However, it is also clear that all the multimodal experimentation happens not at the expense of, but as a supplement to the traditional alphabetic-print based dissertation as 100% of the dissertations did have that element as well. This shows that this traditional form of writing is here to stay for the time being and is not being discarded. Table 2 below presents these results in greater detail.

Table 2
Code 2: Mode

Sub Codes	Definition	Number of dissertations (out of 21)	Percentage	Description of genre feature	Representative Examples
Text	alphabets and numericals	21	100	standard dissertations	All
Audio	sound in any form	9	42.9	participant interviews; songs;	Carson (2017)
Visual	graphic representations	13	61.9	photographs; colors; comics; collages; videos	Ball (2005)
Mixed Modal	when the modes are present as distinct entities, for example photographs included in the written text	6	28.6	photographs included in text; screenshots of multimodal elements included in the dissertation text	Ball (2005)
Multimodal	when the modes are entangled into each other, for example: a collage or a comic where text and visuals are embedded into each other	13	61.9	collages and comics that use integrate text and visuals; pedagogic videos; website; mobile app; music video; documentary; short film; videogame; 3D images; maps	Helms (2010)

Code 3 (C3): Media

The next main code that emerged was "media" which refers to "the technological means of inscription and production that shape the ways any message is conveyed and accessed" (Elola and Oskoz, 2017, p. 510). In the data, websites (28%) and CD Roms (9%) were the two most common media through which researchers submitted their multimodal experimentations. However, 19% dissertations did not explicitly mention how their multimodal components were

submitted. As pointed out by Janelle Chapwell, a colleague of mine, it would be very important for researchers to think about and explicitly address accessibility issues regarding their innovative multimedia and multimodal experiments while training graduate students. Table 3 below presents these results in greater detail.

Table 3

Code 3: Media

Sub Codes	Definition	Number of dissertations (out of 21)	Percentage	Description of genre features	Representative Examples
Electronic Thesis and Dissertation (ETD)	Physical printed pages submitted along with a digital copy	21	100		All
CDRom	Multimodal elements submitted in a separate CDRom	2	9.5		Dickman (2013)
Website	Multimodal elements uploaded on a website and the website linked in the printed dissertation	6	28.5		Carson (2017)
Unknown	Mode of submission of multimodal elements unknown from preliminary analysis of dissertation data	4	19.1	It was unclear how artifacts like mobile apps, video games were submitted. It could be possible that they were submitted in a CDRom but it wasn't apparent in the submission data in the archives.	Oppegaard (2011)

Code 4 (C4): Language

The final code that emerged in the study was that of "language". The data was heavily dominated by dissertations written in Standard Written English (SWE), with only a meager 2 out of 21 texts (or 9%) experimenting with translanguaging by mixing SWE with African American

Vernacular English (AAVE). In spite of strong efforts by translingual scholars to argue in favor of "the inevitability and necessity of interaction among languages, within languages, and across language practices" along with the need to "engage the fluidity of language in pursuit of new knowledge, new ways of knowing, and more peaceful relations" (Horner et al., 2011, p.305), the dissertation genre in Rhet-Comp remains predominantly in favor of SWE as of now. This potentially points towards a need for translingual scholars to develop more focused attempts to train graduate students on how to deploy translingual experiments in high stake genres like dissertations. It is important to note however that the current dataset is limited and it could very well be the case that there exists a larger archive of translingual dissertations in Rhetoric and Composition which would require a different kind of data collection strategy than the one currently followed in this study. The table below shows these results in greater detail.

Table 4

Code 4: Language

Sub Codes	Definition	Number of dissertations (out of 21)	Percentage	Description of genre features	Representative example
Monolingual (SWE)	Standard Written English only	19	90.5	The entire dissertation was written in SWE	All
Translingual (SWE + AAVE)	Mixture of Standard Written English and African American Vernacular English	2	9.5	In one sample AAVE was mixed into the dissertation text itself, and in another the dissertation text itself was in SWE but the audio-visual supplements were in AAVE	Carson (2017), McKoy (2019)

The study also revealed some interesting outliers. While in terms of frequency, these did not occur a lot in the dataset, yet they presented innovations that warrant noticing. Laura Mangini (2015) and Sabatino Mangini (2015) attempted to push against the single authorship norm by trying to co-author their dissertation. On being denied to do so, they negotiated a middle ground creatively, by creating two mirrored dissertations with similar data and insights. Given the strong support towards collaborative authorship that feminist scholarship has made in the recent past (see Lunsford, 1999; Restaino, 2014; Robbins, 2003), this form of innovation deserves scholarly attention too.

Discussion and Implications

Overall then, it is clear from this study that narrative discourses (76%) and multimodal artifacts (62%) are the two biggest types of innovation in this dataset. These areas thus reflect the primary ways in which disciplinary members perceive traditional forms of knowledge making in the field (primarily written in descriptive-expository-argumentative forms in monomodal ways without any visual rhetoric) to be expanding to accommodate new ways of meaning making. Surprisingly, even though translingualism has a lot of presence in scholarly literature, it hasn't made too prominent a mark on impacting dissertation writing in Rhet-Comp (9%).

These results have several implications for graduate program directors and instructors interested in curricular reforms to dissertation innovations in their Rhetoric and Composition graduate programs. Firstly, they should help their students understand that integrating narrative writing in the form of personal autobiographies within their academic prose is a genre feature that is growingly being accepted in the field. Another form of narrative innovation, i.e. of fictional narratives is also gaining slow but steady acceptance, especially in the form of counter-stories. To train for these kinds of innovations, potential collaborations or workshops with creative writing faculty or ethnography specialists could be organized. Secondly, they should also help their students understand the wide range of multimodal experiments that are gaining traction in the field. While thinking about how to make a scholarly argument, graduate students should be trained about the expressive possibilities that integrating texts with audio, images, and videos can bring forth. To train them in this, graduate program directors should consider organizing workshops with digital media specialists in their University's film studies or library departments. Thirdly, in terms of media, while students have to train to submit an electronic dissertation in a PDF format, various other media formats like CD Roms, websites, apps etc. are also accepted for multimodal dissertations. Students should be made aware that these can enhance the public reach of their scholarship, while also being trained about the need to factor in accessibility concerns while producing such artifacts. To do this kind of training, graduate instructors should consider collaborating with user experience researchers or designers who specialize in designing for accessibility so that they can help students understand the various affordances and constraints of various media. Fourth, it is important for graduate program directors and graduate students to have conversations about the use of translingual innovations in dissertation writing. As the results of this study show, this kind of innovation is not yet widely perceived to be present in this high stakes genre, in spite of the strong presence of scholarly arguments about integrating translingualism into academic writing norms. Instructors should help students understand the risks and rewards of utilizing this form of innovation (Matsuda and Matsuda, 2010) and help them make their own decisions. Additionally, scholars who specialize in translingualism should focus their efforts on collating more examples that demonstrate translingual forms of writing in Rhetoric and Composition dissertations, produce resources that train graduate students on how to produce translingual writings in dissertations, and increase advocacy efforts that help in greater acceptance of this kind of innovation.

Furthermore, in terms of the impact of the findings of this study on existing literature, it is important to note that the existing research strongly points to the fact that "on a national level, graduate writing support, and more specifically writing support for theses and dissertations, takes on different forms—and in some places, does not exist at all" (Autry and Carter, 2015). Where it does exist, it often does in the form of short term "dissertation bootcamps" (Baillargeon, 2020) where a range of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) concepts like building genre knowledge (Habib et al., 2020), ethnography of disciplinary genres Sundstrom (2014) and "occluded

genres" is deployed (Autry and Carter, 2015). Including genre innovation as a formal topic of study in such programs would be beneficial. The current study shows that there are some graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition where certain types of innovations are consistently being produced. For example, in the current dataset, Clemson University's graduate program represents a staggering 33% (7 out of 21) dissertations considered to be innovative. This warrants the need for RGS scholars to study in depth the kinds of dissertation writing pedagogies taught at this program to help graduate program directors and instructors at other programs also learn from them.

Furthermore, as we compare the results of this study to Welch et al. (2002), we see that Rhetoric and Composition dissertation writers have steadily increased experimenting with narrative discourse as well as multimodal and media experiments in their work. This shows that these two forms of experiments are poised to become stable conventions within Rhetoric and Composition academic writing conventions. For example, while electronic thesis and dissertations were an exciting aberration for Walter and Moxley (2002), they have now become almost a universal norm. Additionally, while earlier new media experiments were clubbed as a whole, the results from the current study show the emergence of more precise conceptual vocabulary through the subfield of 'multimodal composition' that has enabled greater diversity of such experiments in dissertations with text being integrated with audio, video, music etc. and also presented in a wide range of formats like CD Roms, websites, and mobile apps. Some new forms of innovations that were not discussed by Welch et al. (2002) like translingual writing and collaboratively authored dissertations have also emerged in the two decades since their work. It remains to be seen how widely these will be accepted in the coming decades.

Finally, this study also demonstrates the value of studying innovations in genre features, especially in terms of the discursive forms as well as modalities that dissertations contain as an important metric to track disciplinarity. While so far researchers of Rhet-Comp's disciplinarity have largely focused their systematic, big data approaches on tracking shifts in research methods and thematic content (Hillock, 1987; North, 1986; Mueller, 2017; Miller, 2022; Gallagher. et al., 2023) and formal genre innovations have only been done in small scale studies (Welch et al., 2022), it would be helpful for future researchers to use big data approaches to track genre innovations in Rhet-Comp dissertations at the level of formal genre innovations as well.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the findings of this study have important implications, there are several limitations to the current design which will be improved in future iterations of the study. First, the current study only relies on popular virtual listservs in Rhetoric and Composition to identify which dissertations are considered to be innovative. Only a small section of disciplinary members frequently check messages and comment on such forums. In the future, a more comprehensive survey should be circulated with a wider recruitment strategy to get opinions from stakeholders like journal editors, graduate program directors, dissertation award committee members etc. across the discipline for a more representative dataset. Secondly, the types of data collected at present do not include in-depth understandings of the experiences, challenges, and motivations experienced by the graduate students who created these innovative dissertations. In a prior study, Cook and Fike (2002), for example, had documented the difficulties that graduate students who choose to innovate with dissertations might experience with gaining acceptance of their work in a rigid and traditional genre. Thus, a follow up study which interviews the authors of the 21 dissertations analyzed in the current study should be conducted. Apart from students, even

graduate program directors and instructors who have been forming curricula at their institutions to encourage dissertation genre innovations should be interviewed. In such follow-up studies, two particular areas of inquiry seem especially pertinent: motivations for genre innovations and processes of gaining acceptance for innovation.

Regarding the former, while program policy documents like RCTE Program (2020), scholarly reflections on academic writing's future (Dryer et al., 2014) as well as secondary sources on PhD dissertations (Porter et al., 2018) all seem to present shifts in the economy as a major impetus dissertation innovations, surprisingly, not a single dissertation in the dataset explicitly mentioned this. The authors themselves gesture towards theoretical motivations or their desire to respond to growing calls for social justice as the major impetus for engaging in genre innovations. Understanding these contrasting motivations would help stakeholders while performing a needs analysis for their graduate programs. , i.e. the ways in which authors strive to seek acceptance of their genre innovations, an important direction for future study could be an analysis of authors' persuasion strategies. In a lot of cases in the current dataset, authors included a pedagogy section to demonstrate how their innovative ideas can be used inside the classroom. These included Martinez (2012), Woolbright (2016), Quigley (2018) and LaFolette Sampson (2019). Since Rhetoric and Composition is a discipline centered around the teaching of first year composition, this strategy shows pragmatic sense and is a metric that future graduate students interested in innovating should keep in mind. However, a more focused study exploring this particular question might also shed light on additional persuasion strategies, especially given the emergence of 'alt-ac' or alternative academic careers beyond academia that many graduate students are exploring given growing precarity in the academic job market.

While the types of innovations and the reasons behind them are many, it is clear that academic rhetorical situations, both within, and outside of Rhet-Comp are evolving rapidly and graduate programs would do well to keep pace with them in order to stay relevant and competitive in the future. This information is especially useful for young graduate students, like the author of this paper, who are just beginning their research journeys and would find it helpful to get a feel of where the epistemic winds might be blowing in the not too distant future.

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Appendix A

Please go to this URL to see a rough but detailed notebook that documents the coding process followed in this dissertation:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11HqANMlBIGz4gPOV-EIm-KVuDidNsa1A/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=109118202116716533447&rtpof=true&sd=true

Appendix B

To see my rough but detailed coding memos where I documented my iterative thinking and theorization during the coding process, please visit this URL:https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QVhBl-lncm6FJJgSNYFMQ9EsyjnEjYH2CqwSKfJuf7s/edit?usp=sharing .