



# Negotiating Academic and Professional Identities in Writing the Undergraduate Dissertation

## Negociación de identidades académicas y profesionales en la escritura de tesis en pregrado

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### Abstract

From a writing as a social practice approach, we explore the construction of academic identities in undergraduate dissertation writing at a Chilean university. An online questionnaire was applied and interviews were conducted with students from four disciplinary areas. The participants perceive the dissertation process as an enriching learning experience, but also as lonely and unmotivating. We also observed three forms of identity negotiation that facilitated or hindered engagement with and motivation toward the dissertation: the negotiation of diverse trajectories, of the student's own voice, and of the disciplinary field. From our findings, we make recommendations for the development of dissertation writing programs. Lastly, this study describes various forms of identity negotiation that play a key role in students' engagement in their dissertation process.

**Keywords:** higher education, academic writing, academic identity, undergraduate students, agency

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## Resumen

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Desde una aproximación a la escritura como práctica social, exploramos la construcción de identidades académicas en el proceso de elaboración de la tesis de pregrado en una universidad chilena. Se aplicó un cuestionario en línea y se realizaron entrevistas a estudiantes de cuatro áreas disciplinares. Los participantes reportan que el proceso de tesis significa un aprendizaje enriquecedor, pero también lo describen como un proceso solitario y poco motivante. Además, observamos tres formas de negociación identitaria que facilitaron u obstruyeron el involucramiento y la motivación hacia la tesis: la negociación de trayectorias diversas, de una voz propia y del campo disciplinar. A partir de estos hallazgos, se sugieren recomendaciones para orientar el desarrollo de programas de acompañamiento a la escritura de tesis. Finalmente, este estudio da cuenta de formas de negociación identitaria que juegan un rol central en el involucramiento de los estudiantes en su proceso de tesis.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior, escritura académica, identidad académica, estudiantes de pregrado, agencia

## Introduction

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Several student support strategies in higher education have focused on promoting writing skills from the approach of academic literacy<sup>1</sup> (Carlino, 2013; Natale & Stagnaro, 2017; Montes & Vidal Lizama, 2017). Writing plays a key role in assessment regimes (Lillis, 2017) at university. Indeed, text-mediated evaluative practices (such as reports or tests) affect students' possibilities of academic progress and have a gatekeeping function, preventing or facilitating the entry, permanence, or graduation of students. This is the case of the dissertation, the final milestone of undergraduate education (Navarro, et al., 2022)<sup>2</sup>, which has a crucial role in accreditation (Navarro, 2018) to obtain a degree.

Academic writing in general, and specifically dissertation writing, has often been addressed as a problem of writing conventions that have to be learned and integrated. This approach considers students as a clean slate (Ávila et al., 2020), ignoring their previous training and linguistic repertoires from other fields that are not necessarily academic. This view characterizes learning to write as a unidirectional process in which experts transmit to novices the ways of doing, thinking, and writing in academia. These approaches also tend to conceive writing as cognitive or textual processes that are foreign to the particular life trajectories of individuals, as if writing occurred in a vacuum or in typified and general settings (work, academic, etc.). However, critical sociocultural approaches have begun to permeate the research of writing in Latin America (Trigos-Carrillo, 2019) and have emphasized that writing is situated in the framework of the lives of subjects, who participate in different spheres of activity and express multiple identities in their writing (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). This approach also emphasizes the role of the dynamics of authority, power, and identity negotiation in academic writing (Lea & Street, 2006), in addition to student agency (Ávila et al., 2020, 2021; Zavala, 2011). This perspective can shed light on how students combine different roles and identities (worker, student, etc.) while writing a dissertation at the end of their undergraduate degree.

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1. Note of the editor: "Academic literacy" refers to *Alfabetización académica*, a term widely used in Latin American scholarship for teaching advanced literacy conventions in higher education.

2. Note of the editor: The original version of this article (in Spanish) uses the word *tesis*, which consists of an expanded piece of research presented as a graduation requirement. We translated it as "undergraduate dissertation".

When students write their dissertation, they construct an academic identity as members of a discipline (French, 2020) and compete for a space of agency in their own dissertation process (Botelho de Magalhães et al., 2019). Those writing dissertations find themselves in a complex relational setting that cannot be boiled down to the management of academic conventions: they have to demonstrate their own mastery and expertise, and critically read other advanced researchers, while they are assessed by experts (Kamler & Thomson, 2007) in their role as novice students.

Dissertation writing has been related to the construction of academic identities from different approaches (Castelló et al. 2021). One line of research has explored the linguistic resources that enable the construction of an authorial identity (Hyland, 2002, 2005). In contrast, recent research has addressed the negotiation of academic identities, considering both the discursive resources to construct them and the writers' perspectives beyond the texts (Calle-Arango et al., 2021; McCambridge, 2019).

Another line of research has focused on how students negotiate their identities, expectations, and imagined futures in their academic trajectory (Botelho de Magalhães et al., 2019; McAlpine et al., 2014), although they are mainly situated at the doctorate level. Roozen (2021) recently explored the trajectory of a student from their second university year to the completion of their studies and writing the dissertation. In his findings, he highlighted how disciplinary and extra-academic identities are negotiated in the same trajectory. These studies demonstrate that dissertation writers negotiate multiple identities and identify with possibilities for self-hood (Ivanič, 1998) in different settings of participation, something that could be crucial to understand the development of the undergraduate dissertation, but which has rarely been explored.

This study aims to advance understanding of undergraduate writing in connection with trajectories and identities that are not necessarily academic (Alexander et al., 2020; Prior, 2018; Roozen & Erickson, 2017). Similarly, by observing tensions and negotiations of practices and conventions at advanced stages of the degree course, we intend to contribute evidence to a critical sociocultural view of the undergraduate dissertation. Based on the understanding of writing as a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lillis, 2001), this study examines how students negotiate academic and professional identities throughout their dissertation trajectories.

## Dissertation writing as a social practice

We will understand the work of writing the dissertation in terms of activity rather than an object (Zavala, 2011). This involves seeing the dissertation as a material, historic, and ideologically situated practice (Matsuda et al., 2003; Lea & Street, 2006), rather than as a text product or a set of cognitive processes that are independent of the material and social conditions of production. In this vein, the New Literacy Studies have described literacy practices on two levels: on the one hand, what people do with reading and writing in specific contexts—*literacy events*—and, on the other hand, the attitudes, emotions, values, and social relations involved in those practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Both elements are pivotal in dissertation writing, which requires students to master highly complex writing practices (Russell, 2013) and to project an academic identity as members of the discipline.

Social structures, values, and norms, as well as literacy practices—such as the dissertation—are not unalterable, but open to negotiation and change (Barton et al., 2007; Tusting, 2000). This is partly explained because writing a dissertation involves participating in a social activity with specific actors (such as student, supervisor, assessment committees, or peers) who have prior histories and who position themselves accordingly in the disciplinary community. However, not all actors have the same possibilities of influencing institutional cultures (Hamilton, 2010) and it is possible that undergraduate students writing their dissertation still experience academic conventions as imposed or alien (Ávila et al., 2020; Lillis, 2001; Zavala, 2011), or rigid and restrictive.

The literacy events that students have to face in the process of writing their dissertation take place in the framework of their trajectories or *careers* (Barton et al., 2007) in different areas of activity: health, work, among others. Similarly, various studies have explored the trajectories of writers in multiple settings and literacy practices that are integrated and interrelated in the biography of the subjects (Kell, 2015; Prior, 2018; Roozen, 2010; Roozen & Erickson, 2017). These studies seek to go beyond spatial metaphors of demarcated domains or settings—such as writing in the professional world, in academia, or vernacular writing (Alexander et al., 2020). As Roozen (2021) observes, “people’s disciplinary practices and identities emerge across the boundaries that are usually assumed between everyday, academic, and professional activities” (p. 86). In this study, we will consider people’s trajectories and identities in different spheres and their relationships to disciplinary writing in the dissertation.

### Identity, voice, and agency in dissertation writing

Ivanič (1998) uses the term possibilities for self-hood to refer to the identities available in the sociocultural context, which writers either align with or distance themselves from. Ivanič thus considers that identity is constructed in identification with others, their discourses or positions, in an inherently social process. Ivanič describes three aspects of writers’ identity: the *autobiographical self*—the biography of a person that instantiates in their writing; the *discursive self*—the self-image that the writer projects in their text; and the *self as author*—the position, opinions, and beliefs that the author ascribes to. The concept of *voice* has been associated with the latter two aspects: the expression of authorship and the author’s self-representation in writing (Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Hutchings, 2014). As is clear in Ivanič’s work, identity and biographical trajectories are closely related and are expressed in writing. Within the scope of the dissertation, the aforementioned elements show the importance of understanding the biographical context of dissertation writers.

Writers can make choices in their writing to position their points of view and identities by exercising their *agency*. Agency has been described as the ability of authors to make decisions and actively negotiate institutional demands in their writing (Ávila et al., 2021; Eodice et al., 2016; Hutchings, 2014). As Zavala (2011) argues, “the subject does not constitute solely an effect of their cultural characteristics, but also an agent with initiatives that is capable of generating social change” (p. 56). Agency is therefore generally essential to explain the transformation of social structures (Ahearn, 2001) and, specifically, the mutability of academic writing conventions. It enables us to understand that students can transform those conventions based on their own identities and histories. In this study, we are interested in examining how dissertation writers exercise agency and negotiate possibilities for the self that are available in their disciplinary settings and outside them throughout their dissertation trajectory.

## Methodology

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### Questionnaire

Two online questionnaires were sent in May 2021 to students in the graduation stage at a Chilean public university. Both of them explored students’ perceptions of the process to complete their degrees by means of a shared item with seven descriptive indicators of the dissertation process (e.g., it is a frustrating process), where the response options were a Likert scale with four choices: from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree, including Don’t know/No response. This study reports this shared item, developed using information collected in similar instruments that were previously applied to the target audience. The items were also validated by the assessment manager of the Learning Unit in the Undergraduate Department of the university and by a team of six consultants from an institutional writing program in the same institution.

The university where the study was conducted receives students through regular admission pathways (through a national-level university selection exam) and equitable access routes for inclusion. Despite the fact that 86% of the students are admitted through regular admission pathways, 46% of them are first-generation university students (UCH, 2017), which reflects a certain diversification of the student body. A total of 200 students answered the questionnaire: 65.5% of them were female and 25.0% male (with this information being non-retrievable for 9.5% of students). As for the admission cohort, the enrollment period of the sample was between 2004 to 2019. 80.1% of the students were enrolled between 2013 and 2016, 7.4% were enrolled between 2004 and 2012, and 12.5% enrolled between 2017 and 2019. Regarding the students' admission pathways, 88.4% were admitted through regular pathways and 11.6% entered through equitable and inclusion pathways.

To conduct the analysis, descriptive univariate statistics were applied to observe the frequencies (n) and percentages (%) of the responses. Exploratory bivariate statistics were subsequently applied to identify statistically significant correlations ( $p < .05$ ) between the response items. For this purpose, the chi-squared test was applied using SPSS software and the intensity of the relationship ( $r$ ) was identified considering ranges: low intensity, from 0.10 to 0.30; moderate intensity, from 0.31 to 0.70; and strong intensity, between 0.71 and 1.00.

### Interviews with dissertation writers

We conducted interviews with eight students participating in the university's Dissertation Writing Program for undergraduates, created in 2019 to support timely graduation. Participants from various disciplinary areas were contacted via email. They are shown with pseudonyms in the following table.

Table 1  
*Participants by disciplinary area and year of admission*

Participant	Disciplinary area	Year of admission
Emilia	Social Sciences	2010
Pedro	Social Sciences	2013
Rafaela	Humanities	2015
Sandro	Humanities	2015
Gabriel	Arts	2014
Sofia	Arts	2014
Ana	Natural Sciences	2013
Daniela	Natural Sciences	2014

*Source: prepared by the authors.*

The interviews were conducted via video calls. They lasted approximately 50 minutes, were recorded and stored in audio format, and then transcribed. Before the interview, the students agreed to participate by means of an oral informed consent (Benitez et al., 2002).

The interviews were analyzed qualitatively using the *constant comparative method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in three cycles of revision. First, we carried out exploratory coding, in which descriptive labels were assigned to segments of the interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Then we created a coding scheme (Geisler, 2018) from which broader thematic categories were produced (e.g., intertextual negotiation). This scheme was applied to 20% of the corpus ( $kappa=0.41$ ) and inconsistencies were reviewed with the research team. A new round of coding was performed until we produced a final adjustment of the categories. Finally, the constant comparative method was used once again to compare the data with the theory and previous research (Charmaz, 2006), which allowed us to create the thematic areas in which the results are presented.

## Results

### How do students describe the dissertation process?

From the questionnaire, we observed that students mostly agree or strongly agree that the stage of completing their studies is a very challenging process (94.7%), which is consistent with previous research describing the dissertation as difficult for students (Carlino, 2005; Tapia-Ladino & Marinkovich Ravena, 2011). Being a challenging process is not necessarily negative: 83.5% of students stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that the dissertation is an enriching learning process. We also observed that 79.1% described it as lonely, which is relevant if we consider the central role of interaction with others in the dissertation process (Castelló et al., 2012) and its implications for constructing a sense of belonging, agency, and identity in the disciplinary community.

We also noted that 78.3% of the students describe their dissertation process as frustrating, while 44.4% strongly disagree or somewhat disagree that the process is entertaining and motivating. This finding suggests there is a need to implement pedagogical strategies and support that enable students to engage positively in their dissertation process. As Eodice et al. (2016) showed, expressing self-identities and making autonomous decisions promotes engagement with writing, which suggests a route to tackle frustration and lack of motivation towards the dissertation .

Finally, we observe that 30.4% of the students strongly disagree or somewhat disagree that the dissertation is a process in which you demonstrate what you have learned in your course. This finding seems to reinforce Tapia-Ladino and Marinkovich Ravena (2011)'s observation that students do not have previous training for writing their dissertation at the undergraduate level. dissertation

**Table 2**

*Correlations between indicators on the process to complete studies*

	It is an enriching learning process	It is an entertaining and motivating process	It is a process in which you demonstrate what you have learned on the course	It is a very challenging process	It is a very stressful and anxious process	It is a lonely process	It is a frustrating process
It is an enriching learning process	1	,418**	,284**	,226**	-,042	-,142	-,187*
It is an entertaining and motivating process	,418**	1	,310**	,080	-,083	-,168*	-,282**
It is a process in which you demonstrate what you have learned on the course	,284**	,310**	1	,207**	,037	,005	-,089
It is a very challenging process	,226**	,080	,207**	1	,343**	,023	,124
It is a very stressful and anxiety-triggering process	-,042	-,083	,037	,343**	1	,178*	,421**
It is a lonely process	-,142	-,168*	,005	,023	,178*	1	,236**
It is a frustrating process	-,187*	-,282**	-,089	,124	,421**	,236**	1

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral)

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral)

Source: prepared by the authors.

We observed a significant relationship between those who consider this stage to be an enriching learning process and those who describe it as entertaining and motivating ( $p < .01$ ), where the correlation intensity is moderate ( $r = 0.48$ ). The correlation between those who state that the process is entertaining and motivating, and those who consider that it is a process in which they demonstrate what they learned during the course is also significant ( $p < .01$ ) and moderate ( $r = 0.31$ ).

There is also a correlation between those who perceive the process as challenging and those who see it as very stressful and anxiety-triggering ( $p < .01$ ), with a moderate intensity ( $r = 0.34$ ). This shows that the challenging nature of the dissertation is also associated with a negative experience of the process as stressful. We also observe a relationship between those who consider the process to be one that is very stressful and anxious and those who find it frustrating ( $p < .01$ ), and the intensity of the correlation is moderate ( $r = 0.42$ ). Those who state that the process is lonely also consider it frustrating ( $p < .01$ ), although this shows only a slight intensity of correlation ( $r = 0.23$ ).

To summarize, the results show statistically significant correlations between perceptions of the process as entertaining and motivating and as one of enriching learning. Perceptions of the process as frustrating and as one that is stressful and anxiety-triggering are also significantly related. We observed both negative and positive experiences of the dissertation writing process. However, these findings do not explain the characteristics of the process that make it frustrating, lonely, or motivating.

## Academic and professional identities in the dissertation process

Through the interviews, we investigated the ways in which students negotiated their academic and professional identities in the dissertation process. We observed that these negotiations played a key role in the students' engagement in their dissertation process and in their motivation toward it. In the same vein, Eodice et al. (2016) found a connection between engagement—time and work invested in a task—the meaning of the task in relation to students' identities, and the perception of the task as meaningful. They also describe three forms of engagement: with peers and teachers, with the content or writing processes, and with imagined future selves. In our analysis we also found three emergent forms of identity negotiation that facilitated or hindered the participants' engagement and motivation with their dissertation processes: 1) negotiation of diverse trajectories (work, health, etc.), 2) negotiation of a voice, and 3) negotiation of the disciplinary field. Each of these categories was saturated in the analysis, that is, different expressions of them were seen in all the interviews analyzed in this study.

### Negotiation of diverse trajectories

We observed that the participants face multiple challenges in their life trajectories while writing the dissertation. These trajectories are interwoven with the dissertation process and play a role in the students' engagement and attitudes toward it, that is to say, they can influence the perception of the process as frustrating, motivating, or stressful. Emilia, a Social Sciences student, describes how her health trajectory interfered with the dissertation process: "At the end of the year I was on a leave, then I had to take the tests. It was quite tortuous that year and I couldn't advance at all. I was trying to save the other ship that was sinking."

Activities that were carried out in addition to the dissertation were common among the participants, such as early involvement in the professional world. The majority of the participants combine writing their dissertation with some form of paid work ( $N = 5$ ), or with participation in professional training activities, such as diploma courses or others ( $N = 2$ ). Ana, a Science student, reported that she began her dissertation process with high motivation and even audited additional courses to learn more about her topic. However, she found that sustaining

interest was a challenge: “Always thinking about the same thing made me tired.” This disengagement led her to seek other activities: “And that’s when I started looking for other things to do. And that’s when I found a job too. And then I started to move away from the dissertation.”

Most of the participants in our study expressed an interest in exploring the field of employment and sought to feel competent not only as students, but as professionals. In this vein, Emilia stated:

At the thought that I was going to become a phony psychologist, I started taking a Data Science course, which is basically statistics and programming. I didn’t know how to program, so this course became too demanding ... I did it because I felt I wouldn’t have a job afterward.

Emilia tries to create an image of a competent professional through other activities. This desire of a positive professional identity generates high expectations about her own dissertation: “And, well, I had the idea that my dissertation was going to be the best in the universe ... and since the whole undergraduate course was disastrous for me, then it had to be the consolidation of my dignity.” Because of this, she felt she had to “read everything.” In this case, attributing significant meaning to the task of writing linked to identities and future expectations (Eodice et al., 2016) represented an obstacle.

In other cases, the search for an academic or professional identity during the process facilitated the students’ engagement with their dissertation. For example, due to the social protests that took place in Chile during 2019, Sofía, an Arts student, decided to change her dissertation topic to something more closely related to the social context and her own work experience: cultural management. Thereby, she moved away from what she called “the elitist structure of art,” which she does not feel represents her.

*Sofía:* I started taking a little more social meaning to the elitist structure of art ... and I said: ‘okay, Sofía, it’s time for you to get your degree, to do your dissertation’, so ‘why don’t you do it in what you’ve been working on for a while?’

When Sofía linked the dissertation to her work trajectory, dissertation writing became dissertation meaningful to her. This is consistent with previous research showing the link between engagement and the meaning of the writing task (Ávila et al., 2021; Eodice et al., 2016). In the participants’ accounts, we also observed interactions between their biographical circumstances, their searches for identity, and their dissertation process. These can all have an impact on their perceptions of the process as frustrating or can motivate students to become involved in their work.

## Negotiation of a voice

Discussing other authors ideas requires the student to be positioned as a legitimate interlocutor within their discipline (Calle-Arango et al., 2021; Navarro, 2018). Some participants expressed their insecurity about this positioning and refers to the literature review process and the inclusion of sources as frustrating and demotivating. Pedro, a Social Sciences student, considered it difficult to state his “own ideas” bearing in mind the amount of reading to be done for the dissertation:

*Pedro:* ... It’s like, you read a lot, you read a lot, you read a lot, but from there you have to kind of take a little bit of this reading, bring out your own ideas. And that’s what I think is difficult. And that’s what has been difficult for me too, it’s like ... generally you read so much that at the end you don’t have any ideas of your own.

When including sources, students feel that their voices as authors could fade away. In this vein, A Gabriel, an Arts student, explains his demotivation when faced with the requirement to make academic citations: “This process of searching for references, making what I think to fit into someone else’s previous thinking in order to justify it, has been, like, really, I don’t know, demotivating,” he said. This demotivation contrasts with his initial enthusiasm:

*Gabriel:* At the beginning it motivated me a lot because the idea of the dissertation generated a lot of freedom, like ‘oh, I can really do like ... I can totally go crazy and generate an idea of my own and develop it’, and from then on there was a lot of motivation.

These findings show that the tendency to oppose one’s own voice to the voices of others as if they were mutually exclusive (Lillis, 2001; Závila, 2011) continues until the end of undergraduate education and demonstrate the need to promote strategies for the development of student’s voice in their writing throughout the curriculum. Gabriel knows that there are standards for citation (“this APA citation thing in [Microsoft] Word, no! I really hate that”), but he perceives them as a restriction to expressing his ideas. In this respect, as Ávila et al. (2020) argued, what many teachers call a citation problem is more an issue of voice.

Gabriel also mentions his desire to cite “teachings that you learn like in the family or in the neighborhood,” and explains “when that aspect comes in it’s very difficult to cite or to be given validity by the institution.” Gabriel wants to express his own biographical trajectory in his writing, or his *autobiographical self*, as put by Ivanič (1998), including his experiences in different areas of activity. The desire to include one’s own experiences in writing has also been observed in students at earlier stages of undergraduate education (Ávila et al., 2021). However, students feel that their diverse linguistic and semiotic repertoires are not necessarily embraced in the university context, which leads to frustration and demotivation in the dissertation process.

## Negotiation of the disciplinary field

The participants report tensions between resisting academic conventions and influencing them by exercising their agency. At times, institutional resistance to change is perceived as threatening and a hindrance to the development of the dissertation, while at others, the possibility of opposing the mainstream academic culture leads to greater engagement with the dissertation process. Such is the case of Rafaela, who chooses an unconventional topic and corpus (a film) in her discipline, which generates doubts in her disciplinary community:

*Rafaela:* So it was a very recent subject and I was using an unconventional source, so it was difficult to get certain teachers to help me with it. In fact, it was criticized at one point. Several of my classmates said to me ‘are you really going to use a movie?’ Just like the teacher herself said to me ‘prepare yourself well, because in the grade exam, if you don’t get a good teacher who understands this, they’re going to really criticize you.’

Rafaela insists on working with a film because she considers that “cinema is much closer to the people ... the scholarship of history is very distant from people, like everyday people.” The possibilities for the self that circulate in her discipline are not appealing to her, and instead of uncritically incorporating conventional writing and research practices, she continues with her topic and seeks recognition in her faculty.

Sofía also considers her disciplinary field to be too distant from what happens “outside academia”:

“Let’s stop this a bit or let’s ask ourselves a little about what we’re doing, those of us who study the arts or scholars or those who want to write about the arts because, kind of, art is in the streets, you know? Kind of, let’s think about how many murals, how much artistic action we see in the marches; what’s really happening with artistic production?”

Both Sofía and Rafaela want to express their social commitments and political perspectives in their dissertation work, while also seeking validation and questioning the way knowledge is produced in their disciplines. Rafaela finally obtains validation from a tutor on the dissertation advisory program, a graduate of her own degree course:

*Rafaela:* When he [the tutor] reviewed what I had, he told me that he thought it was very cool and that I was doing very well, that he was really interested in the subject, so I was encouraged, okay ... maybe they don't recognize me in the faculty at all, but someone who works on these issues recognizes it, that encouraged me."

Meeting others during the dissertation writing process to share ideas and validate points of view enables students to feel part of the disciplinary field they are negotiating. This supports the findings of Eodice et al. (2016), who demonstrated relationships between agency, motivation, and involvement as engagement and participation with others.

On the other hand, the participants had a negative view of the isolation in the dissertation process—an experience also reported in the questionnaire: "... starting that process alone, I think that discouraged me from writing; and now how do I do it. I'm writing this alone" (Daniela, Sciences). Isolation is an experience also observed by Ávila et al. (2021), who see it as a powerful hindering factor for writers. These findings show that working with peers, tutors, and teachers can help students feel part of a specific disciplinary space in which they participate with others.

## Conclusions

This study explored the negotiation of identity in the dissertation trajectories of undergraduate students. On the one hand, we observed that students describe their graduation work as an enriching learning process, but also as unmotivating, frustrating, and lonely.

On the other hand, the dynamics of identity negotiation and the students' experiences in their biographical trajectories had an influence on their motivation or engagement in the dissertation process. Participation in work activities could provide students with professional identities that give meaning to the dissertation, or, instead, distance them from the writing process. These findings reveal the connection between engagement in writing and the possibility of projecting professional identities or future selves, which is consistent with the work of Eodice et al. (2016).

We also observed that the challenge of constructing a voice in dialogue with others can result in a loss of motivation toward the dissertation when students consider that citing other authors prevents them from freely expressing their own ideas, which has been observed in other undergraduate research (Hutchings, 2014; Lillis, 2001; Zavala, 2011) and seems to persist until the end of the degree course.

Lastly, we found that undergraduate dissertation writers seek forms of agency in their writing process and suggest new ways of conceiving their own disciplinary field. The dissertation process therefore seems to be an opportunity to think about the discipline and define a position in regards to it.

The findings of this study show how the dissertation process is situated in the student's entire life experience, where academic and professional trajectories intersect (Prior, 2018; Roozen, 2021; Roozen & Erickson, 2017). Taking into account these dynamics contributes to an understanding of dissertation writing as a social and situated practice. It also reveals that writing the undergraduate dissertation does not solely involve writing skills, but also identity work, as has been observed in graduate research (Green, 2005; French, 2020) that can regulate engagement with writing (Ávila et al., 2020; Eodice et al., 2016).

In light of the need for higher education institutions to promote student's graduation and bearing in mind the findings presented in this study, we make four recommendations to guide the development of writing programs in the final years of undergraduate education. First, the dissertation process should be understood as situated in the integral experience of students, who face challenges in their lives, such as preparing to join the professional world or the need for specialized training. In this respect, support for writing in the graduation stage can be enhanced synergistically, for example, through initiatives to connect with professional life or to provide early career guidance. Second, tools should be promoted to build an authorial voice in writing that enables students to overcome the exclusionary opposition between their own ideas and those of others. Third, spaces should be offered for students to discuss the different perspectives within the discipline and allow them to identify their own positions regarding the field that they find meaningful. Fourth, interaction with peers, teachers, or tutors should be promoted throughout the dissertation process so that students can overcome the feeling of loneliness and develop a sense of belonging to their discipline.

Considering this, the dissertation process cannot be reduced to the production of a type of academic text in accordance with specific disciplinary conventions. Making these expectations clear to students is essential, but it is not sufficient to foster the development of the undergraduate dissertation. Furthermore, providing opportunities for the negotiation of academic and professional identities could have a positive effect on students' engagement in the dissertation process. These findings contribute to the understanding of academic writing as practices that, rather than being integrated uncritically, are negotiated throughout the undergraduate journey.

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