

Comprehensive Exam in the Language and Literacies Education PhD & Flex-Time PhD Programs

Overview

The LLE comprehensive exam is comprised of (1) a written dissertation proposal and (2) an oral hearing involving the doctoral student's supervisory committee members. At the comprehensive exam oral hearing, the supervisor and two supervisory committee members assess the student's ability to carry out doctoral research on the basis of the quality of the dissertation proposal, the student's oral presentation of the proposal, and the student's responses to committee members' questions.

Components of the Comprehensive Exam

The first component of the comprehensive exam is a **written dissertation proposal**. Given the intellectual diversity of students and faculty in the LLE program, it is both difficult and unhelpful to prescribe a single format for the dissertation proposal. However, in the *Proseminar in LLE* course that (as of Fall 2018) is required for all thesis-track students, course participants read and discuss various strategies for writing a dissertation proposal.

At a minimum, the proposal should address the following topics:

- a clear statement of the problem or phenomenon addressed in the study;
- a rationale or justification for the study, in terms of its implications for educational theory and/or practice, i.e., what will this study contribute to theoretical and/or practical knowledge in your field;
- a critical review of relevant literature, to determine what is and is not known about the phenomenon, what the outstanding issues are, and how your proposal fits with this larger context;
- the assumptions which underlie your research, including a theoretical framework that will guide your investigation, and, where appropriate, the major hypotheses to be tested;
- a description of the methodology and procedures to be used in your study and an explanation of their appropriateness to the questions your study asks;
- a description of how you plan to analyze and interpret the 'data' in your study;
- a logical and clear plan for carrying out the project, including a tentative timetable and samples of research instruments to be used (such as interview guides, observation protocols, survey items, etc.);
- a proposed table of contents for the remaining chapters in your dissertation.

(adapted from Styres, 2015)

In some cases, addressing the above topics will lead to a proposal that comprises the first three chapters of the dissertation: 1) introduction and "statement of the problem"; 2) literature review; and 3) the research design. In other cases, such as historical or philosophical studies, or those grounded in critical social theory, there may not be such clear distinctions between some of the items listed above. For example, "data analysis" and "theoretical framework" might be one and the same thing, in which case you would not address them in separate sections of the proposal.

Nevertheless, the proposal should communicate to your supervisory committee that you have identified a significant phenomenon related to Language and Literacies Education (understood broadly), can demonstrate why it is important and how it relates to extant research in the field, have articulated a

theoretical stance for understanding the phenomenon and how to study it, and have a coherent and feasible research design to address your research questions.

The second component of the comprehensive exam is the **oral hearing**. At the hearing, the doctoral student prepares and presents a 15 to 20 minute talk on the proposal and responds to supervisory committee members' questions. The supervisor chairs the meeting and participates in asking questions. The purpose of these questions is to verify that 1) your understanding of the literature extends beyond the specific focus of your research topic, 2) you can defend the theoretical and methodological choices you have made in your proposal, and 3) you have a coherent, feasible, and robust research design and plan for conducting your study.

At the end of the question period, the student is asked to leave the room. The supervisory committee deliberates, and the majority must agree whether the student has successfully passed the exam. The decision is based on committee members' assessment of the written document as well as the oral hearing and response to questions.

Timing and Support for the Exam

Full-time PhD students must have achieved candidacy by the **end of their third year** in the program. Passing the comprehensive exams is only a part of achieving candidacy. Thus, students should plan to complete the exam during their third year at the latest. **Flex-time PhD students** have until the **end of the fourth year** to complete the exam and fulfil the other requirements to achieve candidacy.

To begin the process, the doctoral student works with their doctoral supervisor to create a draft proposal. This includes the supervisor's guidance on creating a reading list to inform the proposal, and their support in framing specific sections of the proposal. Once the supervisor and student agree that the draft is ready for the other supervisory committee members to review, the student submits the draft to them for feedback. It is at the supervisor's discretion whether this feedback is provided via email between committee members and the student, a meeting is called, or some other arrangement is made.

When the committee is satisfied that the student is ready to defend their proposal, the oral hearing can be scheduled.

Assessment

Assessment of the comprehensive exam is based on both the written dissertation proposal and the content of the oral hearing.

The final decision categories mirror those of the dissertation oral exam:

Pass as is. This means that the student is ready to apply to the Research Ethics Board for ethics review, where applicable, and is ready to get started with their research.

Minor corrections involve typographical errors, errors in punctuation, or problems in style; they must be corrected within one month and approved by the supervisor. This means that the student can apply to the Research Ethics Board for ethics review, where applicable, and get started with their research once the supervisor has approved these minor corrections.

Minor modifications are more than changes in style and less than major changes in the proposal. For example, clarification of textual material or qualification of research findings or conclusion. They must be feasibly completed within three months and approved by the supervisor. This means that

the student can apply to the Research Ethics Board for ethics review, where applicable, and get started with their research once the supervisor has approved these minor modification.

Fail The student begins the entire process again.