

Student Spotlight: Paul Viskanta, Fourth-Year EdD Student

Interview by Lucas Lee

Please tell us about your research focus and why you selected it.

I am researching which experiences inform teachers who collaborate with a professional writing organization of poets and authors. The organization goes into classes or holds workshops outside of school. Teaching writing, especially in secondary school is undervalued. Most research shows that it is not done very successfully. One of the most startling statistics is how little time secondary teachers spend on writing instruction. They don't spend a lot of time doing it on a day-to-day basis. And then there's a huge tension on different types of writing. There are different purposes, whether it's standardized writing for college (like essays and formal writing) or personal discovery (the kind of writing that helps adolescents to discover more about who they are). However, sometimes, personal discovery writing is neglected and discouraged by schooling and institutions that are focused on standardized achievement. That's underutilized for culturally responsive pedagogy. We're not using this tool that helps students become stronger people, stronger students. So, we need to use the tool of writing more.

Did anything surprising or special happen during your research process?

While I've had interesting findings, the thing that is surprised me most is what a positive and successful process this has been. Even with COVID challenges, my teachers were responsive. I had great research participants with very developed ideas about the teaching of writing.

I credit my professors for sharing advice on my research proposal. My professors kept suggesting things that would make my research more focused and more



achievable. So, I had a pie-in-the-sky idea of what I wanted to do, and my professors never said no. Instead, they helped me think about things that would make it something that I could accomplish within a reasonable amount of time. I really appreciate the feedback and input from my professors.

How have you adapted to education during the pandemic, as both a student and educator?

That's been hard for all of us, especially for underserved communities and international students. So, I acknowledge that my experience has been different than for many who had a much harder experience than I have. They are struggling even more. Speaking for myself, I focus on my health (trying not to get COVID), and I follow the social distancing and the COVID precautions. I knew that the trade-off of that choice, as difficult as that is, would be better than being ill and having my research or my schoolwork extended or interrupted because of illness. So taking care of myself, also my mental health, and acknowledging that racism, the violence, and transphobia that are going on in our big world, and just making sure that I take time for myself to recharged and stay strong.

What advice would you share with first-year graduate students?

The first one is not to neglect to learn about your program and the milestones.

Read the handbook. I understand many graduate students, especially in an education program, are working and have other professional obligations. Many have family responsibilities. I know that we tend not to read our manuals for anything, right? But knowing the process and being informed about the requirements, the time they take, and the steps in which to do them, will help you communicate with your professors. It also makes you an empowered participant in your own program, rather than just finding out about the rules as you go along on an emergency basis. So empower yourself with the information about the program.

My second one is to use technology to your advantage and set up your digital tools. I know it might take like a few days of time, and it doesn't feel like you're working on your schoolwork or research. However, it really pays off in the long run. Especially if you're going to be an academic, put your bookmarks away in an orderly process and find a digital citation program to put all your papers in. Those things will really pay off. Take some time, pick one, and learn how to use it. I started by trying out three of them, and then I really picked one. Technology is important.

And then finally, savor the experience. It is such a privilege to be a graduate student and to take part in sharing ideas and working with knowledgeable professors. I know we all want to get to the next level, and we all want to finish and meet our goals. But so much of what it is to be a graduate student will carry over to when we are teaching. Enjoy all the struggles, or just savor the experience and what you're learning from it: the struggles with APA, feedback that might be tough to hear, tough dialogues with classmates... I just encourage students to stop and smell the flowers. Enjoy the process.