

What Makes this So Hard? Episode 3: Overcoming Comparison and Perfectionism

Kristin Raub: 00:10

Hi, welcome back to What Makes This So Hard? I'm Kristin Raub, and today we have with us Willie Curry. Willie, do you want to introduce yourself?

Willie Curry: 00:19

Oh, thank you very much. Thank you for having me. I am Willie Curry. I am currently a PhD candidate in the Neuroscience Graduate Program here at University of Vermont. I am a senior graduate student, although I like to consider myself an elder grad student. I am currently in a lab that studies epilepsy. More specifically, I'm using an animal model of temporal lobe epilepsy, and without getting into too much of the technical details, just looking at a possible stem cell therapy for improving cognition in temporal lobe epilepsy, excuse me.

Kristin Raub: 00:58

Cool, that's so interesting. I think that's one of my favorite things about talking to other people is getting outside of my own program and finding out all this cool research that other people do. So, I know you mentioned that you're an elder grad student, but I guess where in this process are you? Are you looking at graduation in the near term or are you kind of in the middle of your program?

Willie Curry: 01:16

Right, so I think the actual phrase for where I'm at is usually acronym is ABD, all but defended or all but dissertation. So, I have gone through the hallmarks of probably what's typical of a graduate program. I've passed the so-called qualifying exam, where I had to propose some work in front of committee, give an official proposal and then I'm in between that official proposal and my defense of my dissertation. So, I've at this point completed most, if not all of, the actual experiments to get all the data that will be in my written dissertation. And I'm just analyzing, putting the final analysis on those data and getting ready to... Actually, I'm already in the process of actually writing up the dissertation, so I'm fairly close to the end.

Kristin Raub: 02:14

Congrats, I mean, it's such a long slog with these PhDs. So anywhere, I'm always encouraged by those who are actually at the end too, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Willie Curry: 02:21

It's there, it seems distant at times, but yeah, it's there.

Kristin Raub: 02:24

Yeah, growing bigger, hopefully a little bit at a time.

Willie Curry: 02:26

Yeah, a little bit, a little bit.

Kristin Raub: 02:28

Cool. So if you don't mind, could you tell me a little bit maybe about how you've felt throughout this dissertation progress? Has anything been smooth or over archingly challenging for you?

Willie Curry: 02:39

Sure. It's definitely been a bit of an emotional roller coaster, to be honest. I had a bit of an unorthodox journey to get to this point. Unlike many others going into my program, I actually come from a fairly humanities focused undergraduate education, in that I was a psychology major and I didn't decide to make the jump to neuroscience until basically my senior year of college. So, it was a bit of a hurdle to even convinced graduate programs that I was a good candidate from there. So, there are a lot of new things I had to learn, just even the ins and outs of a typical bio research lab, what constitutes good, hard scientific writing. Really everything was learning from scratch in a way, even thinking in more empirically and biologically oriented ways was a bit of a challenge.

Kristin Raub: 03:39

Yeah, so did you go straight from your undergraduate program into this PhD program?

Willie Curry: 03:44

I took I guess two years. I guess there was a two-year gap where I kind of... it was a combination of bumming around, being a cook actually in-

Kristin Raub: 03:54

Oh, that's cool.

Willie Curry: 03:56

It was an experience. It was in one of the cafeterias at my alma mater actually, and that was fun. But I was wanting a little bit more, so... Yeah, I guess a year and a half into that, I was like, "Okay, it's time to go to grad school." And took the GRE, applied around and eventually got into UVM.

Kristin Raub: 04:17

Wow, that's so cool. I mean, it's just really important, because grad school can be such a slog and especially a PhD, that's always been the advice is definitely do not enter into a PhD program unless you definitely know that that's what you want.

Willie Curry: 04:29

Yeah, I didn't follow that advice. I was completely unaware of that, and that has led to some of the low points, but I've learned a lot. So yeah, that's definitely great advice. I hope anyone considering going into graduate school is aware that yes, that is truly something they want to do.

Kristin Raub: 04:54

Yeah, well I think it's just, I don't know any... Well, that's not true, I know of some PhD students have had a rather flawless time and been out in three years, but at least most of those students I know, you

definitely pass a few phases of questioning, "Why am I doing this? Maybe I should do something else?" But it's whatever that core thing is at the base of it that keeps you going through, but...

Willie Curry: 05:17

Right, right, absolutely.

Kristin Raub: 05:19

But anyway, that's really challenging to go from basically an undergraduate program without a master's in between to then go straight to the PhD level. It's also just like a completely different style of writing and learning and sometimes there really isn't a whole lot of formal training. So I think you mentioned that you had to learn as you go, is there any particular advice that you got or any way that you were able to overcome that challenge?

Willie Curry: 05:40

For writing in particular?

Kristin Raub: 05:42

I mean just any of it, but yes writing also.

Willie Curry: 05:46

Not any kind of codified pieces of advice or guidelines or anything. Mostly it's been ongoing regular talks with my advisor; my mentor, who's been great and has made me aware of what it is that constitutes being a successful graduate student in a scientific graduate program like this. How science and research even works, what's expected of scientific writing in general in terms of clarity and precision. So yeah, it's been just a number of... Not solely my advisor, but it's mostly been ongoing, regular discussions about current, constantly needing course correction in order to get what it actually is to do this thing.

So yeah, so you were asking about how I was able to adapt to this environment, given my history. So, it hasn't been easy, as you can probably already guess already. There was a lot of... a big topic, especially for newer graduate students, is imposter syndrome. And that's not to say that that's solely a graduate student phenomenon or experience, but it happens with alarming regularity amongst graduate students it seems.

So, imposter syndrome is like, "What am I doing here?" You feel in over your head, like, "I'm just a sham. Am I really competent and talented enough to be in the position that I'm in?" And that can be very, very anxiety inducing. There can... feelings of guilt and shame in a way. And a lot of that results, not only from coming face to face with the tasks and day to day of what you'll actually be doing, but it comes from really comparing your performance in many ways to other people around you, be they peers and your particular cohort, or even what, like professors, what level of knowledge and that they've attained. So yeah, that seems to be a common occurrence in getting into graduate school.

Kristin Raub: 08:26

Oh yeah, it definitely is for sure. And I think that's something where I wish somebody had maybe warned me about that a little earlier. Because I think that's the challenge, is if you look around on the day to day, I mean maybe not right now in isolation, but usually on the day to day, you look around and literally

every other person you see is in some form of higher education or already holds a PhD themselves. So it's like that pool that you're looking at is already so advanced.

Or for me, I wasn't formally taught to write in a lot of ways. For me it was, "Hey, I need an abstract this conference." So, I would draft one up and send it to my advisor and it would come back all red, and I would learn as this iterative process. And for me it was always like, "God, that is so easy for them. I don't understand," and you have to remind yourself that adviser has what, decades of experience, and has done this so many times before. And at the time, that was what my first or second time writing an abstract, you know? So, I think it's that comparison is just a big challenge.

And then also sometimes I have to remind myself that what I'm comparing myself to, I don't actually have the entire story of. So some of your peers, you may know to certain extents better or worse than others, but at least there's some where I can think of a person in my program who was in and out with her PhD in maybe three and a half years. And that was very yeah, very quick. And they seemed to have a smooth, great time with it. But also, I didn't know that person very well. I have no idea what else is going on in their life or not going on in their life. And I can, I mean, I know my own life perfectly. I know that there are many other extenuating factors. So sometimes it's also reminding yourself should you even be comparing? And it's challenging.

Willie Curry: 09:59

No, you're absolutely right in that you're forgetting or not forgetting, maybe you never knew in the first place and you only gradually realize that there isn't, I don't know... maybe you schematize graduate student, in this very reductive, very simplistic way. And you're not really realizing that everyone's coming with, even within, even within the constraints and requirements that allow people to even enter grad school, people are bringing their own special mix of competencies and talents and aptitudes into their approach to do their work. So yeah, you're really just comparing apples to oranges and it takes some people longer to realize that than others.

Kristin Raub: 10:43

Yeah. So, this may be sort of an aside question, but have you found that that comparison to others has ever really impacted your performance as a grad student or your writing in particular? And if so, was there a way that you were able to overcome that?

Willie Curry: 10:57

It probably, well, I think it definitely hurts. It definitely hurts more than helps. It could maybe be helpful in that it's a catalyst for you to want to do better, and whatever that entails. Maybe it provides some kind of special incentive to like, "Oh, well, so and so was able to do this in this amount of time. Well, I'm going to try to aim for the same." But the problem with doing that is you could do the same thing you could have. You could still have motivation for sufficient performance of things and trying to always do your best, but you could do that without the guilt and feelings of inadequacy that goes along with comparing yourself to someone else. So, it's a process of refocusing your motivation from an external locus to a more internal locus, I guess.

Kristin Raub: 11:58

Yeah. I think, I mean, something I used to joke about was semi-serious is whenever I would really get into that, like, "Oh my God, everybody is smarter than me and what am I even doing here?" I would assign myself 10 minutes of reality TV, the stupider the better. It's just sort of like a way to reframe that, you know? "Oh, okay. Not everybody is always focused on really smart technical things. There is another world out here and you know what? I'm pretty confident I could quit right now and I would be fine." And it was just like it's perspective shift, which is really valuable. And I sometimes jokingly tell people, but also really, "Put on the Kardashians for 10 minutes. You'll feel a lot better about yourself." That's all it takes.

Willie Curry: 12:36

Yeah. Yeah. That's brilliant. I probably do something similar. I don't know if it's reality TV specifically, but-

Kristin Raub: 12:43

Oh there's plenty of avenues, but the general, the gist of it is what I recommend. Because at least for me, I know that when I get too down on myself and it's a comparison, it's like, "Well, why does it even matter? If everybody is so much smarter than what is the point?" and A, reminding yourself that everybody isn't necessarily smarter. Yes, definitely, some people are, but everybody's different. Nobody exactly studies the exact same thing. So yes, you have more knowledge in a certain area, but it's also just letting go of that perfectionism, because I know at least for me, when I get too down on myself, it really delays my ability to write. I'm like, "It doesn't matter. It's not going to be perfect." And it's letting go of that perfectionism to at least just try.

Willie Curry: 13:22

Yeah, you're absolutely right. I mean, there's definitely certain types of people. There's certain archetypes of people who want to get a graduate school education. Anyway, I won't make any kind of large claims about what types of people those are, but there probably is a higher than average population amount of wanting to be perfect and wanting to get everything right the first time. And just using certain failures to tie a little more intimately into your self-worth than other people possibly do, maybe.

But that said, you have to remember that you're a graduate student, with the emphasis on student. And that, yeah you're not Neo from the Matrix here. No, even Neo from the Matrix, he didn't make the jump the first time. So that's going to be you, you're just never going to... not never, but you just have to come to embrace that your growth and development will happen over probably a longer time scale than you're initially comfortable with.

Kristin Raub: 14:34

Oh yeah, for sure. And I think for me, just that sentiment of, I think once I embraced, I know it sounds stupid, but embraced my own incompetencies. Once I realized that I'm not expected to be perfect, I am a student, I'm still learning and I can see my own growth. But I find that now I will send out drafts just a little sooner than maybe I would have been ready for. And I'm also sometimes very surprised by the lack of comments.

I remember I was writing this paper recently where I thought the intro was a little short, but I was like, "Hey, I think it at least has all the elements. And at least if I send it out, they're going to tell me what's missing versus me racking my brain and not really knowing." And then it came back with not as many comments as I was expecting. And to me, it was like, I literally, if I hadn't done that, I would've spent hours and hours and hours and more making this intro probably twice as long as it was, where it turns out that wasn't even needed. You know? So-

Willie Curry: 15:20

Yes, I totally feel you on that. Even just recently, I sent my advisor a draft of the beginning introduction, literature review of my dissertation. And I was like, "Ah, it's crap. I'm seeing this to you with the intention of realizing that it's a rough draft. I'm going to make a lot better." And he got back to me, he was like, "Hey, this is actually really good." I was like, "What are you talking about?" And I was like, "Oh my God, I wasn't expecting that." But having, you've done this type of writing for years now, of course you're going to get better.

Kristin Raub: 15:59

So I think to me, if we segue over into the writing center and I don't know if you'll introduce that as well, but Willie is also one of our writing consultants at the writing center. For me, it's like the trusting somebody else's perspective. To me, yes, you're supposed to trust yourself and your judgment. But sometimes to me, it's really useful to remember that maybe I'm also not the best judge of my own writing sometimes. So I, while I'm a consultant, I also use the writing center rather frequently. And what I often use it for is just somebody else to give me fresh eyes on it.

And I usually find that the parts that I thought were really maybe not so strong actually have some value to them, but maybe it just needs to be shifted. You know? And I guess in slightly the theme of comparison, I find at least as a consultant, being able to compare the work of so many other students that I work with, it gives me a better understanding and a better vocabulary to even articulate what makes something good or bad or how to improve it or different skills that we have.

So anyway, I think on those themes, that's really how the writing center has helped me. Do you see anything similar?

Willie Curry: 16:57

Yeah, absolutely. I can't quite convey how grateful I am to be able to see all the different types of writing that other grad students are doing. This is going to sound weird, but it's like therapy, right? So what's the point of a therapist? Well, one way you can think of it is a kind of impartial third party who is able to... it's really hard to get out of your own head. So you need to have someone to bounce things off of and make you aware of certain things that you have a blind spot for.

And writing's the same way I think. In that it can be hard to get a grasp on your own writing because you're deep in it. And then you're making all these assumptions and whatnot. So being exposed to the writing of others is really helpful in that maybe I can see the things that they don't see, in discourse with them. And I can think back and relate it to my own writings like, "Oh, do I do this?" And it's just really through that, it gives me a certain not only awareness, but in a vocabulary in order to apply to my own writing.

Kristin Raub: 18:13

Yeah. And then just to say too, for anybody who hasn't used the writing center as frequently as that, even though we do compare amongst different pieces of writing, it's more of a constructive way. I don't think I've ever passed judgment or felt judgment was ever passed on my writing by any consultant. It's mostly just because we're grad students, we've all then there too. Therefore, it's nothing but empathy, at least for my part. And I feel at least from all the other consultants that I know as well.

Willie Curry: 18:36

Oh no, yeah, I would never judge another person's writing. Especially in that we are all in the same position, and we're all at variable, but differential rates of learning this stuff. So everyone has to go through the process. So yeah, just the upmost empathy. Yeah.

Kristin Raub: 18:58

I think originally you had said that your advisor gave you the advice that something about it, you don't need to have perfection always.

Willie Curry: 19:04

Yeah. His point was kind of multifold. One was that something that I feel really stupid for not realizing in the first place, is A, that one of my lab's mantras is that writing is rewriting. And if I've heard that a hundred times, just over the past few months alone, but it's absolutely true. As what we were saying earlier, he was trying to get me to realize that yes, everything doesn't have to be perfect on the first try, so to speak. And it's okay to further revision and editing, that's totally fine. That's the way it should be.

But also, he was making a point for the way that contemporary science works, in that it's absolutely a collaborative process. So, you're not just building, well, depending on what lab you're in and the nature of your advisor, you're not building grant proposals or journal articles from scratch by yourself. You put in the initial work to form the skeleton of it, but you also go on to consult with your advisor, your colleagues, and other authors of the paper to put it in its most polished form. So, the burden isn't all on you.

Kristin Raub: 20:37

Yeah. I think that's really valuable because I think sometimes that can be really isolating. It's just expecting that you yourself need to deliver this big thing. But even a dissertation, yes, it's you, but also your advisors are there to help you. Your cohort is there to help you, the writing center is there to help you. And I think for me, once I realized that, it felt a lot less lonely and a lot less daunting. For me, it's only daunting after I've exhausted all my resources, but usually I never even get to that point, you know?

Willie Curry: 21:04

Right. And to follow up on that. I wish I had become aware and utilize the services of the writing center a lot earlier.

Kristin Raub: 21:13

Oh, me too.

Willie Curry: 21:13

I think that would have mitigated a lot of writing anxiety and make me more aware of what I needed to do in order to get my writing in the best spot a lot earlier. So yeah.

Kristin Raub: 21:28

Yeah. I would agree. I am currently rounding out year four and I didn't start using the writing center until my third year of my PhD. And I think it was just because I didn't really know what they could do to help me. But I think number one, it's just making it not all about yourself, having somebody else there to have a unbiased, empathetic conversation with you and having this vocabulary to help you out of your own whatever point you're stuck at. That's... day one, I wish I had come to the writing center.

Willie Curry: 21:55

Yeah, as you know Kristin, it's not just a, "Hey, bring in your manuscript and we'll do some very technical grammatical edits." It's more like even if you have an idea, come in and we can talk about it and we can give it form and shape. So it's revealing things to you that you weren't even aware of. Which you can in turn, incorporate into your writing.

Kristin Raub: 22:20

And I would say too, it's not even, "I need help on my specific writing." It's also, I had somebody come in recently saying, "Hey, all those things I said I was going to do for today. I couldn't. And I don't know why." And we were actually able to have an entire conversation about why these things are hard to make progress on. There's a whole field of literature on it, and there's a thousand different tools that you can try as well. And it's something where I love talking about that stuff. So, to me, as I always say, if it has to do with words at all, then that's what you come into the writing center for.

So there is definitely help to be found. I don't think anybody has ever come to me saying, "This is the problem I'm having," and I haven't been able to offer something. Or even point them in the direction of another consultant because that's part of what I do is I like to work with other consultants, then I can figure out what their different strengths are. Obviously, we can all consult on anything, but sometimes different people have different specialties. So, I also love recommending people to other consultants as well.

Willie Curry: 23:12

Yeah, you're absolutely right. Yeah.

Kristin Raub: 23:14

All right. Well, thank you so much for chatting with me today, Willie. This has been great.

Willie Curry: 23:17

Oh, no problem. It was an absolute pleasure.

Kristin Raub: 23:19

Awesome and happy writing.

Willie Curry: 23:21

Happy writing.