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Insights into experiences in student research forums: The case of the TESOL Doctoral Student Forum

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Key words: informal adult learning; doctoral student learning; communities of practice; student research forums

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to identify the impact of student research forum participation on adult learners in doctoral programs from around the world. Through the analysis of qualitative data gathered via an open-ended, online survey, insight was gained into the characteristics of the isolated journey of adult learning in doctoral studies and the need to provide opportunities to interact and intersect in the varying communities of scholarly practice.

A major goal of doctoral programs is to equip adult students with the concepts and skills necessary to become effective educational researchers. Doctoral programs are formal in structure and delivery and provide instruction in various methodology courses. But the learning occurs both in and outside the classroom - in the experiences students have of actually conducting research and interacting within a community of scholarly practice. We know that adults enter doctoral programs with a variety of background experiences, motivations, and capacities for research and scholarly productivity. We also know that attrition rates in doctoral programs can range between 40% and 70% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Nettles & Millett, 2006). The Council of Graduate Schools (2004) explains that doctoral students bear a large responsibility for “defining the scope of their educational experience” (p. 4), but the independence, isolation, and personal responsibility for one’s own learning in these programs can be a frustrating and often overwhelming experience (Gardner, 2008). One way to attend to the individual needs of developing scholars may be through participation in research forums. These forums are spaces in which participants can present their own and learn about other doctoral research projects while informally networking with colleagues, professors, and other professionals. Such is the case of the Teachers of English to Students of Other Languages’ (TESOL) Doctoral Student Forum, which is held annually in conjunction with the TESOL Convention. The Forum invites adult learners in doctoral programs to participate and present their research (students are encouraged to submit presentations regardless of the stage of their investigations), discuss hot topics of doctoral study and TESOL-related research, and collaborate/network with academics, professionals, and other doctoral students. The Forum is an all day event wherein students present their research projects in poster presentation sessions. There are also mentoring roundtables in which participating members of the professoriate, as well as other professionals who have completed their doctoral work, meet with student participants in a casual atmosphere to discuss their own research, methodologies, and various insights into the job market and university expectations. The purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of adult learning through participation in such forums. The research questions guiding this investigation include (1) What do doctoral students learn through the process of presenting their own research to peers, professors, and professionals from other universities and programs? And, (2) in what ways does discussing research and doctoral program experiences with others in different programs and

institutions impact the doctoral student's understanding of research, of academia, and of the community of scholarly practice?

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

In doctoral programs, students learn about and to do research through a variety of settings including coursework, exposure to and critical consumption of the literature, and interactions with professors and fellow classmates. Because context and situational influences inherent in the educational environment shape the learning, situated cognition frames this study. Central to the theory are communities of practice (CoPs), which Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as “a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Learning within this framework is not located exclusively within the individual; instead, it is situated communally and is impacted by the differences of perspective among co-participants (Hanks, 1991). Novices, or *apprentices*, entering a new CoP are peripheral participants, and only through experience and practice can they assume the new identity (with attendant attitudes, behaviors, and values) and become full members of the community. Research has shown that adults who attend higher education are located within multiple CoPs, and it is the meaning that these adults construct in the higher education environment that can influence their successful, or unsuccessful, participation (O'Donnell & Tobell, 2007). The present study is therefore situated in a community of adult doctoral students who endeavor to become educational researchers through doctoral study.

Literature in adult higher education calls for more investigation into the influences on adult learning in higher education in general (i.e., Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Kasworm, 2003; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 2000; O'Donnell & Tobell, 2007) and in adult learning in doctoral programs in specific (Drago-Severson, Asghar, & Gaylor, 2003; Young, 2001). Research suggests that diverse “knowledge voices” (Kasworm, 2003, p. 96) and developmental capacities of adult students vary in ways that affect what preparation they will need to be successful in higher education. In doctoral programs, adult learners must become familiar with a variety of research methodologies, master a large body of knowledge and practices, develop specific technological skills, develop data gathering abilities, and cultivate the craft and experiential elements of analytical writing (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2005). The culture of the discipline also bears a heavy influence on the adult learner's experience and participation in the community of educational practice and profession (Clark, 1987; Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005). In the study of teaching and learning, for example, what counts as knowledge, as evidence of an assertion, and as merit of that evidence is abstract and diverse (Green, 2005; Pallas, 2001).

In addition, Nettles and Millett (2006) suggested that “because of the tremendous growth in the size and diversity of graduate programs and enrollments in the United States...there is no clear sense of the characteristics of the people who are pursuing doctoral degrees or the experiences of the expanded population of students” (p. 2). The complex milieu of disciplinary roots, epistemologies, and frameworks lead the new graduate student down multiple paths before one is chosen for personal use. In fact, training in research methods in graduate programs can vary widely and are influenced by a number of individual, departmental, and institutional factors (Astramovich, Okech & Hoskins, 2004).

We know that engaging in doctoral study and research can empower and shape the individuals who participate in it; however, the contextual factors listed above can lead some doctoral students to experience feelings of inadequacy and intimidation during the research

process (Coryell, Clark, Wagner, & Steussy, 2008). Learning more about adult learners in these programs, as well as about their meaning-making processes in formal and informal program-related experiences, is warranted if we are to shape effective curricula and educative paths that support these learners appropriately.

Research Design

Doctoral students, professors, and professionals attend the TESOL Doctoral Student Forum each year. Data were gathered via a confidential, open-ended online survey conducted after each Forum for two consecutive years. Of the 130 requests for participation, 45 students responded to the survey. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents were presenters. Participants hailed from fifteen countries in 38 institutions. In addition, one third of the respondents identified themselves as international student participants. Questions focused on what, if anything, respondents learned through interacting with other doctoral students, professors, and professionals at universities and other institutions across the nation and world. This paper reports the results of the following questions: *If you presented at the Forum, was this of benefit to you?* (40 responses) *What, if anything, did you learn from the experience of presenting?* (36 responses) *What, if anything, did you learn about the research process during your experience at the Forum?* (30 responses) And, *what, if anything, did you learn from other participants this year* (38 responses)?

Data were analyzed via constant comparison methods (Glaser & Straus, 1967) across the completed surveys. Because most of the survey questions were open-ended, I used a cross-case analysis to group answers to questions in order to examine various perspectives on specific topics (Patton, 1990). Data were first broken down into a list of codes, which led to a compilation of categories and eventually larger, overarching themes. Finding these patterns in the data is necessary to discover what is noteworthy and meaningful. Through devising rules that described each category, I consistently compared the codes and ultimately refined the categories into overarching themes.

Findings

Analysis of respondents' feedback provides valuable insight into the emotional and intellectual complexity of doctoral study. Participant responses suggest the opportunity to present and discuss their research and to exchange ideas and experiences about doctoral study are invaluable to their development. The findings also suggest the importance of having specific types of interactive experiences in order to negotiate, gain, and intersect participative access into what otherwise might be tangential communities of practice. Overarching themes from the analysis indicate that the informal learning that occurs in the activities provided in forum were elements needed for authentic socialization processes into their chosen fields.

“A Chance to Present My Research in a Safe Environment”

Respondents indicated presenting their own research provided opportunities to consider their projects from a different vantage point. They suggested that their abilities were stretched, and they were challenged to think beyond the constraints of their experiences back home. Many realized that the process of preparing to present one's own research required them to consider their work from different perspectives, which was invaluable in their developing understanding of their research and about educational research, in general. This sentiment exemplifies this element of the theme, “Preparing my poster helped me think about my research from different

angles and see how best to present the data and theories for an outsider to understand.” Others indicated the importance of the interactions that occurred with other doctoral students during their poster presentations. Responses such as the following summarized many of the sentiments, “I learned that you need to be more open to other people’s suggestions and that you can improve your own research by listening to what experts and non-experts have to say about your own research.”

Many of the respondents realized the self-reflexive processes involved in preparing and actually presenting research to other students. One offered, “I self-evaluated my way of presenting the study. I think it was a process of learning and improving myself as a presenter.” Respondents spoke of learning about how to create a visual component of their research (through creating the poster) and how meaningful that was to their understanding of their own research processes. They also indicated the value of forming and organizing their ideas and arguing their choices in the research and in discussing their research with other experts and burgeoning scholars. A common conclusion is illustrated by these responses, “Through discussing my project with others informally, I got some new ideas that can help me develop this more and think about future projects,” and “Simply giving me an opportunity to discuss the work with others outside of my committee was great. It was good practice to talk about my work.” Just as writing is “a way of knowing, a method of discovery and analysis” (Richardson, 1994, p. 516-517), the findings from this study indicate that the process and experience of preparing for and presenting one’s research at various stages is also a way of discovery, of knowing, and of analysis.

Ultimately, presenting at the Forum was found to be a safe environment in which to put oneself and one’s work into the public eye of peers and professionals. Since all of the presenters were communicating their doctoral research at different stages, there was a unifying sense in the familiarity of experience. The following summarizes this theme succinctly,

“The forum gave me the chance to present in a safe environment to my peers. I really enjoyed the poster presentation format and the chance to see what a large number of people are doing. I was inspired by the other presentations and felt a little less lonely as a PhD student.”

“I’m Not Alone”

The experiences of interacting with peers and colleagues from around the world provided insight about the participants’ developing socialization processes into the scholarly (program and professional) community of practice in which they are working diligently to gain access and to participate. Through their discussions with other participants, the respondents also realized the commonalities of the doctoral study journey. This response tenders the sentiments of many,

Speaking to other participants about the challenges they have faced or are facing with the research process and the doctoral process in general was very helpful. This forum provided a sense of community among the participants. I have found my doctoral work to be a very lonely process, and it was great to have an opportunity to connect with others who felt the same way.

Another stated, “I was happy to see other people who are going through the same *PhD Syndrome*” [*italics added*].

For many, the experiences of learning about others’ research was at once helpful in understanding the newest trends in research, as well as in self-evaluating one’s own work and professional development. One participant offered,

The Doctoral Forum is a wonderful way for me to focus on what I have achieved so far in my research study. Making the poster was a chance for me to test out my ideas and confirm that I am on the right track with my data collection. It focused my thinking and helped to build my confidence.

And another added,

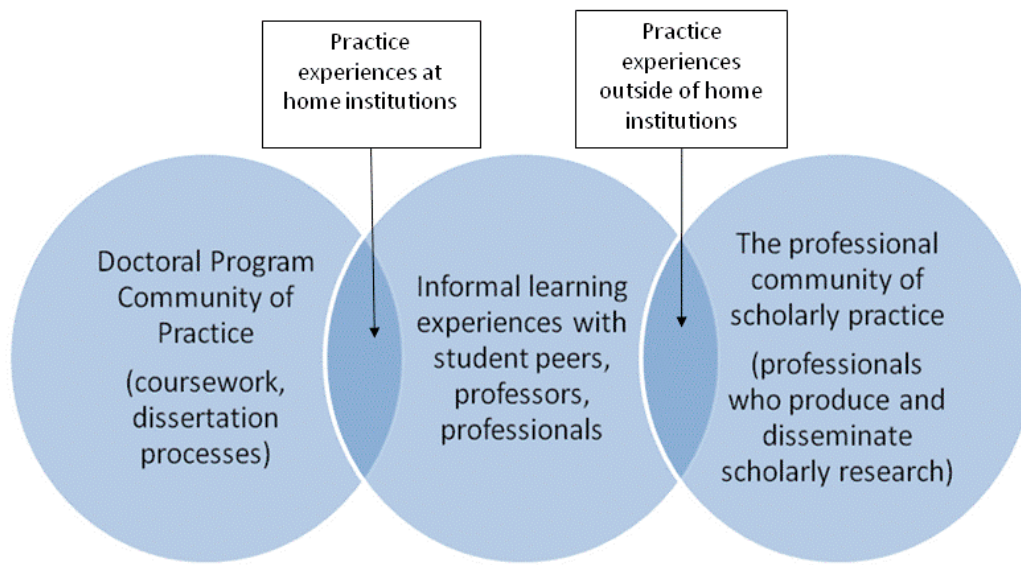
I learned what other people were thinking and doing out there. I was able to know what and where I was as a PhD student. Actually, I could not believe that I knew much more than I was able to discuss research and the topical issues with other presenters with confidence.

Tales of ideological bantering with student colleagues and professors, deepening professional friendships, “horror” and “success stories” with dissertation committees, and negotiating the layers of bureaucracy in the program, department, college, and institutional review boards offered participants the chance to realize they were not alone in the complexities of adult learning and development in their doctoral studies.

Finally, the interaction during the mentor roundtables proved important in learning how the participants’ research might be situated into the professional community of practice. This response summarized this outcome clearly, “The mentor portion of the doctoral forum was a wonderful opportunity to speak to supervisors from other universities and to get a different perspective on my area of research.” Ultimately, the opportunity to engage in authentic and safe dialogue with fellow students, professors, and other professionals helped the participants to situate their own research and individual learning journeys into their own doctoral programs as well as the larger community of scholarly practice. In preparing their presentations and interacting with other forum participants, their abilities were stretched. They were challenged to contemplate their learning, knowledge, and achievements beyond what they had previously done. They got a glimpse of where they were going and where they wanted to end up, gaining a better sense of what they needed to get there, and through it all, enhancing their self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Discussion and Implications

The findings reveal the need for doctoral students to have opportunities to present their research to others throughout the research process. In doing so, this research indicates learners can begin to see the process from the outside-in, rather than only the often lonely, inside-out. In addition, the participants in this study evoked an understanding of the dependence and interdependence between the CoPs of their doctoral studies and that of the professional community of practice. At the time they attended the Forum, they were still apprentices in both communities – participating at varying levels, not sure of their own progress, and oftentimes feeling very alone. The findings suggest that adult learners in doctoral studies need practice experiences that help them situate their research and their evolving identities within both their academic program and the professional CoPs. By having the opportunity to interact with other doctoral students, professors, and professionals, and to be able to discuss their own research in ways they do not have at their own institution, they also began to see the overlapping practices among their formal and informal learning CoPs. The figure below graphically depicts the communities in which the participants learn and work.



A combination of formal and informal experiences are indicated from this study as supportive of cognitive development of research processes, methodologies, and dissemination, as well as the learning needs and socialization processes into the elusive communities of practice that is education scholarship.

Implications reiterate that doctoral studies and supervision should be understood as a pedagogic practice (Green, 2005). Learners in these programs need multiple formal and informal practice experiences as they transition through their academic programs and into professional research practice. As programs and advisors plan for these experiences, a focus on interfacing with multiple facets of academic and professional communities of practice is warranted. Doctoral students need the opportunity to discuss their research and program experiences in a safe environment that encourages open dialogue among peers and professors/professionals, helpful critique, and supportive suggestions. Research forums, like the TESOL Doctoral Student Forum, can be planned at annual professional organization conferences or meetings, bringing together novice researchers to openly present and discuss their work. As well, local forums can be organized for students at different stages in their doctoral programs to present and talk about their research projects, across the phases of their investigations. The networking and dialoguing experiences can prove invaluable in supporting adult learning development, as well as access into the varying scholarly and professional communities of practice in which they desire to participate fully.

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