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The Loneliness of a Solitary Dissertation Writer: Avoiding Isolation through a Writing Community

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine how participating in writing groups, collaborative work, and peer mentoring help doctoral students overcome obstacles and complete the dissertation process.

Keywords: doctoral study, dissertation writing, collaboration, writing groups, peer mentoring

Introduction

As four doctoral students who have finished formal coursework and have begun the dissertation writing process, we formed a working group to help each other address our concerns, inadequacies, and loneliness. Through shared documents, online and personal meetings, and writing sessions, we have set goals, expressed frustration, strategized, and socialized. Our interactions, in person, online, and through communal writing have reduced stress, provided emotional support, increased productivity, and strengthened our understanding of the academic process of dissertation writing. Exploring how writing groups, collaboration, and peer mentoring support doctoral students as they embark on the uniquely independent process of dissertation research is important because roughly half of all doctoral students fail to complete their degrees (Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008).

The Purpose of Our Self Study

This article is designed to provide a theoretical analysis of our supportive relationship and examine how our experiences contribute to our success in completing the degree, improving organization and writing skills, engaging in collaborative research and publishing, and reducing stress and isolation. One feature of our collaboration has been to explore autoethnography. Autoethnographic writing “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, ¶1) while enhancing empathy towards those whose experiences may be different (Ellis et al., 2011). We began writing autoethnographically to explain how we made sense of our experiences as dissertation writing doctoral students, and we offer our own stories as they are connected to the literature with the goal of providing other doctoral students, dissertation committee advisors and members, and program faculty the opportunity to recognize shared experiences. Sawyer & Norris (2013) described duoethnography as a conversation where “two or more researchers work in tandem to dialogically critique and question the meanings they give to social issues and epistemological constructs” (p. 2). We came together and began our group dialogue because we are in the same doctoral program and reached the dissertation writing process at the same time. Through email and text chains, a group blog, online meetings, and in-person writing sessions, we have documented our experiences.

In this article, by analyzing the discourse on writing groups, collaboration, and peer mentoring, we explain the learning that occurred in our partnership. The goal is to understand the nature of the adult learning we experienced through a peer mentoring process, connect our experience to existing research, and identify aspects of our experience that are not explained in the current discourse on doctoral study.

Research Connections to Personal Experience

The literature we have examined in order to delineate elements of group interaction and collaboration that can be successfully applied to dissertation writing include writing groups, collaborative activities, and peer mentoring.

Writing Groups. The stress from academic writing can negatively affect a doctoral candidate's ability to complete a dissertation. Research has shown that writing groups have the potential for assisting doctoral students engaged in academic writing (Benvenuti, 2017; Wilmot, 2018). One topic to explore is the pedagogy of writing groups. Writing groups are not just about the mechanics of writing, but they are also social groups within specific contexts (Aitchison, 2009; Lee & Boud, 2003). Our work has led to improved writing skills and increased comprehension of the elements of doctoral research as we have written and revised our work based on peer suggestions and explanations. It has also transformed our dissertation writing into a group experience rather than a solitary endeavor.

We all experienced intense pressure to move through the steps of our research process hampered by a lack of prior knowledge and clear guidance and instruction in writing, especially in constructing research questions, choosing and justifying methodological approaches, and positioning ourselves as qualified researchers in the academic community. We recognized the need to engage in talk and work with each other on writing so that we could overcome our confusion and frustration. Problems we initially thought were unique often turned out to be shared by the group. A collective blog on a shared Google document where we expressed these thoughts and responded to each other was filled with quotes like "I felt the same way," "Ditto," and "You said exactly what I've been thinking." Sharing ideas and talking through problems as a group was helpful in reaching a resolution. When we had difficulty creating problem statements, Colleen shared a fill-in-the-blanks model that helped us all formulate our own. When we found it difficult to articulate the relationships between the elements of our proposal and how they supported the research questions, Colleen shared a chart that enabled us to see the larger picture rather than only the individual parts so we could better conceptualize and refine our thinking.

An academic literacies view of writing changes the perspective from one that sees writing as a "discrete skill or stand-alone attribute, to a recognition that language and writing is a complex, context-specific social and cultural practice . . . [where] language is seen as a socially situated discourse practice, carrying with it all the nuances of power and privilege" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 906). As a diverse group of different nationalities, ages, and work and life experiences, we have recognized varied levels of power and privilege as we tackle the very context-specific practice of dissertation writing. This view provides a unique link between writing groups and adult education's concern for social justice. Writing groups that support learners from diverse backgrounds can address inequities in academia as well as contribute to individual degree completion (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011).

While graduate school experiences can be challenging for any students, international students tend to suffer more from feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and high levels of anxiety and stress than their American peers; this is often due to language and cultural differences (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). Effective writing groups for international graduate students are usually implemented by institutions and are exclusively designed for them (Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008); our group is self-initiated and integrates both American and international students. Often Colleen and Carol explained common American idioms to the Heh Youn and Xiaoqiao in order to expand their understanding of interpersonal relationships involved

in working with dissertation committees.

Studies of the psychological effects of the dissertation process also reveal a connection to writing. This research often focuses on the “all but dissertation” phase of doctoral study, when doctoral candidates may experience anxiety and depression. Studies include work on writer’s block (McAloon, 2004), stress from the enormity of tasks to complete and social isolation (Monsour & Corman, 1991), and the developmental conflicts of this milestone moment (Blum, 2010). We overcame our own writing blocks with the support of our peers. When Carol was brave enough to go first and defend her proposal, Colleen posted on Facebook that she turned in her first draft, and Heh Youn submitted two chapters of her proposal, Xiaoqiao was motivated to finish writing and submit her own proposal. She was encouraged to stop overthinking and unnecessarily continue to edit.

Collaboration. Collaborative inquiry is a “systematic process in which participants organize themselves into small groups to explore a question that all members find compelling” (Kasl & Yorks, 2010). It is particularly useful for addressing questions that are professionally and personally developmental or socially beneficial (Bray, Lee, Smith, & York, 2000). Participants of a collaborative inquiry group construct knowledge together through free and open dialogue throughout the research process and thus all participants are situated as co-inquirers (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Broadly defined, collaborative learning involves peers working together to learn new concepts or skills (Dillenber, 1999) through asynchronous and synchronous communication. We have worked both synchronously and asynchronously, demonstrating both cooperation and collaboration. We used video conferencing technology to meet when we were not in the same locale, and we met at coffee shops for work sessions when we could. We worked on our collaborative autoethnography, and we addressed our own skill deficits and knowledge gaps with the help of other group members.

We frequently talked about how to create effective research questions and then efficiently structure the chapters of our dissertation. Before our group work, we were unsure of the intricacies of several research elements. For example, Xiaoqiao shared that she was not clear on the differences between a theoretical framework and a conceptual framework until Carol explained her understanding. When Colleen and Heh Youn expressed similar confusion, Xiaoqiao felt encouraged because not only was she beginning to understand the topic more fully, but she also did not feel alone. She knew she no longer had to pretend to understand.

Informal Peer Mentoring. Peer mentoring is an effective tool for students to learn the culture of academia in order to be successful in their academic careers (Hansman, 2012). Previous research revealed an encouraging environment led to more self-confidence for both women mentors and mentees in academia (De Vries, 2005). Our entries on our collective blog and our many group interactions provided us with significant advice and support. We began the group blog as a way to track our progress and our interaction so we could use it as data for future autoethnographic research articles, but we found it to be a source for peer mentoring.

For instance, during one early interaction, Colleen expressed concerns about exactly what her research focus should be. Heh Youn responded “...my situation is not particularly different from yours. I also feel quite lost...maybe we can use our proposal stage to articulate our research ideas better and clear confusion.” We could not always give each other concrete tips regarding how to overcome specific problems. However, sharing worries and frustrations lessened our levels of writing distress and self-doubt as researchers as our sense of belonging to the group grew. What we learned is that, despite different research topics, questions, perspectives, and stages of writing, we faced similar challenges. Recognizing that we all experienced self-doubt

alleviated our anguish and restored our confidence. This aspect of our group experience is in line with Lee and Boud (2003) who argued that writing groups play a key role in activating graduate students' desire and capacity to develop academic proficiency. Also, the longer our group worked together, the more online meetings we had, the more cafe work sessions we arranged, the more social activities we participated in, the more comfortable we became with sharing our own vulnerabilities. We recognized we did not have to hide the hardships we were experiencing at home, at work, in school, during writing process. Once we let ourselves show vulnerability, we became stronger from telling our truths.

Previous research also reveals the role of peer mentoring in personal satisfaction and growth (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004), as well as accelerated research productivity (Johnson, 2002). Our group, beyond serving as a safety net where we share and alleviate our stress, has become a research team. Our blog, multiple email exchanges, offline meetings, and a writing retreat have all become part of our group history, fostering a research idea on voluntary writing groups for graduate students that aide academic development and improve inclusivity within the research community. This paper itself represents our first collaborative work.

Most commonly, peer mentoring programs are planned and initiated by higher education institutions where a mentor is formally matched to a mentee (Boyle & Boice, 1998). One challenge of arranged mentoring relationships is that the relationship may not always be ideal due to power relationships (Hansman, 2002). Mentees tend to depend on their mentors' personal experiential guidance, and their dialogue is largely dominated by the mentors' point of view (Darwin & Palmer, 2009), leaving the mentoring relationship hierarchical. What makes our group's experience different is that our mentoring relationship is self-initiated. With friendships developed over years and equality and mutuality being at the core, we have been supportive of each other throughout different stages of our doctoral journeys, having active discussions, offering emotional support, and sharing writing goals. We took many of the same courses; we were graduate assistants in our program; Colleen and Carol we both involved in student government and union organizing; Heh Youn and Xiaoqiao were both part of the international student community; we attended conferences together; we organized a group writing retreat in the Adirondacks; we coordinated breakfast and dinners both within our program and within our group. While our peer mentoring came about organically, adult education programs can encourage students to form similar groups through coursework and conference presentations.

As diverse learners, it is important to recognize how we avoided a hierarchy that is more typical of institutionally driven mentor relationships. For example, Carol is a native speaking, retired English teacher. By explaining that she too experiences writers' blocks, moments when she just can't read or write anymore dissertation work and escapes into murder mystery novels set in Victorian England, she revealed that despite her technical skills, she shares the same feelings as less proficient writers. In sharing her own insecurities, Carol helped other group members have the confidence to ask for help, knowing they would not be treated merely as less proficient international students. Discussions revealing our value of varied cultural experiences also provided connections between us rather than leaving our differences unacknowledged which could lead to hidden power differentials. Xiaoqiao stated that despite having less working or life experience than Colleen or Carol, she felt her and Heh Youn's suggestions were valued; she felt encouraged working within the group.

Implications for Adult Education Practice

As graduate students, writing is a central part of our studies. Although many graduate students lack sufficient training and skills in writing (Ku et al., 2008), dissertation writing has

been considered a self-directed and independent process. We formed our group because we needed structured support and engagement from others to make progress with our own writing. Within our group, we not only developed our trust and friendship and made academic progress, we also learned about each other's research ideas in depth and gained knowledge of how to comment on others' academic work. Many doctoral students in their final stage of graduate school struggle to find support that sustains their motivation to continue their dissertation work and meet professional and personal development goals. Our peer support network is built on the use of writing groups, collaboration, and peer mentoring that assists participants in meeting these goals. Being free from the fear of external evaluation, we gained confidence in our writing skills and conceptual development throughout our academic and social interactions.

This type of group experience may provide the means for doctoral students to critically reflect on their learning practices as students and researchers while participating in a learning community that shares and expands knowledge. Our research can help guide adult learners in uncovering ways to foster collaborative and peer support relationships that lead to academic and professional success. Diversity in our group contributes to building an inclusive and dynamic learning experience through social interaction. Based on our experience, we view it is imperative for doctoral students to find a group that best supports their academic needs so that they can complete their work, especially given limited time and resources. Our group experience suggests that the support groups can be best utilized when they are formed early in the doctoral degree process so that students develop a systematic and collaborative relationship that facilitates their academic progress.

In establishing organic support groups, it is important for graduate students to recognize the necessity for diversity. Having different backgrounds, races, countries of origin, ages, interests, and skills creates better group dynamics; we keep learning from one another. It is also important to allow for time to build trust. In the beginning, social gatherings such as meeting for coffee, drinks, or dinner and traveling together is beneficial. Doctoral candidates need to be proactive and not wait for their program to arrange mentor relationships. Starting with social activities is an easy way to establish rapport. Finding partners and small groups to collaborate on coursework, research projects, and conference presentations is another valuable step. It helps learners become comfortable collaborating on academic tasks, leading to group support for dissertation writing. We suggest academic programs support their students' attempts to form voluntary support groups by creating course opportunities to work collaboratively, directing students toward group research for conference presentations and offering funding, encouraging social activities within their programs, and providing physical space for both group academic work and social activities. By being intentional in creating support networks, doctoral students and their programs can enable students to find the positive group experiences we have had.

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