

Chapter 6

Navigating the Doctoral Labyrinth: Walking Methodologies and Epistolary Feedback

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how faculty can effectively assist doctoral students as they traverse a challenging and rewarding labyrinth by leveraging innovative pedagogical approaches and communication modalities. Drawing on the extant literature related to doctoral education, an innovative approach that combines walking methodologies and epistolary feedback is described. The labyrinth metaphor encapsulates the intricate pathways, challenges, and moments of enlightenment that characterizes the journey including insights into the challenges faced by doctoral students. Walking as a method of inquiry is presented as a way for helping doctoral students engage in reflective practice. Forms of ableism that can be associated with the term ‘walking’ --therefore these practices include various forms of movement via legs, wheels, video simulations, etc. Epistolary feedback involves the use of letter-like exchanges between students and faculty to communicate feedback. Taken together these approaches can be particularly useful for doctoral students.

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INTRODUCTION

The journey through doctoral education can often feel like navigating a labyrinth. This metaphor highlights the journey's complexity, suggesting that the path through academia is not always straightforward and is filled with unexpected challenges and profound insights. In exploring this metaphor, we seek to understand not only the contours of the doctoral journey but also the individual and collaborative challenges that often make up this transformational experience.

Labyrinths have captured human imagination for centuries, appearing in myths, religious texts, and cultural traditions across the globe. Unlike a maze, which is designed to confuse with its multiple paths and dead ends, a labyrinth has a single, winding path leading to the center. This configuration mirrors the doctoral journey, where despite diversions and challenges, there is a centralizing goal of knowledge discovery, the production of new knowledge, and significant personal insights. The entry point into the doctoral labyrinth begins with an application and a hope—a hope to contribute to an academic discipline and, in the process, to transform oneself. As students say yes to this challenge and start the process of learning to embrace ambiguity-- they bring varied backgrounds, perspectives, questions, and aspirations. They also bring a set of experiences that either make them comfortable with living with questions and ambiguity or they find uncertainty to be anxiety-producing.

Walking a labyrinth--doctoral students can encounter a path that at times becomes less predictable, encumbered by the dense foliage of literature reviews, the rocky debates of theoretical frameworks, and the boggy stretches of methodology creation. These academic challenges, while daunting, are necessary components of the intellectual journey that can spur on growth, new ideas, commitment to a set of values, and the ability to be resilient in the face of high-challenge. While traveling a labyrinth in many ways is a solo journey it is not a journey one undertakes alone. Mentors and advisors act as invaluable guides, illuminating the path and supporting doctoral candidates as they navigate their way through the complexities of their academic pursuits. And peers, also somewhere on the path themselves, are an important part of the community doctoral students learn with and from. These relationships provide clarity and serve as beacons during challenging phases.

Arriving at the center of the labyrinth symbolizes the culmination of years of dedication, research, self-discovery, and following the curriculum created by the faculty within the doctoral program. The dissertation is not merely an academic achievement; it marks a significant transformation, one where scholarly capabilities are honed, and deeper personal insights are revealed. It also represents the gifts each scholar offers the larger community. Exiting the labyrinth, scholars find themselves at the cusp of new beginnings. The completion of a doctoral degree opens doors to new questions, increased confidence in ways to effectively apply new knowledge,

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