

Chapter 9

Using an Online Discussion Board for Peer Review of Dissertation Writing for Ed.D. Students

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ABSTRACT

To improve graduation rates in doctoral programs, the Council of Graduate Schools has recommended more supports for dissertation writing. This article describes and evaluates through action research one such support, an online discussion board where students could post drafts of their dissertation and peer review each other's work. Results of effectiveness were mixed because of the wide spectrum of student participation. Students did not feel they had the expertise to critically read another's work, although they liked reading the instructor's comments to other students. Future implementation of the discussion board might be more successful if it was utilized as a support group or frequently asked questions page rather than a place for peer review or if it was utilized for excerpts from the dissertation rather than entire chapters. Faculty involved with supervising doctoral students should consider what supports are being offered and continue to evaluate their effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of low completion rates has plagued doctoral programs for decades, and the issue is becoming even more important in times of economic recession as academic jobs become scarce. The Council of Graduate Schools (2010) in their seven year Ph.D. Completion Project found that

the national completion rate for doctoral students was about 57% after ten years, although this varied by discipline. Even if programs have an above average completion rate, time-to-degree may be another issue that needs to be addressed. While there are many reasons students leave doctoral programs, All But Dissertation or ABD students are of high concern. These students have

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completed all coursework but not the dissertation. Dissertation writing is often a lonely, frustrating time for doctoral students, and students who fail to complete their dissertation are often just as qualified as those whose degrees were conferred (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

Dissertation writing can be just as challenging for the faculty supervisors. The relationship between dissertation chair and student is critical. Dissertation supervision may be overlooked in faculty workloads, and little professional development is dedicated to this area, although it is just as important as teaching. Spillett and Moisiewicz (2004) outlined the four roles of a dissertation chair: cheerleading, coach, counselor, and critic. Faculty may be more comfortable in one of these roles than in the others, or faculty simply may not have the time to dedicate to each student individually. Students cannot rely only on their dissertation chair or committee, however, especially in departments where the dissertation supervision load is high. Students need the social interaction that they experienced during coursework. The deadlines, incentives, and feedback embedded in coursework are also important to the dissertation writing process (Garcia, Malott, & Brethower, 1988).

Although much of the literature on dissertation completion considers Ph.D. students, this study focuses on Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) students. While much literature has debated the difference between the two groups, in this context the Ed.D. students consisted mainly of school district administrators who were obtaining the degree for certification. This group of students is often older with other responsibilities such as family and full time employment, making dissertation writing even more challenging (Willis, Inman, & Valenti, 2010). Often years or even decades have passed since completion of these students' previous graduate degrees, which are often geared toward practice rather than research. The sheer volume of the dissertation and the many "hoops" that are required are intimidating for doctoral stu-

dents, even those who run entire school districts. Regardless of the discipline or type of degree, the dissertation is still the major stumbling block for most doctoral students.

Dissertation writing support groups are often recommended, both in journal articles discussed later in this chapter and dissertation advice books (e.g. Cone & Foster, 2006). "Reading someone else's work and offering suggestions helps you think about writing, and the critiques of your papers will help you identify common problems" (Willis, et al., 2010, p. 331). Many of the specific program interventions from the Council of Graduate School's (2010) Ph.D. Completion Project center around peer interaction and workshops where writing is shared. Since more and more doctoral students are working adults who have returned to school, rather than "traditional" doctoral students who have attended school full time continuously, physically meeting with a group of fellow students may be difficult. The online discussion board format is ideal for this situation and could perhaps supplement or even replace the face to face writing group. Discussion boards for doctoral students have existed for years online, offering informal support from across the country or even the world. PhiniseD is one example that has flourished for over ten years. Levine (2007) believed that "the online discussion board provides a unique potential that is not automatically present in a face-to-face situation" (p. 67). The discussion board allows students time to process and compose a response, rather than the immediacy required of a face-to-face discussion. All can participate in an online discussion, while some students elect not to participate in a verbal, classroom discussion. In theory, the discussion board would provide an ideal place for students to read each other's work. This article will evaluate, through an action research approach, if this practice was beneficial for the students.

I utilized a discussion board in the dissertation writing course that I taught for Ed.D. students at my own university. Rather than only using the

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