

Swimming Upstream: Summary of Findings from The Writing Hour Micro-autoethnography

Fran Kamin, Rivka Felsher, Kristin Brittain, Dr. Elizabeth Gray-Swann, and Dr. Valerie Bryan

Department of Educational Leadership and Research Methodology
College of Education
Florida Atlantic University

Problem and Significance

- Doctoral student retention is a national challenge
- Doctoral student attrition rates in the U.S. have been measured at 57% across disciplines (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008), other studies report between 40% and 70% (Gardner, 2009)
- Attrition has remained at this level for at least the past 50 years (as of 1992) (Bair & Hayworth, 1999)
- Data from the 2012-2013 Graduate Student Exit Survey at FAU revealed:
 - 63% (n = 42 of 67) felt they received no support in selecting a dissertation topic; 61% (n = 40 of 66) felt they received no support in writing a research proposal; 59% (n = 39 of 66) felt they received no support doing dissertation research; and 64% (n = 42 of 66) felt they received no support writing the dissertation
- In Educational Leadership and Research Methodology the numbers jump to 78%, 89%, 78%, and 78% respectively
- Delayed time to completion is also a challenge (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009)
- The dissertation can be a seemingly insurmountable obstacle that impedes degree completion (Bowen & Rudenshine, 1992; Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000)
- Research on doctoral attrition is somewhat sparse (Bair & Hayworth, 1999):
 - No nationwide databases exist regarding graduate student attrition
 - Institutions of HE often do not keep these records
 - Department heads fear of results make locating data challenging
 - Research on graduate attrition is not guided by a comprehensive theory of graduate persistence (Tinto, 1987, 1993)
- Graduate education, particularly at the doctoral level, is a workforce supplier of top roles in the the academy, educational leadership, research entities, and professionals in education, law, medicine, etc.
- Graduate education is also costly to institutions of HE
- Therefore, this study fills a major void in the literature

Select Literature Review

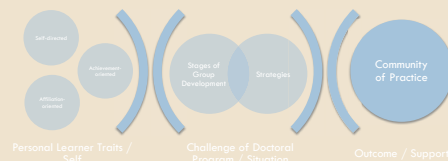
- No single reason for doctoral student attrition (Gardner, 2009)
 - Personal, academic, financial (Lovitts, 2001)
- Some studies examined graduate student retention factors with similar findings (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Ehrenberg, Jakobson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007; Grover, 2007)
- Delayed time to completion is also a challenge that increases likelihood of attrition (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009)
- 118 study meta-analysis (Bair & Hayworth, 1999) found:
 - Doctoral attrition rates vary widely by program of study - higher attrition in educ/soc sci. likely due to lack of financial support
 - Dept culture, student/faculty relationships, student involvement, peer interaction, financial support, dissertation phase, and size of entering cohort matter
 - Dissertation phase factors include: topic, advisor, motivation, outside work, deadlines, external incentives, time devoted, and transition from classes to research
 - Age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, health, parenthood, employment, prior academic achievement, stress, and well-being are not consistently significant factors
 - that while ABD drop-out is the most visible, more students drop prior to achieving candidacy (within the first three years)

Literature Review Continued

- Graduate student peer mentoring supports retention (Feldman et al., 1996)
- Doctoral cohorts are a factor contributing to success (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2005; Nimer, 2009; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001)
- Cohorts contribute to graduate student professional identity development (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Crowe & Whitlock, 1999)

Theoretical Framework

- Knowles' (1975) defined Self-Directed Learning as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (*Self Directed Learning*, p. 18)
- Nimer (2009) described a **cohort** as a group of individuals who are organized to follow a common course of studies where feelings of inclusion, mutual respect, support, and understanding are created
- **Virtual cohorts** embody the core characteristics of a CoP
 - *Our cohort was created first face-to-face, then shifted to e-platforms Skype, ooVoo, and Google Hangouts because the physical distance between each of our home campuses at FAU was 86 miles and travel became too time consuming and costly*
- **Communities of Practice (CoPs)** (Lave & Wenger-Trayner, 1991; Hansman, 2008) involve self-directed, group learning by individuals through shared experiences and interactions:
 - Are created from a social fabric (in this case a shared academic department/environment) by adult learners with common interests, experiences, and interactions
 - Are made up of practitioners with a network of common assumptions and learning needs
 - Includes group learning through emerging problems, an exchange of interactions and experiences, and are often informal
- The process of becoming a CoP can be understood through Tuckman's (1965) group development theory's six stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning, reforming
- Schlossberg's (1984, 1987) transition theory says that the success or failure of adult students in transition is based on 4 Ss: situation, self, support, strategies
- **Virtual cohort/CoP** as goal-focused, non-hierarchical, learning mechanism seems to attract achievement-oriented and affiliation-oriented learners (McClelland, 1953, 1961, 1987)



Study Purpose

- This qualitative, micro-autoethnography explored the perceptions of four graduate students at FAU on their motivation to persist through a doctoral program in educational leadership
- The intent of this research study was to enhance the literature on doctoral student retention through to completion and suggest how the dissertation writing process may be made more successful

Research Questions

1. What is the value of a self-created, self-directed doctoral dissertation writing group for its members in terms of persistence, degree completion, and personal, academic, and professional growth?
2. How does The Writing Group sustain its members and in turn is sustained by them?
3. What are the lessons learned for broader application in doctoral education?

Research Design

- Qualitative, micro-autoethnography (Smith, 1978; le Baron, 2006)
- Multiple data collection methods and use of a collaborative approach to multi-layer coding (Saldana, 2013) and constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) through the lens of the theoretical framework
- Bounded by location, academic unit, and the students involved in the only existing self-created, open-access, public, dissertation writing cohort in the College of Education at FAU
- Timeline: The study began February 2014 upon approval by FAU's Institutional Review Board and conclude in January 2015

Sample, Data Collection, and Analysis

- Study sample:
 - Consistent members of The Writing Hour cohort:
 - a total of four doctoral students
 - all female, White, native English speakers from the U.S. between the ages of 25 and 51
 - Each of the participants are also co-researchers in this study
- Data Collection & Instruments
 - Document review (flyer/marketing materials, email strings, text messages, writing samples, Facebook posts, photos)
 - 2 Focus group interviews – July & October, 2014
 - 4 semi-structured, individual interviews – July 2014
 - 1 Spontaneous drawing session (McDrury & Alterio, 2002) from which 4 individual drawings emerged – July 2014
 - 4 Self-Directed Learning Readiness Surveys (Guglielmino, 1978)
- Data Analysis
 - Collaborative approach structural, emotional, and process coding (Saldana, 2013) validated through consensus discussion of each individual researcher's coding schemes
 - Constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) - requires adding new data as coding and analysis continue

Findings

- Participant-researchers score high on the SDLRS
- Major distractions faced each member of the group from health, parenting, employment, and financial pressures, yet motivation was/ remains very high
- Culture of the university, college, and department did not specifically contribute to the success of the cohort – it did not help nor hinder the collaboration
- This group supported persistence, completion, and growth of all members, and resulted in an unexpected strengthening of relationships that enabled the development of a CoP
- The group sustains its members by providing structure, critique, feedback, accountability, and support
- It is sustained by its members' commitment to their goals and to each others' success as a community of practice
- Different kinds of adult learners with different motivations for learning may need different structural support toward completion of doctoral programs
- Cohorts can provide support for affiliation-oriented learners, but other factors may come in to play that determine cohort success
- Fostering the evolution of a cohort into a community of practice has promise
- Cohorts, along with well-planned, readily available, clear, and consistent faculty, peer, and online advising might create a more general approach to doctoral student support

Implications and Recommendation

- Adds to the literature by bringing together a diverse array of theoretical models to explain doctoral student success; future research on similar cohorts (if they can be identified) is warranted to validate the framework
- Academic programs might create structural opportunities for cohort development for those students most likely to thrive on social interaction based on an affiliation-orientation to learning; student surveys and structured advising is recommended
- Informs students pursuing the doctorate regarding managing the transitions within their programs; self-organization of cohorts recommended
- Could be useful to students with disabilities

Delimitations and Limitations

- Delimitations:
 - Does not examine sample's demographic / other characteristics that might contribute to motivation to persist
 - Does not examine sample's field of study relative to other fields
- Limitations:
 - Not generalizable, but may be transferable to other sites
 - Technology, time, and health challenges
 - Participant-researcher bias – self-reflection versus reporting
 - Progress-to-completion different for each participant-researcher
 - Self-study methodology challenged by IRB

References

Please see our handout for a select list of references used in this poster.

2015 GPSA Research Day
Boca Raton, FL
March, 2015



Members of the Dissertation Writing Hour, and the participant-researchers of this study, as they viewed each other each week via ooVoo before switching to Google Hangouts. The "Writing Hour" typically meets once per week for 1-3 hours online. The Writing Hour began meeting every other week, face-to-face, but the members of our self-created cohort live over 86 miles apart and have two different "home" campuses at FAU. Meeting online allowed us to meet for more time each session increasing productivity, saving money, and continuing to "see" each other live in order to build and maintain our connection to each other and our mutual learning goals and processes.

From left to right: Kristin Brittain, Dr. Elizabeth Swann, Rivka Felsher, and Fran Kamin