Using the Principles of Adult Learning to Facilitate Self-Directed Dissertation Writing

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Abstract: Traditionally, faculty expect doctoral students to be self-directed when writing a dissertation, but little is done at the program level to facilitate this self-directedness. After a needs assessment of students and faculty, I created a dissertation writing course based on the principles of adult learning and best practices of teaching writing. The Spring 2010 pilot of the course consisted of 36 Ed.D. students. In the course, students wrote a learning contract and determined which dissertation writing workshops they would attend based on their needs. Also, students chose a partner for peer review of dissertation writing. At the end of the course, students presented their research findings and progress. In this study, I explored how and if the course designed to support dissertation writing facilitates self-directedness in Ed.D. students. I also investigated how the course changed the students’ perceptions of dissertation completion. Results indicated that some students made great progress while others stalled. However, all students felt the new course was helpful, and data demonstrated that most students were engaged. Further longitudinal research is needed to track these students as they continue work on their dissertations. Recommendations to other doctoral faculty who may want to implement a similar course are included.

Introduction

Recently, the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) completed a seven-year project on Ph.D. Completion and Attrition, and their results come as no surprise to doctoral faculty. Their report expressed concerns about doctoral student attrition and demonstrated the extended time-to-degree for many in doctoral programs. “At the aggregate level, the data showed that 57% of doctoral candidates in the sample completed their degree programs within a ten-year time span,” although rates differed by discipline and program (CGS, 2010, p. 3). Although the issue of time-to-degree and lack of completion in doctoral programs has been debated in the literature (e.g. Nettles & Millett, 2006), few practical, low-cost solutions have been proposed at the university or program level. In this study I focused on a doctorate of education program, recognizing this understudied population in dissertation completion research which is often focused on Ph.Ds.

As doctoral programs, particularly Ed.D. and other practitioner programs, become increasingly populated by working adults, the principles of adult learning need to be adopted for not only coursework but also dissertation writing. The concepts of andragogy and self-directed learning are especially relevant to dissertation writing. The words of Knowles (1980, p. 98) apply directly to the dissertation, “You don’t just throw them into the strange waters of self-directed learning and hope they can swim.” Becoming a self-directed learner is not an easy process, and undoubtedly, dissertation writing produces angst in students and their supervisors alike. Unlike many courses, the end result of dissertation writing is not a grade. Students must set and follow their own deadlines, and dissertation research is essentially centered on a problem. However, doctoral faculty cannot assume that students will be self-directed and successful with
no support. While this particular study focuses on Ed.D. students, I believe the struggles of dissertation writing extend to other disciplines as well, perhaps even to other self-directed projects required for graduate degrees, such as a thesis.

The report by the CGS (2010) and other research studies too numerous to list here recommended more support for students in the dissertation writing phase of their program. “There is widespread recognition that students at the dissertation stage feel isolated and vulnerable and universities are putting into place a number of efforts to help students overcome these feelings and remain on track” (CGS, 2010, p. 57). While this report gave some brief examples from different universities participating in the project, more research is needed into specific interventions for doctoral students and the process for developing them.

In this paper, I outline an innovative approach to facilitating dissertation writing for graduate students at the end of their coursework, combining the principles of andragogy with the best practices of teaching writing and online learning, following the recommendations of the Ph.D. Completion project (CGS, 2010). I investigated the following research questions: How does a dissertation writing course facilitate self-directedness in education doctoral students? and How does a dissertation writing course change doctoral students’ perceptions of dissertation completion?

This pilot project, implemented in Spring of 2010, combines theory with practice to offer a possible solution to an ongoing problem for many doctoral institutions. After developing and implementing a course based on the principles of andragogy, I followed the advice of Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (1998) to evaluate it qualitatively. While it is too early to determine if this intervention increases graduation rate, I believe that increasing self-direction in the dissertation writing process and creating awareness of dissertation expectations and policies will lead to increased satisfaction for both faculty and students.

**Development of the Course**

The focus of this paper is the dissertation writing course, the last course doctoral students take at my institution. Students enrolled in this six credit hour course after successfully completing comprehensive exams. Previously, this course consisted of independent study with the dissertation advisor with a few group meetings to explain policies and procedures. After a needs assessment of faculty and students as well as an in depth investigation into the research on dissertation completion, I piloted a new format for the dissertation writing course based on andragogical principles.

The needs assessment began by interviewing Ed.D. students at various points in the program about their experiences with dissertation writing. I held focus groups with doctoral faculty and with the Fall 2009 dissertation writing classes. The needs assessment also consisted of an electronic, anonymous survey of Ed.D. students in our program. The survey examined student satisfaction with many aspects of the program, but I used the results centered on dissertation writing and relationships with chair and committee to inform my course development.

In the needs assessment, students indicated they felt their dissertation chairs and committee members were overworked, making it difficult to even find a chair or receive effective feedback. Faculty expressed frustration with students’ writing abilities and lack of self-directedness. They also, at times, felt overwhelmed with the volume of student work they were expected to read. The majority of Ed.D. faculty at my institution served on more than 10
dissertation committees at any one time. As a result of this, the students’ timeline for dissertation completion often did not correspond with reality. Faculty needed time to write quality feedback, and they recognized how each person had a different style for dissertation supervision. Students complained that procedures for submitting dissertations and the process for scheduling a defense were unclear and confusing. Some students expressed a need for more help with writing.

After examining the data from the needs assessment and reflecting on my own experiences as a doctoral student and a dissertation final reader, I began to develop the course. I examined the content and skills students would need to write a quality dissertation and created a series of workshops, each centered on a different topic related to dissertation writing. Workshop topics included APA citation style, IRB submission, and common grammar errors. I invited many different guest speakers including a librarian, a statistician, and alumni of the program. This new format also consisted of an online component consisting of peer review of dissertation drafts with a partner, following best practices in teaching writing, and student presentations of their research at the end of the course.

The first assignment in this class was a learning contract, following the model of Knowles et al. (1998) who suggested this as the best vehicle for facilitating self-directed learning. Students wrote goals and selected workshops and other resources to help them meet these objectives. I then compared these learning contracts with the progress the students actually made.

I incorporated other aspects of andragogy as well. As Knowles (1977, p. 209) stated, “The single most important one [of the seven process design elements] is establishing a climate that is conducive to learning, that is dominated or characterized by trust, by informality, by openness, by mutual respect, warmth, caring, etc.” I used an interactive teaching style, and the workshops took place in a computer lab, where students could immediately apply concepts to their own dissertations. My own teaching style is informal, and I encouraged students to stop me at any point with questions. “The conversation made a comfortable climate, in turn my volunteers shared much more info!” one student wrote in a workshop reflection. “Love the openness to ask questions when we have them, and love that you even see when we have confused looks!” wrote another. As a recent doctoral recipient, I did not present myself as the expert. Instead, I viewed myself as the students’ peer. Modeling (Henschke, 1998) was an essential component of the course. I frequently used my own writing as examples in the workshop, and I gave my own dissertation defense presentation for the students in the course. I believe this perspective helped me design the course to be as student-centered as possible.

Over the course of a semester, I offered 16 workshops, and students were required to attend at least eight. In this way, students could choose the workshops that fit their needs, and this allowed them to have a more flexible schedule. Workshops were also available to any students who had completed all coursework but not the dissertation (ABDs). All materials from the workshops were posted on the course website. In this way, the information was available to students when they were ready. Students also read their partner’s dissertation draft and offered feedback, as did the instructors of the course, modeling the expectations. This allowed for peer interaction and helped the students learn from reading the work of others. The final assignment for the class was for students to present their dissertations in a mock defense, as preparation for the real event. The collaboration and support offered by the students and instructors in the class were deliberately designed, based on research of dissertation completion, best practices in teaching writing, and adult learning.
Methodology

I collected qualitative data from learning contracts, workshop and presentation reflections, discussion board postings, student work before, during, and after the course, and my own reflections as one of the instructors of the course. In addition, I collected descriptive quantitative data including number of discussion board posts, time spent on the course website, workshop attendance, number of new pages written during the course, and references added during the course.

The participants in this study, the students in the course, consisted of 36 students, 14 male (39%) and 22 female (61%). Twenty of these students were Caucasian (55%), and 16 (44%) were African American. Most of these students held jobs within public school systems: the primary audience for the Ed.D. at this institution. All of these students successfully completed comprehensive exams and all other doctoral coursework.

Of the 36 students in the class, 24 (67%) attended eight or more workshops, and 11 (30%) attended ten or more. At the beginning of the course, students were in various stages of dissertation writing. Seven had already obtained IRB approval and had collected or did collect data the semester of the dissertation writing course. Five students received IRB approval sometime during the semester or immediately following. IRB approval was a struggle reported by many students in the course, and I also noted it in the needs assessment.

At the end of every workshop, students wrote a reflection, responding to several questions that changed depending on the workshop. This was how we kept track of attendance. This was data that I used to improve subsequent workshops, and I am still referring to them to improve the workshops for next semester. These reflections were almost all positive, and the last question for the reflection asked students how they were going to apply what they learned to their own dissertation. I also asked students what they learned from the workshop and was often surprised at the result. For example, in the avoiding common grammar errors workshop, almost every student wrote he or she had learned the difference between parentheses and brackets. I only spent about two minutes on this topic, but apparently, it was the most memorable.

Student Perceptions and Progress

Students who were self-directed learners flourished in this course, although they may have been successful regardless of the support systems offered. Rather than a trial and error approach, where students submit a draft to their chair and wait for feedback, students knew the expectations at the beginning, before writing. I offered suggestions for specific strategies to aid their writing. Reverse outlining was a technique I recommended, as well as creating graphic organizers or tables to synthesize information in the literature review. However, some students struggled to make progress, although they participated enthusiastically in the workshops.

The workshops changed students’ perceptions of dissertation completion, providing clear expectations and explanations of procedures. Many students had the perception that the chapters should be written in a linear fashion, finish chapter one, then move on to chapter two, etc. Early in the class, some students refused to work on later chapters until they had earlier ones completely polished, despite my assurances they would need to revise again after collecting data.

One of the most powerful ways I found to change students’ perceptions was through sharing my own writing and experiences. In an early workshop on organizing the literature review, students in groups critiqued an excerpt. The groups were scathing in their criticisms, but
then I shared that the literature review was, in fact, from my own dissertation. I actually welcomed the comments and felt I was modeling accepting constructive criticism. Students wrote in their workshop reflections comments such as “having a successful example of a finished product was helpful” and “I think I that I will go back through your sample paper and highlight items I need to include in my paper.” I offered examples from published articles as well, often pointing out typos or weaknesses in the research while still discussing the strengths. I believe this gave students a more realistic view of the dissertation—that it would never be perfect, that no research was perfect.

Discussion

Although other institutions may handle dissertation writing credit hours differently, a series of regular workshops as a support for dissertation writing could be implemented anywhere. While some writing centers have used this approach campus-wide, few departments have used this systematic intervention. I chose not to detail each individual workshop here. Instead, I would encourage each department to conduct a needs assessment, asking both faculty and doctoral students where their struggles lie in dissertation writing. One of the most motivational workshops was the alumni panel, when Ed.D. graduates from the previous semester were invited for a question and answer session. Each department should determine its own workshop topics, as well as decide who to invite and if attendance is optional or mandatory. The workshops can be one way to connect with ABD students who may be frustrated or stalled with dissertation writing. The importance of the group gathering weekly and supporting each other should not be overlooked, since dissertation writing is often a solitary activity. Over the summer, several students told me how much they missed the weekly class meetings.

One faculty member should take charge of the logistics of developing topics and scheduling workshops speakers as well as finding space, but the actual cost of this intervention is very little. As with many programs, implementing the workshops a second semester should be smoother, and attendance should be higher. This intervention could be especially important in departments where faculty chair a large number of dissertation committees. Rather than relying on word of mouth, the department can disseminate information about dissertation expectations and process directly to the students. In my course, documents from each workshop were also available online to all students enrolled in the course, which participants indicated they appreciated greatly. In this study, the participants expressed their enthusiasm for the workshops again and again; many saying they wished the workshops had been offered earlier in the program. However, this information may have been available to students earlier, but they may not have been ready for it, again consistent with andragogical principles (Knowles et al., 1998). This is also the rationale behind offering the workshops to ABD students, so they can come to the workshops when they are ready.

Conclusions

While the effects of this intervention continue to be studied, the dissertation writing course is one support departments can easily offer to support their doctoral students during dissertation writing. Development of this course should begin with a needs assessment to develop the topics for the workshops. Each workshop had a focused topic with an expert presenter, and the learning environment was informal, interactive, and supportive. The course
could even be aligned with the 12 or more dissertation writing hours many programs require. This is one way to make doctoral programs more student-centered, adapting the principles of andragogy.

However, implementing the dissertation writing course is not enough, it must be continually evaluated. I have already made changes to the course for the Fall of 2010, and I continue to track the pilot cohort from Spring of 2010. I hope to see some of these students return to workshops in the Fall of 2010. I have now made materials from these workshops available to all doctoral students, not just those enrolled in the course. Once a month, I will hold writer’s workshops where students can meet in groups and individually with me, as well as report progress to the entire class. This will facilitate reflection and allow students time to apply the concepts from the workshops to their dissertations. Students indicated in their workshop reflections from the pilot implementation that the pace was overwhelming at times. I will continue to refine the course each semester to better meet the needs of each cohort of students.

The issue of doctoral student attrition cannot be ignored. “Paradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals” (Golde, 2000, p. 199). Perhaps one solution is to use andragogy to support the self-directed learning necessary to complete a dissertation.

References


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