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Fostering Motivation When Virtually Mentoring Online Doctoral Students

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Online learning in higher education has become commonplace as more working adults and nontraditional aged students return to pursue advanced degrees. Graduate education, specifically, has grown in recent years (Allen & Seaman, 2014), including doctoral degrees. Pursuing a doctoral degree requires writing a culminating paper (e.g., dissertation, doctoral study, capstone study). Writing and conducting such a study requires support and mentorship from faculty of the program. Establishing a positive relationship in which the student feels supported by the mentor is crucial to encourage dialogue and motivation throughout the process. In this case study, online doctoral students' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were investigated, along with how these connections with their dissertation chair influenced students' motivation to make progress. Results show that feelings of relatedness were crucial to the students' motivation to continue in the doctoral study and dissertation process. Also, internal locus of control motivated students to complete their doctoral study and dissertation.

Keywords: *online doctoral students, motivation, self-determination theory, mentoring*

Introduction

Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, and Suñe (2017) shared that many doctoral students fail to complete their degree. Although there is limited research focused on the number of students who discontinue their graduate studies, approximately 50% of U.S. doctoral students do not complete their degrees (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Gardner, 2009). Although online master's programs may be structured very similar across institutions, Castelló et al. (2017) reported that doctoral programs can widely differ in structure and program requirements. Further, master's and doctoral programs may differ in the level of mentorship that students receive from program faculty.

As a result of receiving mentorship experiences in their doctoral studies, students acquire skills and expertise related to their discipline of study and obtain emotional support throughout the dissertation process (Lyons, Scroggins, & Rule, 1990; Rademaker, O'Connor Duffy, Wetzler, & Zaikina-Montgomery, 2016). However, Kumar and Johnson (2017) contended that the dissertation process may be challenging for students due to their unfamiliarity with research. Due to the uncertainties students may experience with the dissertation coupled with high attrition rates in doctoral programs, they may need to receive effective mentoring experiences to navigate the research process and remain engaged and enrolled in their doctoral programs.

Many doctoral students quit during the doctoral study and dissertation phase of the program. Research has shown that feeling supported by the mentor, also commonly known as the dissertation and doctoral study chair, is important to the student especially during the dissertation phase of the program (Rademaker et al., 2016). Being sympathetic to life struggles (e.g., job stress, family

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emergencies) can help a student feel the mentor cares for him or her (Rademaker et al., 2016). Motivation is key to self-drive and self-discipline in an individual activity such as writing a dissertation and doctoral study (Stupinsky, BrckaLorenz, Yuhas, & Guay, 2018). A positive relationship is shown to promote intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination theory (SDT) states that autonomy, competence, and relationships foster intrinsic motivation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine to what extent autonomy, competence, and mentor relationship promote doctoral students' motivation to make progress on their dissertation and doctoral study.

Mentor Relationship

In a traditional brick-and-mortar institution, a mentor relationship may include office visits, meetings, lunches, and coffee breaks. In a virtual setting, establishing a positive and supportive relationship between the mentor and student is just as crucial, but the activities may look different. The mentor may need to be more proactive in ensuring the student feels the mentor cares about the progress and can answer any questions and provide guidance as needed, especially at the beginning of the process (Orellana, Darder, Perez, & Salinas, 2016). Much learning and competence development is done during the dissertation phase of the doctoral degree, but only when a productive and positive relationship between the mentor and student is developed throughout the journey, might this positive, working relationship flourish to support the student's progress (Abiddin, Ismail, & Ismail, 2011). Without such a supportive relationship, the student may feel unprepared and unmotivated to continue in the process (Jones, 2013). This may be especially true in a virtual setting where there is no physical faculty office for the student to visit, in which case a struggling student may feel there is "nowhere to go" when he or she needs support (Orellana et al., 2016). Establishing a positive mentor–student relationship requires the mentor to reach out to the student and use various mentoring strategies, particularly at the beginning of the relationship, so the student feels supported. Determining the strategies each student needs may take time and a great deal of communication between the student and chair, but it may ultimately determine whether a student stays in the program and completes his or her degree of study (Loureiro-Koechlin & Allan, 2010; Kumar, Johnson, & Hardemon, 2013; Schichtel, 2010). Such strategies can include phone calls, video calls, and emails in addition commenting on the document within a virtual learning management system.

The relationship between the student and dissertation and doctoral study chair (i.e., mentor) is key to the student making progress on his or her doctoral journey, especially during the doctoral study and dissertation phase (Abiddin et al., 2011; Jones, 2013; Orellana et al., 2016). Particularly, if the student feels supported and understood, he or she is more likely to feel more at ease with putting trust in the chair and the chair's ability (i.e., competence) to support him or her throughout the dissertation and doctoral study journey (Orellana et al., 2016).

The doctoral student is often a novice researcher, especially at the beginning phases of the dissertation and doctoral study journey. The doctoral study and dissertation may be the student's first attempt at conducting research. This dynamic means that the chair is the expert in conducting research and must therefore be willing to examine his or her own supervisory skills and style to ensure they align with and support the student (Orellana et al., 2016). Supporting the student's motivation, especially during the dissertation and doctoral study phase, is incremental to ensuring the student continues to progress in the program (Abiddin et al., 2011).

Supporting Motivation

Motivation can be either extrinsic (externally focused) or intrinsic (internally focused). Deci and Ryan considered intrinsic motivation to be a more powerful motivator for keeping students engaged

and making progress on their academic pursuits (Davis, Kelley, Kim, Tang, & Hicks, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Motivation can alternate between intrinsic and extrinsic over time; however, research continues to demonstrate that intrinsic motivation is a powerful factor for keeping a doctoral student from dropping out or not making progress (Hidi & Ainley, 2012; Templeton, 2016; Thunborg, Bron, & Edstrom, 2013).

When people are intrinsically motivated, they engage in activities such as learning for enjoyment. These behaviors then have an internal perceived locus of causality—coming from internal sources rather than external sources (DeCharms, 1968). This fuels one's interest and autonomy, which is central to promoting a learner's progress and development (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Flavell, 1999).

SDT states that intrinsic motivation is sustained through continued perceptions of autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, research suggests that a highly competent chair can still promote motivation for the doctoral student until the student's own competency in creating a study and conducting research increases (Anekstein & Vereen, 2018). Additionally, the relationship and communication between the chair and student often influences how competent the student perceives the chair to be until such time as the student has his or her own competence to continue progress on the doctoral study and dissertation (Anekstein & Vereen, 2018; Muirhead & Metros, 2016).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the aspects of the mentor–student relationship that influenced online doctoral student's motivation to make progress and ultimately complete the dissertation and doctoral study.

Method

Design

The methodology for this study was a qualitative case study. For this study, the cases were doctoral students at the dissertation and doctoral study phase of the program at two different online universities.

Institution A

Institution A was a large, private, for-profit online university offering degrees ranging from bachelor's to doctoral. At the time of this study, 75% of its students were enrolled in graduate programs. For a 3-month period from fall of 2017 to early 2018, an online survey was available to all students and faculty enrolled on a participant pool website. Monthly emails were sent to all enrollees as a way to encourage participants to take part in the research being conducted. The site was open to any U.S. adults, but was only advertised on the university's website, so it was likely that all participants were students or faculty of that university. A total of 29 doctoral students participated in the survey by completing all (or most) of the 14 items. The survey items were a mix of open-ended and close-ended items.

Institution B

Institution B was a nonprofit institution consisting of four campuses, including three on-ground campuses and one online campus. Online doctorate of education students at this institution received monthly emails for a 3-month period in late fall of 2017 and early spring of 2018 requesting their participation in an online survey. During this 3-month timeframe, a total of 11 doctoral students participated in the survey and completed all survey items. The survey consisted of a combination of items that were both open and closed ended.

Participants

Institution A

The sample drawn from Institution A included students and faculty who opted into the subject pool and received a login and password. Enrolled students and faculty can participate in research studies posted to the site and receive participation points for participating in things like surveys and interviews for other researchers' studies. These points make participants eligible to post their own studies on the participant pool site once it has been approved by Institution A's institutional review board. The researcher posted information about the study on the participant pool website and requested that participants be limited to doctorate of education students in the dissertation and doctoral study phase.

Institution B

The online doctorate of education program at Institution B consisted mostly of full-time working professionals. This institution does not offer a participant pool for research. Therefore, the researcher sent online doctorate of education students monthly communications to recruit their participation in this study.

Data Collection Technique

Initial questions on the survey asked the students to identify themselves as being in the doctoral program and in the dissertation and doctoral study phase to ensure only those appropriate for the study completed the interview. The ideal sample size for Institution A was 10 students so 29 participants was well above what was expected. One student agreed to also be interviewed via phone (after completing the survey). The survey items at Institution B were similar with the exception of Item 1 (i.e., "If student, what degree are you pursuing?"), which was removed because all participants who partook in this study were enrolled in a doctorate of education program.

Data Analysis

An electronic consent form was presented at the start of the online survey. Students who completed the survey provided their consent by opting to participate in the study (as approved by the institutional review board). All results were captured in the online survey system and downloaded to Microsoft Excel for analysis.

All results and comments were organized in one of two ways. First, an overall analysis of all students' ratings and comments was conducted. Second, students were grouped by the stage of the process in which they currently belonged because many of their responses were similar to each other and different from students in the other stages. There were also two phases of coding of results. The first phase was in vivo coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014), which uses words or short phrases to capture participants' main point. Then, a priori codes from the SDT framework were used as the initial codes. Subcodes from the overall SDT constructs (i.e., autonomy, competence, relationship) were found as the analysis continued. Axial coding was conducted to connect the codes into overall themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the second phase of coding, open coding was used to determine emerging themes outside of the SDT framework (Creswell, 2014).

Findings

Results showed a number of valuable insights concerning how autonomy, competence, and the mentor–student relationship influenced the motivation of a doctoral study student, particularly in the dissertation and doctoral study phase of the program. Additional insights about the importance of the locus of control were also found during analysis.

The data was sorted into three phases: early (in course work or working on prospectus document), midway (working on proposal but not yet collecting data), and final (working on final document, having collected data already). These groupings became clear upon analysis of data, as these students were quite different from each other based on responses to survey items.

Relationship With the chair

The relationship between the chair and the student was found to be an important component to supporting the motivation of the student. In the midway phase of the dissertation and doctoral study, students who did not feel supported or did not have a positive relationship with the chair mentioned how much they struggled to stay motivated. This was especially true if that student blamed external factors (i.e., demonstrated an external locus of control) on the lack of progress on the document. For example, one participant perceived her professional and personal responsibilities as hindering her dissertation progress. Further, another participant shared that the tuition rate impacted his motivational levels toward dissertation completion.

When asked how important the relationship with their chair was on influencing continued progress, 83% of early stage students rated it as "very" important, whereas 17% of participants opted not to answer or rated "somewhat" or "slightly." The midway stage students had a mix of responses on the importance of the relationship with the chair with wide range from "not at all" to "somewhat" and "very." For the final stage students, 75% rated the importance of the relationship with the chair as "very" and 25% rated this item as "somewhat."

Participants in the final stages of dissertation completion who responded that they did not feel supported by their chair discussed intrinsic reasons for completing their degree (e.g., "I keep striving because I feel hopeful about my study," "I am passionate about my topic so I want to learn more about it"). Eight participants also highlighted the importance of building professional relationships with their chairs. Five participants described these relationships as also providing professional development opportunities. For example, one participant shared,

> my chair has helped me to become confident in my research and to understand that it is a work in progress and has helped me feel confident in presenting my findings to the educational community since I want to involved in research that results in educational policy changes.

Some students put extrinsic reasons for lack of progress (e.g., blaming the chair or other things) for reasons of not making progress. For example, one participant expressed that "[my chair] has reduced my motivation and along with medical issues had me take a 6 month break and I am going to look into a new chair." Another participant shared, "[my chair] has put my study at a standstill."

Feeling Supported

Seven participants indicated they felt supported in their dissertation progress by their chair: three were in the early stage, two were in the midway stage, and two were near in the final stage. One participant expressed that "Most students [in the program] work fulltime in addition to completing coursework during the dissertation process. Without the additional support... I envision how quickly I could get overwhelmed." Another said, "My dissertation chair has provided me with the necessary feedback to enhance my research and know he is available should I have a question. I feel that he provides continual support in this process."

Feelings of Competence

About 30% of early phase students rated themselves as feeling "very" competent to complete their dissertation and doctoral study. However, about 70% of early students rated themselves as "somewhat" competent to complete it. This possibly indicates that during coursework, students are unaware of the skills and knowledge required to complete the dissertation and doctoral study until they actually begin the process. All students in the final stage rated they felt "very" competent.

Discussion

Many of the participants mentioned a desire to quit at some point during their doctoral journey. However, those participants who mentioned more internal reasons (internal locus of control) for why they stayed in the program and progressed in their program, were more likely to continue on the path to ultimate degree completion (or near completion) than those who mentioned more external reasons (external locus of control) for their continued progress in the program. This finding may indicate that students who ascertain an internal locus of control are more likely to complete the dissertation and doctoral study and ultimately graduate the program. Students at the midway phase were split on their reasons for progressing, with about half mentioning internal reasons for continuing (internal locus of control) and about half mentioning external reasons for why they have struggled to progress (external locus of control). It seems that the midway students were the group to focus on ensuring they develop an internal locus of control to promote their motivation to continue the dissertation and doctoral study and ultimately graduate from the degree program. Further studies on investigating strategies for developing doctoral students' internal locus of control may promote motivation and, ultimately, more graduates in an online doctoral program.

Participants did not seem to develop a strong feeling of competency until the final phase of the program. Many students in the early phase indicated high feelings of competency, but midway phase students did not, indicating that early phase students may have had unrealistic expectations of their own skills and knowledge to conduct a dissertation and doctoral study until they were further along in the process. For example, students at the beginning phases of a program may feel they already know a lot about the field and expectations for being successful in the program. Early phase students are often excited and well-motivated. However, as the reality of the challenges of the program and content set in, the students adjust their perceptions of their own ability and may actually rate their own competency lower than they rated it earlier in the program.

Students may feel their mentor has the competency to bring them through the process until their own skills and knowledge are proficiently developed. Further studies on understanding how feelings of competency or lack of trust in mentor competency may reveal how students may feel unsupported by an incompetent chair. This may indicate further importance on helping the online doctoral student develop his/her own competencies but also demonstrate the mentor competencies so the student builds trust in the ability of the chair to take them through the process to graduation.

Because online doctoral mentoring can encompass many components including advising, modeling, encouraging, promoting, and guiding students through the research process (Kumar & Coe, 2017), faculty need to effectively use mentorship strategies that can enhance students' levels of motivation toward degree completion. However, online faculty may experience difficulties in providing mentorship in online learning contexts (Kumar & Coe, 2017) because they most likely received mentoring in their graduate studies through face-to-face interactions. As a result, faculty may need to adjust their mentoring strategies when working with online versus traditional learners. Further, institutions may need to provide professional development opportunities that help faculty acquiring effective mentoring skills. For example, Kumar and Johnson (2017) proposed that

> the use of multiple technologies to mentor research and communicate with students; negotiation of expectations for drafts and updates; implementation of clear structures for online mentoring and dissertation procedures; and provision of timely feedback, psychosocial support, and exemplars of quality writing in the online environment can create a dissertation experience to facilitate mentees' growth, autonomy, and successful dissertation completion. (pp. 219–220)

Because faculty may not have been explicitly taught how to provide effective virtual mentoring approaches, institutions may need to consider how to best support faculty in their development of these skills. One option could be for institutions to provide workshops or symposia to faculty who are novice or in the process to transitioning to chair online doctoral students. Mahsood, Ahaan, Atzai, and Aziz (2018) found that these types of professional development opportunities are perceived positively by faculty in enhancing their professional practices and teaching skills. Further, Steinert et al. (2016) discovered that faculty development initiatives were perceived positively by faculty and resulted in their increased levels of effective educational practices, enthusiasm, and self-confidence. Moreover, due to the complexities associated with mentoring, faculty may need to reflect on what strategies may be most effective in connecting with their online mentees. Reflective practitioners are able to adopt "a reflective stance toward their practice as a means of ongoing professional development" (Kayapinar, 2016, p. 1672). This, in turn, may result in faculty using reflective practices to continuously improve their mentorship approaches. By restructuring their perceptions of the mentoring process, faculty may be able to better support their mentees as they progress through their dissertation research and they may be able to assist students in acquiring higher levels of self-confidence in their ability to conduct future research. Through this type of mentorship approach, students may be more motivated to make continual dissertation progress and successfully complete their doctoral studies.

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