Developing Practitioner-Scholar Doctoral Candidates as Critical Writers

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In this study, we sought to understand how students perceived the dissertation as practitioner-scholars and part-time doctoral students in advanced doctoral programs in educational leadership. The results indicated that the expectations associated with scholarly writing present major hurdles for doctoral students, and the dissertation process can be lengthy, filled with anxiety, stress, and doubt. Doctoral faculty members are often called upon to advise students as they balance their personal and professional demands with those of the academy. We found that the essential part in this process is supporting practitioner students as they transform into doctoral level writers.

In the realm of academia, writing skills are imperative to creating a lasting career, putting truth to the adage of publish or perish (Ferguson, 2009). Since publications are commonly associated with academic prestige, it is fitting that researching and writing a dissertation is the culminating activity for doctoral candidates (Kucan, 2011). In our research and experience, we found that the dissertation process is lengthy, filled with anxiety, stress, and doubt. In particular, the expectations associated with scholarly writing presented significant challenges to success for doctoral students.

For practitioner-scholars, there are additional stressors to completing coursework and the culminating dissertation. Graduate students who are also full-time practitioners must carefully pilot the balance between graduate school, employment and life (Belcher, 2009; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Manalo, 2006; Nielson & Rocco, 2002; Ondrusek, 2012). Additionally, the need to alternate between the mindset of a practitioner and that of a scholar impacts both the writing process and the framework with which one embraces inquiry (Labaree, 2003; Ondrusek, 2012). Doctoral faculty members, and particularly doctoral dissertation advisers, are often called upon to instruct and advise students as they balance their personal and professional demands with those of the academy. One key part in this process is supporting practitioner students as they redefine their identity as doctoral level writers.

BACKGROUND

In 2013, we undertook a study designed to review the writing challenges experienced by doctoral candidates in an educational leadership department at a Midwestern university. Our original study was

written in response to the literature base about the stresses facing practitioner-scholars as they advance through doctoral programs (Belcher, 2009; Ferguson, 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2008; Nielsen & Rocco, 2002; Ondrusek, 2012; Wang & Li, 2011); the concerns for the quality of scholarly presentation by doctoral candidates (Boote & Beile, 2005; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Kamler & Thomson, 2008) and the possibilities that exist for educational leadership faculty to provide assistance to students with expanded roles and responsibilities not normally associated with doctoral candidacy (Manalo, 2006; Wang & Li, 2011).

According to Boote and Beile (2005), a lack of quality research in the field of education can be attributed to the standards of educational doctoral programs. Graduate level discourse requires writers to "integrate disparate ideas, synthesize perspectives, and extend theory" (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007, p. 809). These concepts, which are uncommon in undergraduate coursework, are elusive to practitioner-students who approach writing assignments from their perspective within their area of expertise.

Becoming a critical writer necessitates the development of a research lens with a focus on critical inquiry. When analyzing an issue, the researcher's position can be contrary to that of a practitioner and therefore practitioner-doctoral students must be encouraged to separate from their professional identity in the workplace in order to assess the underlying factors at play in education (Labaree, 2003). In essence, doctoral students must detach from their pragmatism and subsequent practitioner beliefs in order to develop a worldview with an unbiased lens to productively conduct objective research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The importance of scholarly communication is well documented and understood as an influence to one's research output, which directly impacts a future academic career (Boote & Beile, 2005; Cafarella & Barnett, 2000; Ferguson, 2009). Nevertheless, the education of doctoral students on the writing process is neither a common practice in higher education nor represented in the body of literature (Ferguson, 2009; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). Since the 1970s, the need for doctoral writing research has been noted and continues still today (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Manalo, 2006).

Doctoral Level Writing Dispositions

Two underlying stressors experienced by doctoral students when approaching writing include unclear expectations of writing assignments and underdeveloped writing skills (Ferguson, 2009). Since undergraduate faculty have different writing expectations than graduate programs, students do not have the opportunity to learn the grammatical skills necessary to write at an academic level beyond the doctoral program (Kucan, 2011). When students experience doubt about their ability to complete quality work, the result can be lower scores on their writing submissions (Belcher, 2009; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Ondrusek, 2012; Wang & Li, 2011).

Emotional Response to Feedback and Critique

During the course of doctoral studies, students receive varied feedback from peers and professors on writing projects. Due to low self-confidence of writing skills, students are unsure how to move forward with the feedback while maintaining their voice (Cafarella & Barnett, 1997; Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). Furthermore, critiques can be viewed as personal attacks instead of assistance towards a better product (Nielson & Rocco, 2002). Wang and Li, (2011) noted:

> Feedback in doctoral research is a social practice embedded in supervisory relationships. This demands attention to the interpersonal aspect of feedback, focusing not only on the what, that is, the text, but also on the how, that is, the way in which feedback is given and received. (p. 102)

Overall, the process of editing is not understood by some graduate students; instead of using feedback to reevaluate the overall strength of the piece, attention is often paid to correcting minutiae such as spelling and grammar (Ondrusek, 2012).

Writing Efficiency

For practitioner-students, time management can be viewed as an insurmountable hurdle in the writing process (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). Nielson and Rocco (2002) noted that many doctoral students are responsible not only for their studies but also a career or family. Accordingly, the age of students in educational doctoral students is higher than other fields (Labaree, 2003). Thus, making research and writing a priority amongst life's many other duties and responsibilities can prove difficult for practitioner-scholars (Belcher, 2009; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Manalo, 2006; Nielson & Rocco, 2002; Ondrusek, 2012). The issue of time is more about making the most of limited time resources and prioritizing coursework amongst life's other requirements.

Researcher View of Writing

Developing a researcher lens can be challenging for practitioner-students because "writing for their chosen disciplines requires them to make major adjustments in how they view knowledge, learning, written expression, and themselves before they reach a comfort level in scholarly writing" (Ondrusek, 2012, p. 180). By changing viewpoints and ways of approaching inquiry, a level of dissonance ensues as doctoral students vacate their work-life perspective for that of academia (Boote & Beile, 2005; Labaree, 2003). Less likely to be changed by their program in a transformative way through the research process, many educational doctoral students do not plan to join the academy and publish original research but desire to work in advanced practitioner roles in education (Labaree, 2003). The role of inquiry is therefore viewed as a by-product of advanced coursework versus a separate goal.

Anxiety

Issues of time management, doctoral level writing expectations, feedback and critique, and cognitive dissonance between practitioner and scholar worldviews compound with the pressures of coursework and elicit feelings of anxiety and a lack of confidence which can prove overwhelming in the dissertation writing process (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Ferguson, 2009; Ondrusek, 2012; Nielson & Rocco, 2002). Figure 1 provides a conceptual model of the four stressors we examined in this study.

FIGURE 1
THE FOUR STRESSORS THAT GENERATE ANXIETY FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS
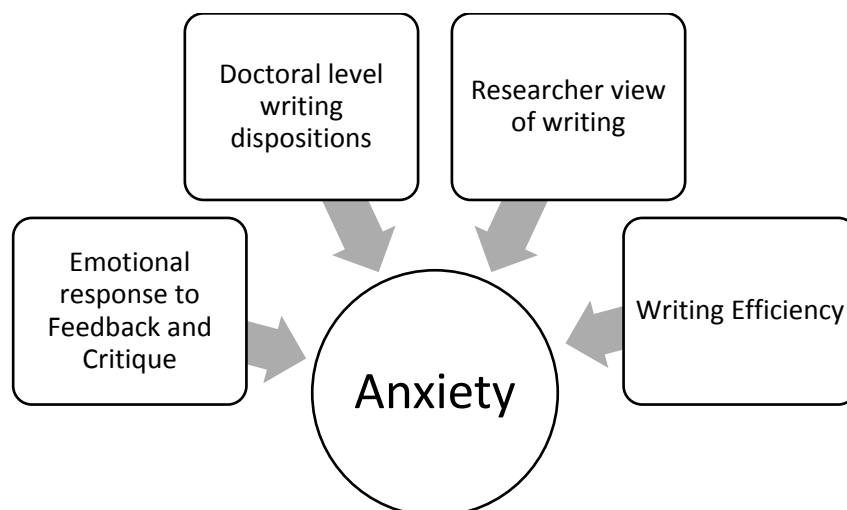
Often, doctoral students have past academic successes which have created high expectations for their work. It is understandable then when they receive constructive feedback and lower grades in their doctoral level coursework, why self-imposed anxiety may result (Caffarella & Barnett, 1997; Ondrusek, 2012; Wang & Li, 2011). Additionally, students can become frustrated when the feedback is limited, contradictory or of low-quality since they are unable to clearly identify their missteps (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). However, not all work produces the same emotional responses. Belcher (2009) noted graduate students experience intense pressure surrounding academic writing which can cause doubt, depression, or guilt and result in a lack of writing progress. Nielson and Rocco (2002) explained "the more important the writing, the greater the apprehension" (p. 313). Students experience increased anxiety in proportion to the importance of the assignment in their courses building to the ultimate project of dissertation writing. To that end, the purpose of this study was to ascertain doctoral students' beliefs regarding critical writing skills and the extent to which professors can alleviate or contribute to student dissertation anxiety. The research questions that inform this study included: 1) What helps or hinders practitioner students in their academic writing process? 2) What areas do students feel they need more instruction? 3) What institutional or curricular changes can be made to increase the number of practitioner students completing the doctoral program?

METHOD OF THE STUDY

In this mixed-methods study, we systematically examined the beliefs of practitioner-scholars who had advanced in a doctoral program in a Midwestern state regarding their critical writing expectations and stressors. We conducted this exploratory study in 2013 to measure differing trends and adjust curricular practices and expectations accordingly. Specifically we were interested in whether students felt that doctoral level coursework addressing remedial writing skills would be beneficial to themselves or their peers. We designed a survey with both quantitative and qualitative inquiry in mind. Consequently, the researchers were able to facilitate analysis by calculating numerical averages as well as extracting emerging themes to provide a holistic interpretation of this problem under examination.

Participants

Advanced doctoral students and graduates were invited to participate in this electronic survey. Eligible participants completed their doctoral core coursework from 2006 to 2013 in a doctoral program in educational leadership at a Midwestern state (n=97). Participants are part-time doctoral students who maintain full-time employment within an educational setting. Most serve as administrators or faculty. Participants (n=47) consented to participate and completed the online questionnaire administered through Survey Monkey®. This is not a longitudinal study and we only sought to determine generalities based on the behaviors and attitudes of students and graduates as a cohort, not as individuals through this research design. The sample size supports a 48% confidence level as ascertained by the responses received by the researchers. Thus, we present a representative sample from the surveys to adequately make generalizations about the perceptions of doctoral candidates in a Midwestern state regarding critical writing skills and associated stress.

Validity

In order to establish construct validity of this survey, the variables were aligned with the literature base of scholarly writing, the stress of doctoral candidates as defined in the literature, and the descriptors based on the experiences that we had as researchers and professors. Thus, the researchers determined that the survey instrument measured the theoretical constructs the instrument was designed to measure—doctoral students' beliefs regarding critical writing skills and the extent to which professors can alleviate or contribute to student dissertation anxiety. Since we studied an array of variables that may be associated with doctoral candidate stress and writing under the multiple constructs of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, we anticipated a wide degree of variation in the response. Thus, there was a low but acceptable level of internal consistency (.59 Cronbach alpha) among the variables.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The final reporting of these data is presented as a descriptive narrative. While generalizable findings may appear, this research is not seeking universals that exist free of context. Timely feedback from instructors, thinking critically, and having a strong working vocabulary were essential elements for success indicated by these doctoral candidates as shown in Table 1. We also found that respondents did not agree that technology resources were essential to their writing acumen. However, candidates highly valued the supports provided through the university library in securing literature, but seldom used the intensive writing support offered by the campus writing center.

TABLE 1
KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND SUPPORTS NECESSARY FOR
DOCTORAL WRITING SUCCESS

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Timely feedback from my instructor helps me to improve my writing.	46	4.46	.75149
Thinking critically helps me to write in a scholarly manner.	46	4.37	.64494
Documents on Demand is an extremely helpful service for doctoral candidates.	46	4.30	.83983
I have a strong, working vocabulary.	46	4.22	.72765
It is easy to access the necessary resources for my research at the Library.	46	4.17	.92627
Good lighting is important for me to be able to write.	46	4.12	.82269
My work/study environment must be free of distractions.	46	4.00	.94281
I have a good working knowledge of APA6 style and formatting requirements.	46	4.00	.47140
I outline my concepts before I begin the writing process.	46	3.83	.87697
My instructors clearly explained the scholarly writing expectations for assignments.	46	3.76	1.03676
I read regularly for pleasure.	45	3.56	1.27128
I like to play music when I am writing.	46	3.50	1.36219
I need to have beverages and snacks close at hand.	46	3.48	1.02717
Once I learned APA6, writing is a more pleasurable experience.	46	3.33	.81797
APA6 has helped me to be more organized in my writing.	46	3.28	.83435
I do all my pre-writing notes on the computer.	46	3.24	1.28556
Peer editing and review are helpful to me.	46	3.17	1.25263
I had to learn a whole new style of writing.	46	3.09	1.27934
APA6 has helped me to write with more clarity of expression.	46	3.07	.95224
I use graphic organizers to understand concepts prior to my writing.	46	3.02	1.18301
I use Post-It notes regularly to organize my thinking and writing.	46	2.85	1.15407
I Pads and other tablet devices are helpful tools in my pre-writing process.	45	2.71	1.12052
I use software to create my citations and references.	46	2.59	1.40754
I need to take frequent breaks.	46	2.52	1.11034
It is important to enjoy writing in order to be an effective writer.	46	2.50	1.00554
My Smartphone is a helpful tool in my pre-writing process.	46	2.20	1.00265
My work/study environment must be neat and organized.	46	2.17	1.01772

Note: 5=Strongly agree; 4=Agree; 3=Neither agree or disagree; 2= Disagree; 1=Strongly disagree

Peer review provided interesting results in this study. When asked whether peer editing and review are helpful, 45% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Conversely 26% either disagreed or strongly disagreed and 24% of the respondents appeared ambivalent regarding peer editing and review. When asked how often they asked a peer to review and comment on their writing, one third of the respondents reported *almost never*, and only one respondent (2.22%) reported *almost daily* as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

FIGURE 2
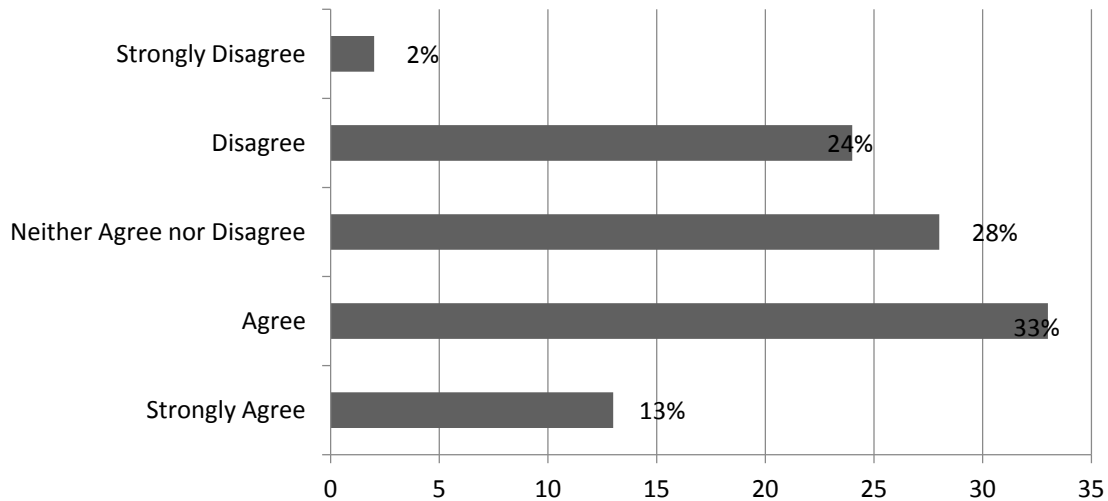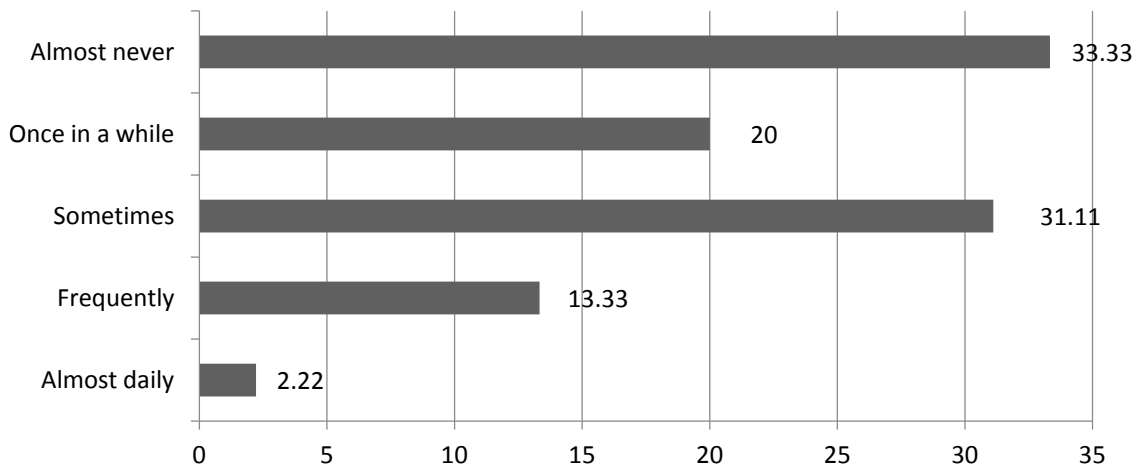**PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE HELPFULNESS OF PEER REVIEW**

FIGURE 3
PEER REVIEW FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

The overall mean score of 2.4 suggests that students seek peer support *once in a while*, perhaps one occurrence per week as shown in Table 2. These data generate questions regarding why doctoral students value peer review, and yet seldom take advantage of this support.

TABLE 2
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE DISPOSITIONS TOWARD WRITING

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Do you proofread an assignment thoroughly before submitting?	46	4.26	.71289
Do you schedule a sustained block of uninterrupted time (more than 2 hours) for writing?	46	3.35	1.09985
Do you read passages from your manuscript aloud as part of your editing?	46	3.17	1.16054
Do you ever exercise "to clear your head" when writing becomes difficult?	46	2.85	1.41370
Do you ask a peer to review and comment on your writing?	45	2.40	1.19469
Do you ever encounter writer's block?	46	2.39	.77397
Do you get papers returned with APA style and format errors?	46	2.02	1.10532
Do you get papers returned with basic grammar errors such as tense, fragments, agreement, pronoun use?	46	1.85	1.01033
Do you ever give up on writing because you find it too difficult?	46	1.59	.77678
Do you get papers returned with spelling errors?	46	1.46	1.02646

Note: 5=Almost Daily; 4=Frequently (4-5x weekly); 3=Sometimes (2-3x weekly); 2=Once in a while (1x weekly); and 1=Almost never

This finding also corresponded with reports that 54% of the respondents answered *N/A* when queried about the helpfulness of the writing center, suggesting that they had no experience or had never taken advantage of the writing support offered by the university as shown in Figure 3. The writing center offers support for editing and development of student manuscripts, and a mere 13% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this was a helpful support. It is interesting to note that 67% of the respondents indicated that they agree that doctoral level class time should be used to teach writing skills and yet they do not avail themselves of peer review, nor did they report problematic behaviors in their writing.

When asked to describe the challenges they face in developing their writing expertise, the respondents consistently identified time and anxiety, over developing writing expertise. However the mean response indicates that students schedule sustained blocks of uninterrupted time, more than two hours two to three times weekly as shown in Table 2. In looking at the distribution, it appears that they are prioritizing their writing time, but students still are distraught over the time requirements of scholarly writing. If these practitioner students are indeed regularly scheduling more than two hours for writing daily (15%), four to five times weekly (28%), two to three times weekly (28%), or even once a week (24%), time should not pose a barrier to the completion of their dissertation.

As self-reported data from a small population, the qualitative results of this study posed interesting findings that may inform faculty. The qualitative data were organized around four key themes entitled: time, feedback and clear expectations, anxiety, and writing mechanics.

Time

The first major finding related to effective use of time. According to the data, students are scheduling time to complete their writing assignments yet they experience high levels of anxiety about the amount of writing required in their doctoral program. If adequate time is being set aside, the efficient use of this allocated time is called into question (Belcher, 2009). According to one participant, "I need long chunks of time in my schedule. I need to immerse my brain in my material." Students set aside sufficient time to complete quality assignments yet failed to effectively utilize their time. Stress pertaining to writing and

project completion lead to anxiety as a stumbling block to writing. As one participant commented, "I fear not writing well. I struggle with writer's block." If students felt more capable to do the writing assignments by improving their writing and researching skills, anxiety could be lessened and the amount of time allocated for the projects would be sufficient. As one other participant added, "I am challenged by organization. I never feel that I know enough about a topic to come up with a decent outline."

Participants offered suggestions for lessoning anxiety associated with writing and time management. These suggestions included meeting regularly with their advisor and/or faculty members for regular feedback, writing strategies and encouragement. Participants in this study recognized the vital roles that faculty play in developing students' doctoral level writing skills but also in building their confidence. Second, participants recommended the inclusion of organization tools to assist them in mapping out a timeline for completion, developing milestones toward achieving their writing goals, and for learning how to locate and abstract literature. Third, participants also identified the positive impact of peer editing or peer writing groups. By receiving additional feedback from their peers, students were able to obtain another perspective on their writing from a less-intimidating peer.

Feedback and Clear Expectations

The second key theme that emerged from the participants was the need to have clear, faculty expectations and consistent, constructive feedback. Additionally, the expectations and feedback should be consistent across faculty. For example, one faculty member would have high expectations for the proper incorporation of and citation of literature and the next would devalue these elements and emphasize grammar and organization. The contradictory feedback between instructors was confusing and frustrating for participants. In the words of one participant, "The expectations for each professor and paper have not always been clear. It would be beneficial for there to be ground rules within the department for grading and paper component expectations." The need for faculty consensus on grammar, citations, organizational preferences, and other writing elements were frequently sought by participants.

Additionally, participants noted incompatibility between student and faculty expectations on writing assignments. As one participant stated, "It seems each professor has a different hang up on writing…it seems a common rubric would help… please stay consistent." Ironically the quantitative data supported clearly explained scholarly writing expectations on assignments, while the qualitative data spoke to a clear disconnect between student and instructor expectations on writing assignments. In an effort to ensure uniform, realistic expectations that are consistent between faculty and students, detailed rubrics with specific assessment criteria were recommended.

Anxiety

Another theme that emerged from the qualitative data surrounded student anxieties surrounding the writing process. At times the emotional response to the assignment would appear as writer's block, paralyzing even to the most seasoned writers, leading to a student's inability to complete quality, timely assignments. An additional contributing factor to their writing anxiety included receiving participant's responses to constructive feedback. Rather than appreciate faculty feedback, participants commented on how the feedback only contributed to their feelings of writing. One student in particular discussed his struggle after completing the comprehensive exam process, "After comps, I had an extremely difficult time getting my confidence back. The first time I had to write I sat at the computer for an hour and couldn't get a word down. That had never happened to me before." Rather than recognize the constructive nature of faculty feedback, participants felt critiqued and their confidence shaken.

Participants offered strategies for reducing the anxiety associated with writing. These recommendations included the implementation of peer review or peer writing groups where students could offer support, encouragement and constructive feedback to one another. By supporting one another through the obstacles associated with writing, participants recognized that they were not alone in their challenges and could learn from one another.

Additionally, faculty become critical in building writing skills and self-assurance in students. As per our participants, faculty should consider providing practice examples of quality writing. Additionally, one

participant commented on how much she appreciated a faculty member who shared a recent review she received from a journal. The faculty member received extensive feedback and planned to revise and resubmit the article. The student commented knowing that a faculty member received feedback on her writing validated the idea that everyone's writing could be improved. Students recommended creating a culture of demystifying the feedback process and welcoming the feedback as a way to improve their writing rather than the feedback serving as an indication of their lack of understanding of scholarly writing. Additionally, participants reinforced the need for positive, reinforcing feedback to help offset some of the harsher constructive feedback. For the doctoral students, knowing what they are doing correctly was just as important as understanding the improvements which needed to be made by providing a boost to their confidence level. As one participant stated, "when a faculty member wrote 'that is doctoral level writing' on my paper, I was ecstatic. This one comment really boosted my confidence."

Writing Mechanics

The fourth theme that emerged from the qualitative literature relates to the overall mechanics of writing. Students noted that they struggled with the fundamentals of writing including proper citations, grammar, verb-tense and passive voice. Since participants were practitioner-scholars with full-time jobs, their work settings did not often require academic type writing. As a result, participants recognized the need for remediation in the fundamentals of writing, citing and basic literature searches.

Participants recommended faculty administer and review practice tests related to writing basics. They also endorsed allowing students to rewrite papers or submit drafts prior to the deadline. These opportunities would allow them to improve their writing with each draft. Respondents suggested current students use the university writing center, if that center has individuals qualified to assess and provide feedback for doctoral-level writing. Understanding that the dissertation is a major hurdle to completion, students recommended course assignments be created to specifically demystify the dissertation process and allow them to prepare for the dissertation (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008). Students did recommend additional writing support but most agreed that writing seminars or APA workshops should be optional as not everyone needed remediation in this area.

IMPLICATIONS

As the findings from this study indicated, practitioner doctoral students struggle with efficiently using writing time, ways to organize their writing projects, and high levels of emotional stress related to producing writing for critique. Proactively addressing these challenges and infusing strategies for overcoming these barriers throughout a doctoral program are vital to student writing success. As early as program orientation, writing strategies should be taught and then reinforced throughout the doctoral program. By focusing on the process of writing and critiquing to develop academic writing skills at the beginning phase of doctoral studies, a culture of improvement is established during the initial socialization of a doctoral program (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). Training topics should include establishing writing timelines, how to search the literature, concept mapping and outlining projects, proper citation and a review of common grammatical mistakes. As evidenced in our findings, despite being doctoral students, most students needed intentional instruction and practice related to basic scholarly writing. By emphasizing quality writing throughout a doctoral program, faculty and students alike have shared expectations for what it means to be a member of the learning body.

Additionally, peer review can be a helpful tool in doctoral writing, but students must first be educated on how to provide meaningful and constructive feedback. Peer evaluation helps create a culture of ongoing feedback and insights about what feedback means, how to emotionally respond, and what to do with the feedback. Since everyone in the writing group follows the same processes and is then critiqued, receiving feedback becomes de-stigmatized (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). This is an important process which can reduce some of the anxiety associated with writing over time when students frequently take part in peer review assignments or group writings (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Cafarella & Barnett, 2000).

Lastly, faculty members can help by defining writing expectations and holding individual student conferences. Departmental consensus on writing expectations and priorities is imperative for student success in learning the elements of scholarly writing. Clear expectations, detailed rubrics, and specific feedback (Belcher, 2009) are aids in advancing student's writing skills. When student's skills improve and their efficacy increases, they are more likely to view themselves as capable of completing a dissertation and have the motivation to complete. If improving student writing and reducing writing anxiety are departmental priorities, faculty must collectively discuss expectations and implement the necessary changes. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to meet with course instructors and advisors to receive feedback on their writing and suggestions for approaching writing assignments. By regularly discussing writing projects with advisors, students will build writing confidence and improve their writing skills (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000).

This study was intentionally limited to one doctoral program with students who work full-time as educational leaders. This study is unique because of the lens of practitioner-scholars and their perspectives on scholarly writing. Based on the findings from this survey, areas for future research include identifying ways to embrace the diversity of perspectives brought to doctoral programs by practitioners while prioritizing doctoral level writing. Moreover, further studies could examine how institutions can strike a balance between creating an environment built to provide students with academic success while still providing opportunities for transformative learning. Additionally, we have determined that additional research is warranted regarding the role of the student in the dissertation writing process.

SUMMARY

The ability to write critically is an essential component to becoming a member of the academic community and, therefore, doctoral programs conclude with the ultimate writing task; a dissertation. For many practitioner-students, the writing skills they bring to the classroom are reflections of their undergraduate courses or workplace experiences and do not meet the expectations of doctoral programs. This gap between skills and expectations, when not met during the initial stages of a doctoral program, leads to doubt, anxiety and stress. For practitioner-scholars managing multiple responsibilities on top of their coursework, the emotional duress can result in late assignments, lower scores, and even discontinuation of the program. From our research, we have learned there are changes which can be made by students and faculty to bridge the skills gap, create consistency and transparency, and build a program focused on scholarly expression.

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