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ABSTRACT

This preliminary study of students' experiences in doctoral programs includes perspectives from newly admitted students, those who have completed their dissertations, students in intermediate stages of the process, and students who have decided to leave doctoral programs. The time span covers almost 25 years and data were gathered for some 250 participants in doctoral programs. Many students noted that they had no idea what to expect in the dissertation process. It was typical to find that they viewed writing the dissertation as a testimony to what they had learned in their courses. Many students spoke about the hops through which they had to jump to complete the dissertation. Others regarded it as a learning experience in itself, and others seemed to have a pragmatic attitude in which they noted that they were able to engage in new learning while completing many institutional requirements. For some participants, writing the dissertation was the highlight of their educational development, but for others, the dissertation was a hurdle in the way of credential building. The paper discusses the implications for preparing students for the dissertation process. (SLD)

**Doctoral Dissertations:
What Doctoral Students Know, How They Know it, and What They Need to
Know --- A Preliminary Exploration**

Rita S. Brause

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**Doctoral Dissertations:
What Doctoral Students Know, How They Know it, and What They Need to
Know --- A Preliminary Exploration**

Rita S. Brause

Roundtable Discussion at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Seattle, WA April 2001

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Objectives or Purposes

- Using multiple lenses to understand the experiences of doctoral students when preparing to write a doctoral dissertation
- To consider the purposes for writing a doctoral dissertation using multiple lenses

This preliminary study of students' experiences in doctoral programs includes perspectives from newly admitted students along with those who have completed their dissertations as well as those in intermediate stages - as well as those who decided to leave doctoral programs. Future studies may choose to limit data to one or another of these subsets. In addition, the time span covered included experiences over a 25 year time span, at numerous institutions. There are inevitable changes occurring over these geographic and chronological distances which are not accounted for in this preliminary study which is intended to promote the conscious and explicit development of one or more theoretical stances on the purpose(s) for requiring the writing of a doctoral dissertation in education doctoral programs.

Perspectives or Theoretical Framework

The requirement of writing a doctoral dissertation has been well-established. The effect of that requirement on students in doctoral programs, while sometimes visited on an anecdotal level, is infrequently subjected to systematic research and reflection. With an excess of 25 years of working with doctoral students, I was sufficiently frustrated and motivated to investigate why many students have trouble in writing this document.

I am not alone in this pursuit. As recently as the April, 1999, Nell Duke and Sarah Beck published an article in the Educational Researcher advocating "Education should consider alternative formats for the Dissertation." The previous September, Gary Olson and Julie Drew (1998) advocated "(Re)Reenvisioning the Dissertation in English Studies." Even the mass media are involved in this concern, witness Louis Menand's 1996 article, "How to Make a Ph.D. Matter." Along with these more academic presentations, we are faced with institutional advertisement:s, e.g.: "A Fast Track Doctorate..... 11 weekends and 2 four-week summer sessions over a two-year period."

Students enrolled in doctoral programs get conflicting messages about what the purpose of the dissertation is, and they have a range of purposes in enrolling in doctoral programs. While the myriad of perspectives may be inevitable, it seems useful at this juncture in our professional development to contemplate the importance of the dissertation in the professional lives of our

students, the university, and the profession.

Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

Through interviews, focus groups, and open-ended, anonymous questionnaires, I gathered data from some 250 participants in doctoral programs - current and former - graduates and drop-outs. These volunteers related experiences from doctoral programs across the US - across a span of approximately 25 years. Some currently teach in doctoral programs. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed as were the focus group meetings. The anonymous questionnaires were typically multi-page documents, single-spaced, typed. The passion present in many of these responses was palpable - despite the many years which had elapsed since the original experience.

Data Sources or Evidence

The respondents to the interviews and questionnaires were current and former participants in doctoral programs across the US. Some have just started out, having completed 6 or 9 credits. Most are quite advanced, at the stage of writing their dissertations, with some having graduated and others having dropped-out of their programs. Some identified themselves as individuals who had dropped out of other programs and were now, with a new mind-set, participating in a program at a different university. Some are professors at universities currently responsible for directing other students' dissertations, who reflected on their own experiences as doctoral students.

The questions posed in the anonymous questionnaires, the focus groups, and the individual interviews included:

- Why did you enroll in a doctoral program?
- What did you expect writing your dissertation would involve?
- What is/was most significant about the process of writing your dissertation?
- What is/was most exhilarating about the process?
- What is/was most frustrating about the process?
- What is/was most memorable about the process?
- What advice would you offer to future and current doctoral students?
- What did you learn about learning and about yourself as a learner?

Results or Conclusions or Point of View

Perhaps the most troubling finding was that many of the participants remarked that they had no idea what to expect in the dissertation process. Few had read dissertations or dissertation proposals. Most had the perspective that the dissertation was much like a term paper, just longer. Typically, they viewed writing the dissertation as a testimony to what they had learned in their coursework, despite the fact that they were constantly being placed in a position to learn more.

For many of the informants, there seemed to be conflict between the students' perception of what was expected of them in the process of writing the dissertation and in the final result. The most frequent explanation was that the process was one of hoop hopping. Many spoke about the many hoops which needed to be hopped before they could complete the dissertation. (For convenience, I will call this the "First Stance.")

Others, however, perceived the process as different from the coursework --- one to which they were entitled to participate only after having "proved themselves" in the coursework. This group viewed the dissertation as another, a different learning activity --- an invitation to explore a new world - to enter the world of the researcher. For this group, the process was one of

exhilaration and enjoyment. (I will label this the “Second Stance.”)

There was a third group, those who seemed to have a pragmatic attitude, in which they noted that there was both new learning in which they were engaged while accommodating numerous institutional requirements. They created a combined stance, acknowledging that there were institutional hoops in addition to new learning which they were engaged in. (This I call the “Third Stance.”)

Some individuals noted a change in their understanding of their roles and responsibilities as they went through the process. Some of those who entered with the First Stance, eventually adopted the Second Stance. Others who started with the Third Stance, wound up believing the First Stance was more appropriate.

For some of the participants, the writing of their doctoral dissertation stands out as a highlight of their educational development. It is an experience which helped them to see the world - or a phenomenon - with new lenses and some noted they now understand more about themselves as learners as well as about the topic of their dissertation. There was frequent reference to enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence, assurance that “I can do anything.” For some this experience led them into new realms that were not contemplated previously. For others, the dissertation was another hurdle in the way of their credential building. They viewed the dissertation as an irrelevancy. It was not connected in any way with themselves as learners, or with the need/responsibility to contribute to a growing knowledge base. They perceived themselves as recipe followers although the recipe itself was concealed from them and they needed to pry to formula from their committee or other knowledgeable sources.

Clearly each participant’s initial stance affected the ultimate impact of the outcome. Some of those who were looking for hoops and found more, were elated. Those who looked for hoops, and found only hoops, got what they expected - but were also very cynical as well.

Educational or Scientific Importance of Study

These findings can inform three different realms of our professional concerns:

- student preparation for writing a dissertation
- the organization of doctoral programs, and
- the requirement(s) of the dissertation.

We need to consider ways to prepare students for an appropriate mind-set when writing their dissertations. It may happen as early as the initial application and interview process, when potential students are contemplating enrolling in a doctoral program. The possibility of a wide range of research inquiries and modalities needs to be addressed and promoted. The program director can convey a sense of the purposes for writing a dissertation within the context of the entire program in interviews and catalog description, for example, and then monitor that these perspectives are clear through all the experiences the students encounter, all coursework, residency, and other projects. For example, each faculty member may be held accountable for promoting the student’s development as an independent researcher through mini-research projects and through apprenticeship experiences. This evolution should be made clear to the students and used as a criterion for advancement in the program. And there should be a monitoring of student experience with multiple research modalities throughout the program. If the goal is for students to have new lenses through which they interpret phenomena, and/or new stances they take as learners and listeners, then there should be some explicit evidence of this evolution.

Clearly there are different purposes implicit or explicit in doctoral programs. Students recall taking courses in which they did what they were told to do -- and yet were expected to be totally independent at the time of their dissertation writing. If the dissertation writer is expected to be independent, then the preparation for that experience needs to be systematically provided. If the writing of the dissertation is a rote activity, not one which is intended to ask the student to develop new lenses for seeing the world, then that needs to be plain as well. On the other hand, if the goal is to promote the acquisition of new skills, stances, and strategies, then the dissertation process needs to be explicitly presented in this way to the students, and the faculty need to take active roles in promoting this development. This qualitative difference in expectations gets us to the last, and perhaps most profound issue: rethinking what we perceive the purpose(s) of writing a dissertation to be.

While there is increasing talk in the profession - and in the general public as well, the profession needs to take the lead in this conversation. We need to decide what we think is essential for a doctoral degree. While the conventional may be appropriate in philosophy, there are other models to contemplate. In medicine, there is no dissertation per se, and Doctor of Arts programs have a range of experiences documenting the students' expertise. We in education need to contemplate the appropriate experience(s) which will reflect the knowledge and expertise which we believe is essential for receipt of the doctoral degree. With the confusion reflected in our students' minds, we need to address this issue as soon as possible. We also need to consider which methods are acceptable and how this decision is communicated implicitly and explicitly within the program activities and requirements. Perhaps more importantly, we need to acknowledge the multiple ways of inquiring into the teaching and learning process and reflect this stance in our doctoral programs.

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From Dissertation Proposal to Dissertation.

Model #1

Beginning to Write your Dissertation

Faculty Dissertation Committee



Student



Completing the Work on Your Dissertation

Faculty Dissertation Committee



Student



🍏 = relative responsibility in decision-making

From Dissertation Proposal to Dissertation: Transition in Responsibility and Expertise

Model # 2

Beginning to Write your Dissertation

Faculty Dissertation Committee

Student



Completing the Work on Your Dissertation

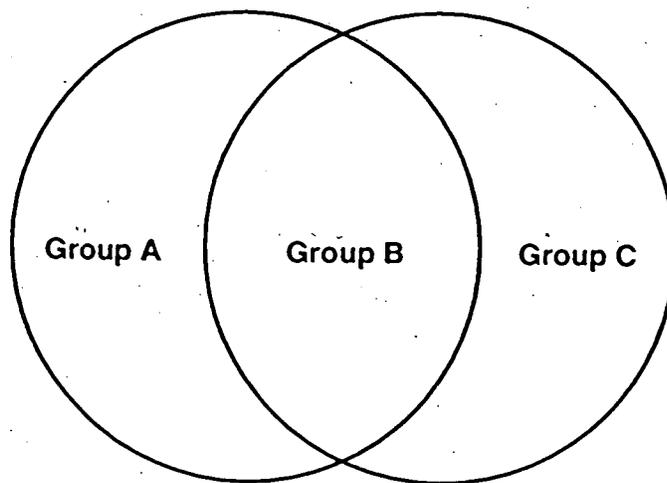
Faculty Dissertation Committee

Student



🍏 = relative responsibility in decision-making

Student expectations on entering doctoral programs



Note

Group A = those seeking personal enrichment, those with intrinsic motivation

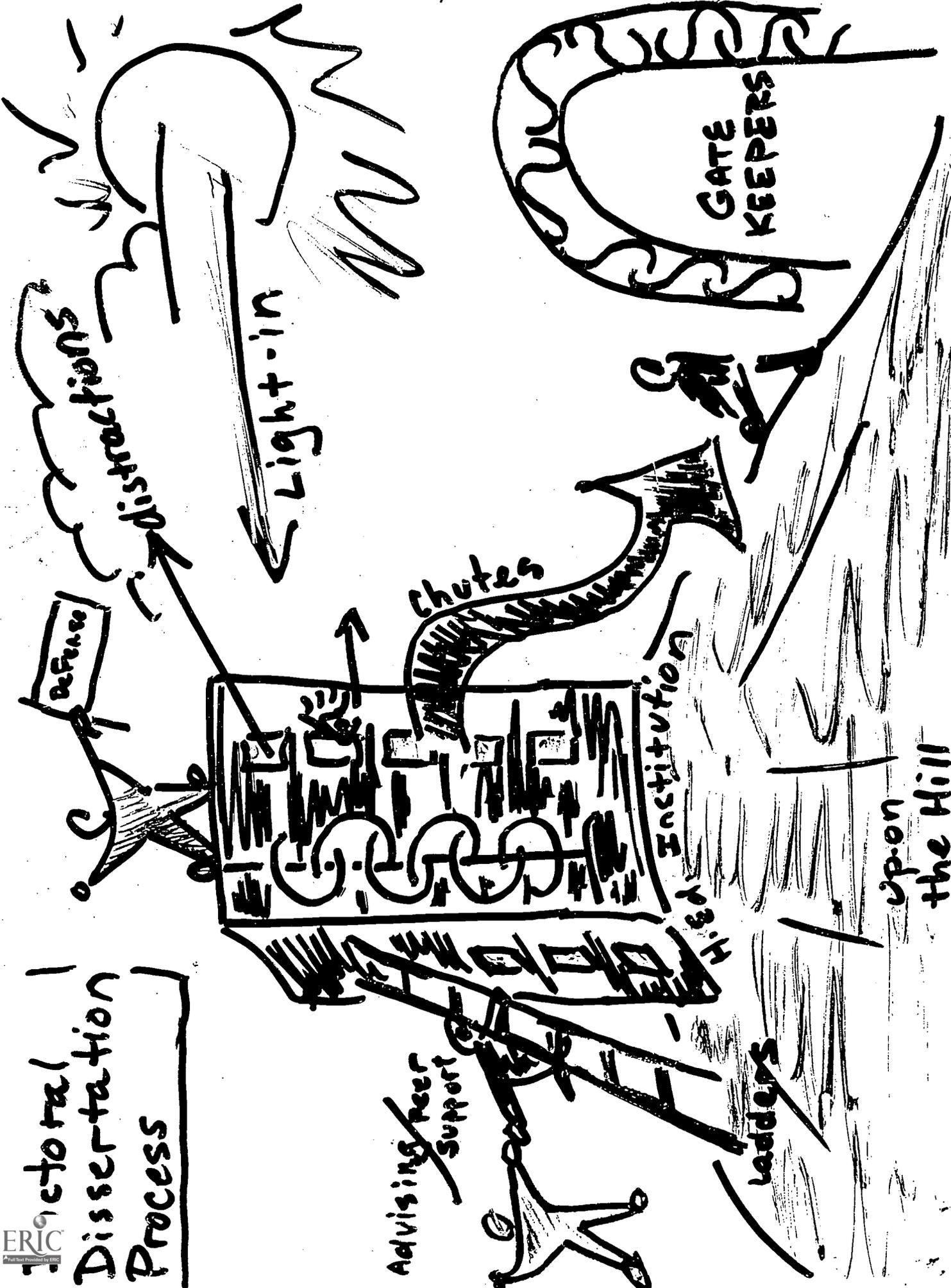
Group B = those with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (personal enrichment and external pressures)

Group C = those with extrinsic motivation, responding to external pressures

Doctoral students' experiences: expectations and realizations

<i>Expectations</i>	<i>Initial expectations</i>			<i>Ultimate experiences</i>		
	<i>Extrinsic</i>	<i>Intrinsic</i>	<i>Combination</i>	<i>Extrinsic</i>	<i>Intrinsic</i>	<i>Combination</i>
<i>Experiences:</i>	<i>Hoops</i>	<i>Enrich</i>	<i>Hoops & enrich</i>	<i>Hoops</i>	<i>Enrich</i>	<i>Hoops & enrich</i>
<i>Extrinsic</i>						
Group 1	✓			✓		
Group 2	✓					
Group 3	✓				✓	✓
<i>Intrinsic</i>						
Group 4		✓			✓	
Group 5		✓		✓		
Group 6		✓				✓
<i>Combination</i>						
Group 7			✓			✓
Group 8			✓	✓		
Group 9			✓		✓	

Dissertation Process





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