Doctoral Assistants = Critical Friends
A Simple Yet Complex Equation

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Introduction

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) encourages doctoral candidates volunteering in order to give back and continue their relationship with the university after completing their dissertation. Volunteering can take on many forms, from acting as doctoral assistants to performing the role of critical friends on future doctoral students' dissertations. The third guiding principle of CPED's doctorate in education provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships (Perry & Imig, 2010; Zambo, Buss & Zambo, 2013).

The authors of this article look at the process of how six doctoral candidates who successfully defended their dissertation provide guidance for two up-and-coming cohorts of doctoral students as they began their first dissertation class at a south Florida university. The first dissertation class occurred during a weeklong Summer Institute. The authors address the process, the experiences and the benefits perceived by the doctoral candidates as a result of mentoring the doctoral students.

The professor teaching the course was the Dissertation Chair for the six doctoral candidates who assisted, which ensured a level of camaraderie and understanding of the process the professor would use when teaching the course. Of the six doctoral candidates who assisted with the class, two of them assisted for the whole week in both the morning and afternoon session, and the other four participated for half-day sessions two days out of the week.

Process

Three weeks prior to the first class one of the assistants reviewed the syllabus with the professor to suggest appropriate changes. The assistant learned the process of writing and revising a syllabus. Additionally, the time spent reviewing the syllabus provided further opportunities to think of potential assignments and conversations the assistants could facilitate and at what points

during this Summer Institute. The professor encouraged the assistant to reflect on her experience and suggest ways to not only improve the syllabus, but also to improve the experience for the students in the course.

Two weeks prior to assisting with the class, the six doctoral candidates started communicating on the phone and via e-mail, bouncing ideas back and forth. A Google document was created for the collaborative process as an outline for the week and what insights the assistants could bring to the class. A week before assisting, the doctoral assistants held an ooVoo (internet based video conferencing tool) meeting to work out the details and discuss the potential roles each member would play in the coming week. The group decided to continue using the Google document during the week as a way to share feedback and observations for those who may not have been able to attend on a particular day.

The team of doctoral assistants created a framework for the points they wanted to present throughout the course of the week in order to enlighten the cohort members about the dissertation in practice process. Important themes the group wanted to discuss included reviewing CPED, writing problem statements, the difference between a dissertation in practice and a dissertation, developing relational trust between the cohort members, the creation of norms in a group Dissertation in Practice (DiP), and the role of critical friends. These themes would all be in concert with the lead professor discussing a traditional five chapter dissertation and how the steps of completing a dissertation support the creation of a DiP. The team anticipated the cohorts would better understand the process of the DiP as a result of facilitating conversations about how to create a DiP. By the end of the week, the team of doctoral assistants' goal was to create relational trust with all the cohort members.

Relational Trust

According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), if trust is present within an organization, then individuals are willing

to risk vulnerability to take on the mission of a new leader. To begin with, trust is absolutely essential for an organization to be successful. An effective and well-run organization depends and thrives on it (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Trust helps improve schools and organizations, increase student achievement as well as boost energy and morale (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). It is a resource which should never be surrendered at any time. It creates and consolidates energy, commitment and relationships (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). When one trusts another colleague or group, they are willing to take additional risks because they have confidence in him or her getting the task completed by a specific deadline. Trust is earned as a result of observing people perform a plethora of tasks and activities over a period of time.

Reina and Reina provide a thorough description of the three forms of trust present within an organization or academic institution. They are Contractual trust, Competence trust and Communication trust (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Contractual trust requires educational professionals to meet obligations, complete written arguments and keep promises (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). An educational professional who provides leadership, builds rapport by investing in and embracing all stakeholders as well as maximizing and empowering resources, is demonstrating Reina and Reina's second type of trust which is known as Competence trust (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Communication trust is the clear articulation of information, being honest, keeping confidences, and willing to admit error. Educational professionals able to balance and demonstrate these trusts are also able to influence, convince and persuade others of a plan of action to accomplish a goal (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). A leader needs to be able to clearly express his or her thoughts to other staff members, colleagues and stakeholders. Everyone who is in attendance needs to be able to comprehend what is being conveyed to them without any ambiguity. A leader will be able to motivate individuals as well as a result of clear and continual communication. Reina and Reina state how clear, high-quality, open and frequent communication are the hallmarks of communication trust (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Bryk and Schneider concluded that "trust matters as a resource for school improvement" (Bryk & Schneider, 2004, p. 121). They stated schools, organizations and other groups of professionals working together have a presence which is known as Relational trust which is similar to Reina and Reina's Communication trust. They stated relational trust has positive consequences on a school, organization or group of individuals working together in regards to "more effective decision-making, enhanced social support for innovation, more efficient control of adults' work and an expanded moral authority to go the extra mile" (Bryk & Schneider, 2004, p. 22). Relational trust must be established and maintained by the members of a cohort throughout the coursework as well as the duration of the dissertation process.

Critical Friends

The role of the critical friend in CPED is to support and empower scholarly practitioners by providing informed critiques and analyses of processes and practices (Swaffield, 2005). Critical friends view themselves as learning organizations and realize learning requires assessment feedback (Senge, 1990). This assessment feedback should provide a clear vision about the learning performance in the eyes of the learner (Costa & Kallick, 1993).

First of all, the critical friend builds trust with the educator. Once trust is established, the educator and the critical friend confer with one another. Critical friends listen well and critique the work honestly with the utmost integrity. They provide essential feedback to an individual or a group of people by asking meaningful, thought-provoking questions, and critical friends examine various types of data throughout the dissertation process.

The critical friend and the educator are constantly reflecting and writing about their experiences. Critical friends allow individuals to reflect and reassess their current beliefs and practices in order to improve their craft, providing a powerful tool during the DiP. The team was confident in the professor and knew they could add to the dialogue and discussion of the cohorts. Through the process of assisting with the class, the plan was the cohort members would view one or more of the doctoral assistants as critical friends and how they could guide and mentor throughout the dissertation process. They get the learner to examine and analyze their work from numerous angles and perspectives. Critical friends are a tremendous asset during the dissertation process as well as in a plethora of educational settings.

Presentation of the Framework

Summer Institute classes are in session for four consecutive days, two four hour classes each day. The course is titled "Dissertation in Practice Seminar, Part I the Problem/Profile". During the other half of each day both cohorts studied quantitative and qualitative dissertation practices. A twelve member cohort met during the morning, while a smaller sized seven member cohort met for the afternoon class. All the students are initially shown a CPED video and learn about the 6 CPED principles in the DiP class. Next there is a presentation and discussion on selection of a dissertation topic. The professor mentions regardless of whether they are doing a 5 chapter dissertation or a DiP, students need to decide on a topic and then start reading articles, dissertations, and their textbooks. During the reading of articles, patterns and themes will emerge. In addition, the names of the same theorists will likely keep appearing in their topics. Usually among these, there will be a theorist that especially resonates. Next it is imperative to narrow an idea for a topic so the research has a specific focus. The professor stated:

"Instead of vaguely stating, "My topic is on issues in education in the U.S.", it is vital to narrow it down to

what specific type of issues, what part of the U.S. and what is the population you're studying? When choosing a topic, the simpler the idea the better. Just because the idea may be simple it does not mean finding research or completing the DiP will be easy. The chapters of a dissertation must flow and tell the reader a story. The literature review section is written based on what the theorists 'state. It's not a book report, and it is not written by stating, 'I believe or I think" (Taylor-Dunlop, Class Lecture, 2015).

The professor introduces the next section about the difference between a traditional 5 chapter dissertation (the first 2 chapters) and a DiP. A cohort member interjects by stating she looks forward to the possibility of creating a dissertation which is so important to her school district, it leads to a promotion and/or financial compensation. One of the doctoral assistants replies and offers some pointers about writing a dissertation:

> "For your first dissertation, do not seek to write a groundbreaking landmark dissertation. This initial one is meant to acquaint and familiarize students to the practice and art of dissertation writing, while gaining useful experience at completing the entire process in a timely manner, graduating and gaining doctoral status. The student can always attempt the landmark dissertation afterwards when the student has more experience at becoming a professional researcher".

At this point, the doctoral assistants now take over the presentation to discuss components of non-traditional DiP which are a DiP, literature review, executive summary and writing two publishable articles which stand alone, so they build a body of work. If working in either a small group or large ensemble group, they explained and shared examples of the additional components such as accurately collecting qualitative archival data consisting of articles, agendas, emails (including threads), photos, minutes, etc. categorized in a time sequential order by date.

The critical friends discussed the difference between good teams and bad teams - being trust, commitment, and buy-in - and provided examples of five dysfunctions during teamwork. How does a group handle problems arising during the DiP project? These doctoral assistants (critical friends) highlighted the importance to establish norms. Norms must be thought out carefully and agreed upon by everyone in the group. If a norm is listed, you must be willing to follow it. They emphasized the importance of relational trust getting established early on so any constructive criticisms are accepted without resentment. For example, a norm which could be created is "be open to constructive feedback" because often it is important to share with another group member some constructive feedback.

The presentation has dispelled several misconceptions that the students verbalized during the discussion. Some of these are noted below.

- Misunderstood DiP as linear like a 5 chapter traditional dissertation

- Misunderstood DiP unconventional approach and originality

- iBook was the entire doctoral assistants' DiP dissertation

- iBook was an unprofessional marketing piece

- iBook was a glorified homework assignment

- The group DiP can be finished quickly

- A cohort could replicate another cohort's DiP, and then simply add more to it in order to call it their own DiP. "If an earlier cohort could do it, we can do it better!"

Lessons Learned

Part of assisting the doctoral classes necessitates thinking about lessons learned from the experience. Some of these lessons helped clarify and frame the doctoral candidates own DiP, while at the same time creating opportunities for new lessons learned from sharing in teaching how to create a DiP. One of the important lessons learned was the unique group dynamics of each cohort. One of the cohorts exhibited a very aggressive temperament, while the other cohort was more relaxed and open to suggestions.

Departing from the traditional 5 chapter dissertation can be quite difficult to wrap one's head around. Many of the frameworks of a 5 chapter dissertation can be found in a DiP, but the departure from the known to the unknown can be difficult.

Relational trust needs to be established and maintained within a cohort in order for the opportunity for authentic critiques and potential for group DiPs. This relational trust is an outgrowth of class activities which promote respect, acceptance of diverse viewpoints, a democratic learning environment as well as theoretical debates in initial coursework. Developing relational trust among cohort members increases collaboration in both individual and group DiPs. There was no clear evidence of the establishment of positive group relations, and there lacked an atmosphere of individuals' obligation to the group for a shared purpose.

Doctoral students need critical friends to help guide the process of a DiP. These critical friends can take on many roles, from assisting in classes, to reading and critiquing DiPs for future doctoral students.

Through teaching one becomes even more familiar with the DiP process, thus offering insights into the process from topic selection to the actual creation of a DiP. Learning is an activity not done in isolation.

Implications for Education

The doctoral assistants stated significant implications for education as a result of mentoring doctoral students during the four day Summer Institute. Noted below are the implications for education.

• Demonstrating the ability to convey the components of a nontraditional DiP and CPED principles to doctoral students by customizing the presentation to meet the cohort's group dynamics.

• Recognizing the importance of establishing relational trust at the outset of the DiP or 5 chapter traditional dissertation. This will lead to the creation of norms, productive dialogue and successful collaboration on and off campus between cohort members.

• Identifying critical friends who can enhance the quality of the DiP by providing feedback, mentoring and support during the dissertation process.

• The doctoral assistants gained leadership experience through their participation in the Summer Institute. Through this positive pedagogical academic activity, additional leadership opportunities may be provided to offer guidance and teach future doctoral students.

Doctoral assistants have the potential to apply the third guiding principle of CPED's doctorate in education as scholarly practitioners by demonstrating collaboration and communication skills to guide, support, lead and build partnerships with doctoral students who are getting ready to commence their dissertation.

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