Chapter 10

Dissertation Research Supervisor Agency for U.S. Online Doctoral Research Supervision

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically explores the construct of agency from a dissertation research supervisor perspective. While the literature has expanded in the exploration of student agency, little focus has been given to the construct from a research supervisor agency stance. Current research into doctoral completion has shown the relationship between supervisor and dissertation writer as critical to persistence and completion. However, less investigation has focused on the aspects of dissertation supervisor agency and the evolution to a high mentoring approach, especially for online doctoral students. The conceptual inquiry utilizes the lens of Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theory to view how research supervisor agency can foster and guide doctoral scholars to consider researcher positionality and move from the margins of the doctoral learning community to the center of scholarly life and post-doctoral practice-based research and evidence-based decision making.

INTRODUCTION

The key determinants of American doctoral student persistence and online dissertation research completion have highlighted the relationship between the doctoral candidate and dissertation research supervisor, mentor, or chair (Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, & Throne, 2017; Throne et al., 2017; Throne, Shaw, Fore, O’Connor Duffy, & Clowes, 2015). These key elements have also emphasized the necessity for the online doctoral research supervisor to possess the very human traits of trust, honesty, and effective com-

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munication, especially for online, hybrid, or part-time doctoral degree programs (Black, 2017; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Rademaker, Duffy, Wetzler, & Zaikina-Montgomery, 2016; Throne & Duffy, 2016). In a critical review of the factors of doctoral student attrition, the authors previously noted the high attrition rate in U.S. doctoral programs has proffered much research to explain why doctoral students exit these programs, regardless of delivery modality, prior to dissertation completion (Baghurst, 2013; Rigler et al., 2017). In addition, the authors have identified that a positive, relational, and nonhierarchical online mentoring supervision style was a key determinant for doctoral degree and dissertation research completion in an online U.S. doctoral education program (Throne & Duffy, 2016; Throne et al., 2017; Throne et al., 2015). Yet, online doctoral students repeatedly report problematic relationships with the dissertation research supervisor as an impediment to dissertation completion regardless of delivery modality (Akagi & Fore, 2016; Levitch & Shaw, 2014; Rigler et al., 2017). On a positive note doctoral program leadership attributes a supportive, high mentoring, and interactive relationship between dissertation research supervisor and candidate as a significant factor in doctoral persistence (Baghurst, 2013; Cornér, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017; Kyvik & Olsen, 2014).

Gardner (2009, 2010) and other past researchers have also reported U.S. dissertation researchers, regardless of spatiotemporal distance from the research supervisor or doctoral peers, require socialization (Cornér et al., 2017; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Rigler et al., 2017) and access to regular and instructional communication with the dissertation research supervisor (Holmes, Trimble, & Morrison-Danner, 2014). In addition, this relationship must be socialized to involve meaningful interaction (Lave, 1991, 1996; Rademaker et al., 2016; Throne et al., 2015). Several researchers have reported some U.S. research supervisors who were overly involved in their own research agenda and not regularly available for supervision, interaction, and feedback were detrimental to dissertation research completion (Holmes et al., 2014; Rigler et al., 2017; Van de Schoot, Yerkes, Mouv, & Sonneveld, 2013). To this end, in a critical review of the literature surrounding U.S. doctoral persistence and completion, dissertation research supervisors who initiated regular and consistent doctoral student-research supervisor meetings reported higher doctoral completion rates (Rigler et al., 2017; Throne et al., 2017). Thus, as U.S. doctoral candidates engage opportunities to interact with the dissertation research supervisor, it is essential for a socialized, cooperative, and supportive relationship to be established based on clear expectations between the candidate and research supervisor (Gardner, 2009, 2010; Hardre & Hackett, 2015; Rigler et al., 2017).

Within this essential relationship, the doctoral candidate requires a research supervisor willing to extend the research supervisory relationship beyond task completion and manuscript milestones, and one who desires to develop agency in dissertation research supervision. Indeed, the research supervisor should be willing to move beyond traditional hierarchical relationships and provide the individualized instruction, social support, and the high mentoring ethos necessary for the doctoral candidate to persist and achieve dissertation research completion. For example, Bourke (2017), and others have noted the importance of this development of community-engaged scholars and the benefits to society and social justice when graduate-level researchers are encouraged and willing to tackle important inequities within the community through research. Further, insider positionality can offer access for community-engaged scholars who can evolve researcher positionality through this inquiry (Chavez, 2008).

From the review of additional literature, past researchers have consistently reported the influence of the dissertation research supervisor as a pivotal determinant of U.S. doctoral student success and dissertation research completion. Yet, few U.S. doctoral programs require, or even provide, the specific professional development opportunities for dissertation research supervisors to develop mentoring skills or the relational aspects which their role needs. More often U.S. online doctoral programs often qualify
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