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Tracking the experiences of Canadian Education doctoral students over time: cultivating agency in diverse spaces. (0189)

Programme number: A3.1

Research Domain: Student Experiences,

This study of doctoral students in Education at two Canadian universities forms part of a longitudinal research program documenting the everyday experiences doctoral students as they progress toward PhD level degrees. Using a longitudinal tracking log form over two year period, the study inquires into the nature of doctoral students' day-to-day activities, interactions, challenges and relationships – practices that cumulatively influence the development of agency and academic identities. Response patterns highlight students actively cultivating relationships beyond the primary supervisory relationship and engaging in multiple informal activities that are often not perceived or designed as learning activities but contribute to learning and further development.

SRHE 2009 – Symposium 1727

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Much of the work on doctoral experiences focuses primarily on global issues and finite events without documenting variations in daily routines. Yet, the minutiae of varied daily activities and the role of diverse interactions are integral to students' cumulative experience and developing understanding of the doctorate and academic life. In this work we place particular focus on the multiple diverse activities doctoral students engage in everyday. This longitudinal lens acknowledges that the repetitive and cumulative nature of daily activities contributes to learning, and thus, provides robust insights into the individual development of academic identity and personal agency.

This study forms part of our larger action-research oriented and longitudinal program of research documenting the experiences of both doctoral students and new supervisors. Our participants are 35 PhD students in faculties of Education at two distinct Canadian universities. One of the universities is located in western Canada and is a comprehensive university (i.e., university without all of the professional schools usually contained in traditional research intensive universities) and the other is a research-intensive university (i.e., a substantial contributor to the number of doctoral level graduate) in eastern Canada.

Data sources were structured log forms collected electronically via e-mail at both sites with different frames of reference for the responses: one week in a particular month versus the entire month. Twenty doctoral students and candidates in the Faculty of Education at the research-intensive university agreed to participate in this tracking via log forms (18 female, 2 male). Log forms were completed once a month over two academic years and pertained to only a particular week within that month (total logs at this site: 163, 4-15 logs per person). From the demographic information provided

by 17 of these participants, 15 reported a desire to seek academic positions upon completion and 16 attended their program full-time while holding only part-time employment within the university context such as teaching or research assistantships in addition to their studies. At the comprehensive university, 15 PhD students and candidates in the Faculty of Education agreed to complete the log forms (10 female, 5 male). Logs were completed every month over two academic years, with the log questions instead referring to events of the entire month instead of any particular week (total logs at this site: 133, 2-15 logs per person). While these participants are all enrolled full-time in their studies, most of these individuals maintained their previous full-time employment while pursuing their doctoral studies, and only came to the campus for classes or pre-arranged meetings.

These sets of 296 log forms are considered textual representations of student experiences over time. We characterize these texts as snapshots comprising the narratives that represent their developing agency and forming identities as doctoral students and becoming academics by capturing ongoing experiences over time.

Thematic analyses of particular log questions across logs displayed remarkably similar response patterns, despite varied time frame for completion and contextual differences between sites. For example, the reported supervisor-supervisee interactions show surprising patterns. In terms of the most important person influencing progress or a sense of progress, the supervisor was named in only 32% of all instances, with the remainder distributed among peers (17%), other faculty members (13.3%), family & friends (22.4%), oneself (10%) or others (5%). Similarly, when asked about human resources that were drawn upon in a particular week or month, the supervisor again is infrequently reported (1/5th of all instances), with peers and family members comprising more than 50% of reported resources drawn upon. Additionally, in responses to how difficulties or challenges were handled or addressed, there were equally sparse references to the supervisor, with the majority of responses indicating that either nothing could be done in the face of certain challenges (e.g., time constraints), or that the full responsibility of difficulties lay solely on their shoulders with outsider aid unwarranted, as in the much cited experiences of anxiety or writer's block reported by participants.

Reports on how time was invested and the types of activities engaged in allowed for a mapping of these activities onto a continuum of doctoral specific activities (i.e., activities that only doctoral student engage in) ranging from informal (e.g., reading), semi-formal (e.g., meetings with others) and formal activities (e.g., dissertation proposal), to academic general activities (i.e., activities in which academics and doctoral students alike may engage, such as writing a journal article), also ranging from informal, semi-formal to formal. Via this reference frame, doctoral students in both contexts reported spending 65-70% of their time engaging in informal doctoral student specific activities, such as reading and writing on one's own, or informal conversations with peers or other faculty.

Collectively these patterns highlight student engagement in activities that are often hidden from the view of others such as the supervisor, likely unacknowledged, and are not designed or necessarily perceived as learning activities but have learning as a probable by-products. The respondents report engaging with family and friends, peers and supervisors as resources on a regular basis and the same groups of individuals are also frequently cited as 'most important' for consistent yet varied reasons.

Hence, the often assumed centrality and singularity of the supervisory relationship requires reexamination, as our results suggest that many other similarly important relationships are actively cultivated by students. What we perceive emerging from this representation of doctoral experience is a sense of agency – whether or not it is explicitly articulated by the student – situated within a set of structures and resources. We propose students are negotiating distributed supervision-mentoring relationships with more directive roles linked to the supervisor and other academics and more supportive roles to other students and family/friends. The varied contexts in which similar results were obtained also supports the robustness of the log form in capturing diverse and ongoing doctoral student experiences.