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Directing and Chairing EFL Doctoral Students' Qualitative Research Dissertations in Taiwan

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Writing a dissertation to fulfill the requirement for the completion of Ph.D. programs has always been the most challenging task for doctoral students. It is especially true for EFL students who not only need to struggle with the research process, but also the English language. One way to avoid being an ABD (All But Dissertation or All But Dead), dissertation chairs usually advise their EFL students with less research, no research experience, or low level of English proficiency not to conduct a qualitative dissertation which is "notorious" for its hardness and complication. Thus, students without time, energy, and good writing skills are not encouraged to do it. While the statement might be true, supervising and chairing a qualitative research dissertation is as hard as writing one. It is indeed challenging work for the first-time dissertation chair. The purpose of this study is to better prepare doctoral students and first time chairing dissertation faculty during this process by outlining the facts and tips of supervising, directing, and conducting a qualitative dissertation. More importantly, the author of the current research hopes more graduate students and scholars will conduct qualitative research studies. Yet, it is very essential for researchers to know that research questions determine the methods they need to use for their researches, not the methods they are most comfortable with.

Introduction

Pursuing a Ph.D. degree is usually representative of a person's personal characteristics such as ability, organization, and persistence (Willingham, 1974). However, thesis and dissertation requirements delay the completion of graduate degrees (Garcia, Malott & Brethower, 1988). Writing a dissertation is the requirement for the completion of Ph.D. programs and has always been the most challenging task for doctoral students. It adds more frustration to EFL doctoral students who need to struggle with the research process and language. Therefore, committee chairs are not fond of having doctoral students with less or no research experience, or who are incompetent in writing and conducting a qualitative dissertation which the students consider "hard" and "complicated."

The author of this current study will first present and share facts of supervising, chairing and conducting a qualitative dissertation. Facts such as doctoral students' ability of conducting and writing a dissertation, supervisor's ability of chairing

a dissertation, time consumed, money issues, and other unexpected matters that might interfere in conducting, supervising, or directing a dissertation will be discussed. Then, the possible tips for enhancing doctoral students' ability of conducting and writing a dissertation and supervisor's ability of chairing a dissertation, managing time, dealing with financial difficulties and other out of control factors will be outlined. This paper further argues that dissertation chairs determine the success and completion of doctoral students' dissertations.

Ability Factors

There are many ability factors which might interfere with conducting, writing, or even chairing a dissertation. Spillett & Moisiejewicz (2004) indicated that students who are excellent in their course work might have their academic confidence shaken by their advisors' criticism. Both faculty members and graduate students in Hansen's (1990) study stated that graduate training does too little to prepare students for undertaking independent research. Similarly, the author of this current research would say many dissertation chairs weren't trained to direct

doctoral students' dissertation. Lin (2005) pointed out that those dissertation chairs in China have to be certified by many countries prior to acting as a dissertation chair. Yet, any assistant professor, including those who have just obtained their doctorates can serve as a dissertation chair in Taiwan regardless of their experience in supervising a dissertation and, conducting researches or the number of publications they have. Therefore, we can't ensure the kind of quality work doctoral students will do in Taiwan.

As a matter of fact, Hansen (1990) also found that inadequate undergraduate preparation is the possible obstacle to the completion of dissertations. Kluever & Green (1998) indicated diminished interest and lack of ability as internal factors for failing to complete the dissertation. In addition, the amount of full-time study and scores on comprehensive examinations is factors related to the completion of doctoral degrees (Dolph, 1983). Therefore, it is very important for doctoral students to know that conducting a qualitative research is not just about interviewing people or doing observations in the field.

The author of this current study would say what challenges graduate students the most is that they know and have ideas on how they are going to collect their qualitative dissertation data, but have no idea about the epistemology and methodological approach for their research. Doctoral students generally fail to think that these two should come before thinking about the methods for their study. However, without the patience and passion to read and comprehend what the epistemology and methodological approach are, doctoral students are not going to make it, simply because it is the hardest and most complicated part of conducting a qualitative dissertation.

Furthermore, quantitative research data deals with numbers, yet qualitative researches are words. Therefore, to make sense to all the data, doctoral students do

need to learn the most update qualitative software for analyzing and organizing their data which is not an easy or simple task. Chairs also need to keep up with the latest software in order to supervise their students well.

While there is a way to prepare students for the complexities of the dissertation process, many students are unrealistic and misjudge the amount of work they must involve (D'Andrea, 2002). One unrealistic aspect comes from having topics that too broad. Thus, difficulty of the topic is an obstacle to the completion of doctoral dissertations (Hansen, 1990). The author of this current study suggests that doctoral students should be able to tell their dissertation chairs what they want to do in "ONE SENTENCE." If they can't, then they aren't ready to go. Furthermore, doctoral students had better not seek their topic from their dissertation chair as they might end up doing what their chairs want them to do or do the research their chairs feel most comfortable with.

It is good if students do what their chairs ask them to do because they surely can get plenty of good resources and advice from them. However, doctoral students should be aware that their dissertation could be or may be the only piece of work they will write in their lifetime. Therefore, they have to like it and have passions and interests to do it in this long journey. They cannot make it without the passion and interest for the topic they are doing.

Furthermore, in Wertheimer's (2002) article, Dr. Reed comments that doctoral students should not think they are done once they complete their dissertations. After all, many doctoral students later will end up working in university as the job for faculty is to publish and let others know what they have discovered in their researches. Thus, doctoral students have to love what they are doing and they would want to continue to do it to help them work toward tenure (Stasny, 2001). The researcher of this current study advices that if doctoral

students don't want to have a matchmaker marriage, neither should they want a similar arrangement for their dissertation topic. Allen (1968) found that a common reason why doctoral candidates gave up on their first dissertation attempt was due to a lack of interest in the topic.

Therefore, dissertation chairs need to help doctoral students to narrow down their topics. Doctoral students' topics generally are usually too big or too general and take a few years to finish. However, if doctoral students think they have the passion, time, and energy, then they should go for it. Yet, doctoral students should know if the research topic they are going to conduct is a doable research and if they have a good sense of how much time and energy they want to devote in. Meanwhile, people need not be amazed if occasionally we would have people say it took them different lengths of time to complete their dissertation--from one year to more than a decade. The researcher of this current study knows a professor who wrote his dissertation in 67 pages and one who wrote hers in 3 volumes for a total 1167 pages. This shows that doctoral students are the ones in control.

Moreover, many EFL doctoral students whose major was/is English might still have trouble writing a dissertation in English. Therefore, for those whose major has nothing to do with English will indeed suffer more in this long process. In fact, dissertation chairs who obtained their doctoral degrees from an English speaking country do not guarantee they are all capable and comfortable in supervising and assisting their doctoral students' in writing their dissertations in English.

Tips for Enhancing Ability

Many doctoral students did not need to write a thesis for their Masters, thus they might not know a lot of things about research. The author would add that the courses graduate students take during their graduate study do not give them the best

sense of how a dissertation should go as well. It is the same with dissertation chairs who weren't trained to direct a dissertation. Therefore, dissertation chairs need to be sure that they are capable of directing a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods research. In addition, doctoral students and dissertation chairs are encouraged to take all the necessary courses, attend workshops, and read other related books to enhance their ability of conducting, designing, analyzing, and directing a dissertation.

D'Andrea (2002) suggested that courses in statistics and research methodology should be taken early in students' programs so that students would have the skills to plan and complete an independent research project. More importantly, doctoral students should be actively involved in research projects to better understand what a research is really about. While major professors should be honest with their students about their strengths and weaknesses, areas for improvement, and how they can improve (Benet, 1977). Students should also realize that the major professor is going to give them an honest evaluation about their strengths and weaknesses. It should be noted that some faculty members may disagree with students' approach of doing the research thus students should be sensitive to their committee members' philosophies and research designs (Mendenhall, 1983).

The author of this current study also recommends doctoral students not to wait until the last minute to learn the knowledge they need to in order to conduct their dissertations. Doctoral students should not rely on others for data analysis; otherwise, they might not be able to expertly defend their dissertation. In addition, it is hard to ensure whom doctoral students can rely on to do the research correctly. Therefore, if doctoral students know the research process like the back of their hands, at least they will know if those people they rely on are doing it right. Moreover, dissertation chairs should keep Vogosky's Zone of Proximal Development in mind and use

both the support from teachers and what students can do to get them to move forward. In short, dissertation chairs are obligated to ensure doctoral students are on the right track along the process. It includes helping them brainstorm research topics, watching doctoral students' progress, sharing personal experiences, and giving feedback on their work.

For the English language ability part, both doctoral students and the dissertation chairs need to work hard to strengthen and polish their English. Doctoral students can look at the existing dissertations that have been done in their library or other libraries. Learning and modeling from how other researchers construct their own research writing will help with their own writing. Writing down good sentence structures from what they read will help as well. Furthermore, dissertation chairs can also get some advice from foreigner teachers, their overseas professors, or experienced local colleagues. Yet, it is the researcher's belief that if time allows, the researcher is sure that the dissertation chairs and doctoral students will be able to write an excellent dissertation if they are willing to take time to find the mistakes they made by reading their work again and again. In addition, if money is not a big issue for doctoral students, they might also consider paying a professional editor for the final editing.

Time Consuming Factors

Miles & Huberman (1994) stress the importance of early analysis to move research cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new and better data. It is because many researchers spend months and years collecting the data, retired from data analysis with collection are complete. It goes without saying that transcribing interviews and observation audit tapes or videotapes are very time-consuming. It is especially true when the quality of the taping is not good or when this research is a cross-culture

research that people do not speak the same language as the researchers do or researchers have hard time understand their accent. However, what take researchers the most time in conducting a qualitative dissertation include data analysis and data collection. If the data collection involves observing people under the age of 18, it will probably take longer for the Institutional Review Board to approve the protocol than getting access to the subjects or vice versa. Yet, it was not emphasized strongly as compared to the U.S. On the other hand, as qualitative research involves a lot of face-to-face interactions, videotaping or audio taping that researchers' universities have to protect the participants and researchers to avoid any avoidable law suits. As the result, it usually takes longer than researchers would expect especially when revisions need to be made for several times.

While data collection and analysis take time, getting feedback from dissertation committee members or schedule meeting time with chairs or all committee members can be very time consuming as well. For example, according to Heiss (1970, p. 22), "nearly 80 percent of the students reported that advisers failed to schedule regular meetings for the purpose of checking the candidates' progress or needs (as cited in Dillon & Malott, 1981)." It is especially true when the students' research problem required cooperation from more than one academic department, doctoral students seemed to find working with a committee particularly frustrating and were sometimes caught in inter-departmental conflict (Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly, 1993). One participant in Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly's (1993) study disliked his/her advisor. The participant said "He was a son of bitch; if I wanted to ask him a question, he said 'make an appointment', but he was the only person working in the area."

Tips for Time Management

Time is the most essential thing for doctoral students. Dissertation chairs would agree that "How long would it take for me to get my Ph.D.?" "How long would it take for me to finish a dissertation?" are the most frequent and common questions asked by doctoral students. Thus, if supervisors know time is so important, there is no reason for them not to be an efficient time manager to make sure doctoral students would and will complete their degrees in the time frame allotted.

Being good time managers, dissertation chairs with whole committees and doctoral students need to sit down and set up the timeline for doctoral students to complete their degrees. Dissertation committee especially chairs and doctoral students should see the timeline sheet as a contract that they are going to work towards. It is especially important for dissertation chairs to recognize that there will be times they must stay up late to read students' dissertations, meet with them whenever they need to or, if necessary, push the timeline. Benet (1977) shared his belief that dissertation chairs must be available for students beyond the five-day working week, 8AM to 5PM. On the other hand, it can be all the time during the day, night and weekends. Benet (1977) even thinks that as a major professor, his obligation is to support students in their careers. In fact, his advice and counsel will not cease even after the students obtain jobs.

Therefore, to be a good time manager, dissertation chairs need to be a problem solver from time to time to help doctoral students especially when they have problems with other committees. Also, dissertation chairs need to be aware that there will be times they need to deal with challenges from their colleagues who serve in their doctoral students' dissertation committee. On the other hand, dissertation chairs have to be able to fight for their students when needed. For example, if it takes doctoral students forever to get feedback from a committee member or the Institutional Review Board, dissertation chairs have to be able to come to the right

person and address the need of doing his or her job. The researcher of the current study doesn't buy the notion from professors or administrators who say being "busy" is the reason that keeps him or her behind. After all, who isn't busy? Moreover, when a committee member gives students a hard time without reasons, dissertation chairs might need to find others to fill in the position if communication breaks down. It is the researcher's belief that it is better for chairs rather than students to be the "bad guy" since chairs generally know their colleagues better than students and they know how the "SYSTEM" works.

The researcher's experience of working with many different committees make her recognize that sometimes students have to choose people who can get along with the dissertation chair in the committee. On the other hand, if doctoral students' dissertation chairs cannot work with any committee, it is going to create problems. The author of this current study advises doctoral students to ask their dissertation chairs who they would recommend to serve in the committee before they decide who should be in the committee. Dissertation chairs must also be able to advise students in choosing their dissertation committees. In fact, doctoral students are encouraged to take the recommendations their chairs give, as the person chairs recommend is usually someone chairs can work with.

In brief, Benet (1977) recommends that major professors should be tough enough to make sure students finish their thesis and the appropriate publications before students are allowed to leave the campus. While the major professor might be tough, doctoral students should look at their dissertation chairs as a challenger to explore the potential they have. Dissertation chairs should know the importance of time for students. This is especially important when funding itself is on a time limit that will soon expire. Also, students who take a sabbatical from their regular jobs know they cannot leave their work forever which might add additional stress to themselves. Therefore, many students experience extreme time

pressures in completing their dissertation. That is why both doctoral students and the chair have to make sure they are working toward to their timeline as well to ensure the completion of a dissertation. Spillett & Moisiejewicz (2004) echo that graduate students with multiple responsibilities and roles may need additional services or support to complete the dissertation.

Financial Factors

The dissertation writing process requires a lot of time, energy, and money. It is especially true when the researchers do not use their own backyard as their research setting and need to travel out of town or overseas. If trips need to be made several times in order to complete the research, the expense is even higher.

Another costly factor in the research process is the postage. In order to have a very formal research process, doctoral students sometimes are asked to send out an invitation letter via the regular mail, not an e-mail to invite potential participants to join the research. Then, a survey via the regular mail will be sent to all participants few days later. What makes it more costly is when the response rate is low and a second invitation and survey have to be sent out which will surely add to the cost. If there is a follow-up study, the cost will be even more. The above does not yet include the cost of printing even. After the data is collected, doctoral students might spend money hiring someone to do the transcribing which might cost more than the total expense of the postage.

Malaney (1984) found that the majority of full-time graduate students use institutional financial aid to fund their education. Therefore, students don't need to work if they are on scholarship. On the other hand, those with assistantships must work twenty hours per week to earn their monthly paychecks. The law in the United States only allows international students to work 20 hours a week on campus. As a result, it can be very stressful for people who are on

their own, especially if there is a cutback in higher education budgets which reduces the availability for financial aid while the tuition keeps increasing. When looking at financial support of male and female doctoral students in Holmstrom & Holmstrom (1974) study, men primarily depend on their own savings while women are supported by their parents. Jacks, Chubin, Porter, & Connolly (1993) interviewed 6 bio-scientists, and they found financial problems were cited most frequently as the major reason for leaving school before completing the dissertation. Interviewees from the study also said they need to have a paying job to support their families. One participant even said that he was "sick of having no money." Students in sociology said that they are tired of living and trying to raise families on meager fellowships. That is why when paying jobs were offered, many took them without completing their programs. Similarly, D'Andrea (2002) identified financial demands as being a major barrier to the completion of a doctoral degree in the College of Education. However, a research done by Singh & Dalal (1988) in India found that lack of libraries, computers, and financial facilities are major obstacle in the timely completion of the doctoral dissertation.

Therefore, doctoral students should be urged to consider the impact of their internships on their ability to complete their dissertations. Williams (1994) suggested that if one chooses an internship away from campus, one must also find a good library with interlibrary loan services for completing his or her dissertation. To help doctoral students financially, some versions of the "smaller but better-funded" have been experimented with in many public and private universities (Magner, 1999). As Linda Charnes of Indiana University said, universities are trying to make sure they can fund all the doctoral students through the program so that they don't have debts in the end (Magner, 1999).

Tips of Solving the Financial Difficulties

Dissertation chairs often are the ones who offer doctoral students assistantships, which means students' paychecks are coming from their chairs' funding. The researcher of this current study doesn't think that doctoral students need to find a chairperson who has a lot of money. However, we can't deny that more money coming in will help one to conduct any research. For example, the money can help with expenses like postage and copies if students are doing a mass survey research. The money can also serve as the travel fund if students are doing research overseas which requires frequent travel. Thus, having a chairperson who can provide the financial information and assistantship becomes very essential.

While no one would expect dissertation chairs to give their own pocket money to support their doctoral students throughout the program, many of them fail to help or tell their doctoral students where to apply or obtain the findings for their dissertation research. The fact is that many dissertation chairs are not aware of this kind of information since they have never gotten one. Thus, the researcher of this current study emphasizes that even if dissertation chairs can't provide money for students, at least they should know where to direct students to.

Factors Beyond the Control of dissertation chairs

There are factors beyond the control of dissertation chairs when conducting, supervising, and chairing a qualitative dissertation. For instance, things like the distraction of major professors because of death, fire, travel, or leaving for better jobs leave students to be reassigned to other faculty members who either have no interest or competence in the students' fields, or who are already overburdened with their own students or other college responsibilities (Hansen, 1990). Ogden (1993) shared a similar idea by stating that if one of the committee member flies off to Europe to do research or present a paper at

a conference, students have to wait before officially moving on to the next step. This might result in them failing to stick to the timeline. Monaghan (1989) reported that students who take longer to complete their dissertations tend to be those who have experienced a major loss in their lives, such as a death, divorce, or neglect. For doctoral students who have families, they might need to deal with the sickness of their family that might interfere with the completion of their dissertation.

In addition to these factors, during the research process, many things are out of our control. For example, people doctoral students target to interview might change their mind or not be able to participate in an interview for some reason. The interviewer's tape recorder may have been tested many times to ensure the quality of the taping, but it may turn out that nothing has been recorded. Last, doctoral students might lose their data because their computers break down or their place burns down.

Tips for Dealing with Factors Beyond the Control of the Dissertation Chair

There may not be an exact tip for dealing with things that are out of our control. However, for a factor like losing data, doctoral students should always keep several copies in different places such as a bank safety box or even in a refrigerator. At least if a fire takes place, the data will still be fine. Johnson & Conyers (2001) looked at how support groups helped with the dissertation process. For the feelings of loneliness due to loss of loved ones for any reason, they pointed out that individuals benefited from the group very much when they set up the short term and long term goals, reporting their process, and sharing what works best for them to accomplish their goals.

Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown (1995) also found that educators who worked together as a team to earn their doctorates tended to be more motivated to complete their

program of study than others who did not employ a team concept. Group support and peer encouragement were the main reasons 108 doctoral students in Dorn, Papalewis, & Brown's (1995) study kept on track toward achieving their degrees. Thus, it would appear that doctoral students should find their own support groups to support them intellectually and emotionally during the dissertation process. Perhaps, dissertation chairs can assist students to find their own support group in this long journey.

Conclusion

To conclude, writing a qualitative dissertation is a very time consuming, costly, and energy demanding process especially when doctoral students need to write it in English. To best survive the dissertation writing process, doctoral students have to make sure they are well prepared and trained to conduct, design, and analyze the research. In addition, doctoral students need to understand that choosing who to serve in the dissertation game board will determine their success or failure (Ogden, 1993). In fact students whose supervisors were more analytic achieved significantly higher grades for their dissertations (Armstrong, 2004). More importantly, students should choose someone who can help them to complete their degrees on schedule; conversely, the wrong person might result in them taking two steps backward for everyone step forward. Obviously, the result is regression not progress.

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