

Opening a Space for Collaboration and Support in Ph.D. Programs

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Abstract: Research can be a very isolating experience for Ph.D. students. We created a forum for discussion among Ph.D. students to discuss the doctoral experience and generate ideas surrounding collaboration and dialogue using open space methodology. This paper explores isolation as an element of the social and community aspect of learning in a Ph.D. program. The onset of COVID-19 broadened the scope of our exploration and necessitated new adaptations for discussion and interaction.

Keywords: Open Spaces, dialogue, support, collaboration, isolation, COVID-19

As doctoral students nearing the completion of our programs, we began to reflect on our individual journeys, especially in the context of mentoring students who are at an earlier stage of their doctoral odysseys. What we each found (primarily through anecdotal probing) was that the most common barriers to a more robust and fulfilling doctoral experience was a lack of time and an encroaching sense of isolation.

Research can be a very isolating experience for Ph.D. students, given their outside commitments to work and family. However, because we recognize that research—as a component of self-directed learning—is also social and collaborative, we desired to focus on the community aspect of learning in a Ph.D. program. Using Open Space methodology to create a forum for discussion among Ph.D. students, this project addresses the issues and generates ideas through collaboration and dialogue. Doctoral students can benefit from the social support of peer collaboration—students helping students—learning from the lived experiences of others and using collaborative education to support, to mentor, and to empower each other.

The purpose of this project is to find ways to overcome known barriers to participation, including isolation and lack of time (Tinto, 2012), to create a supportive and collaborative community of learners in the Ph.D. program.

Background

The doctoral experience can be viewed as a type of self-directed learning (SDL), but self-directed learning does not equate to learning in isolation (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The nature of the Ph.D. program and the general busy-ness of students' lives can impact the doctoral student's participation in the program, which Tinto (2012) addresses in his longitudinal model of doctoral persistence. Tinto's model of doctoral persistence examines the factors that contribute to student success and engagement in doctoral programs. While there are many issues that impact persistence, we are choosing to focus on the social system Tinto describes: that of peer and faculty relations and how that aligns with collaboration and support.

Feelings of isolation and doubt are often the result of a lack of connection with peers, which is unfortunate given that much of the learning in doctoral programs is enhanced by collaboration. Hill and Conceição (2020) noted that “Fostering a community of practice among students may

stimulate the exchange of ideas, sharing of challenges, tips and coping strategies; provision of emotional and social support for one another; and offset the loneliness of the doctoral journey” (p. 40). Therefore, creating a collaborative learning community facilitates the social phenomenon of learning, allowing students to become more self-directed and empowered to learn.

Methodology

Developed by Harrison Owen in 1997, Open Space methodology provides opportunities for participants to discuss what is most important to them in a meaningful and organized way. This process allows them to take ownership of the issues and develop solutions to problems that work for them. Our project explored using an Open Space methodology to create a forum for discussion among Ph.D. students, with the purpose of finding ways to overcome the barriers to participation as identified by the participants throughout various discussions.

Open Space

There are four basic requirements for holding an open space discussion: You need a clear and compelling question or theme, an interested and committed group, a time and a place to meet, and someone to facilitate the session. Within open space, there are four guiding principles and one law: First, whoever comes are the right people. Essentially, whoever is there is who should be there. Second, whenever it starts is the right time. There is a general schedule, but time is flexible. Third, whatever happens is the only thing that could have. The discussions that happen are the ones that are meant to have happened in that particular time and space. Fourth, when it’s over, it’s over. There’s no need to prolong a conversation that has ended. And finally, the one law: known as the “law of two feet”, this frees the participants to leave a conversation when it no longer interests them and allows them to join any other conversation at will.

Compelling Question

Anecdotally, we’ve discovered that sharing experiences regarding research, publishing, preparing for the qualifying exam, and writing the dissertation is of great interest to those students who lack experience in these areas and want to know more. Consequently, to better understand the collaborative potential of the Ph.D. program, our project settled on the compelling question: How can students form positive, supportive, and collaborative relationships with one another while participating in the Ph.D. program? Just as we began to get these conversations underway, COVID-19 struck, and our doctoral student association-sponsored gatherings had to transition to Zoom. We decided to experiment with facilitating an open space discussion in a virtual format.

First, we shared our compelling question and a Zoom link with the doctoral student community, inviting them to participate in this conversation. We then organized the first plenary session where participants could submit and choose topics of discussion. Utilizing the breakout-room feature, we met in small groups for two rounds of conversation. If someone decided to exercise the law of two feet, they could leave the breakout room and ask the facilitator to be placed in a different group. At the end of two rounds, a second plenary session was held to summarize the discussions that took place. Following the entire open space meeting, exit tickets (as Google

Forms) were sent to each of the participants as a follow up, asking about their experience with this process and to generate future topics of discussion.

Major Themes

Because one of the cornerstones of open space is that the participants themselves identify the issues and then discuss ways to address them (Owen, 2008), the next step in this study would be to analyze the data that comes out of the open space sessions. Part of our process in trying to understand the student perspective toward the issues and challenges of participating in a doctoral program has been to listen to the students themselves.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 interrupted our project, making the adaptation of the open space forum to a virtual setting a necessary task. Harnessing technology to continue vital conversations and maintain connective relationships with our peers was a shift for which none of us was prepared. The goal changed: not only was it important to find ways to continue the conversations but it was also important to acknowledge the impact of COVID-19 on the whole doctoral experience.

This project is a work in process: the initial open space session was held quite near the end of the spring semester, just before summer break. We would like to resume this practice, to continue the conversations and to build collaborative and supportive opportunities for our peers, especially during this time of virtual interaction.

Discussion

Creating a collaborative community means taking advantage of organic opportunities in the Ph.D. program to engage in meaningful learning beyond course and assignment completion, to create opportunities for co-creation with multiple purposes. For example, diversification of the student population--joint discipline classes, a mix of masters and doctoral students together in all tracks, course opportunities for joint publications—all enrich the Ph.D. experience in both practical and meaningful ways.

Initially, our project was aimed at understanding the challenges doctoral students face when it comes to collaboration and support, notwithstanding the lack of extra time and the sense of isolation that comes from participating in such a program. However, COVID-19 forced a literal state of isolation on students across the board, eliminating in-person class meetings and other opportunities doctoral students might have to get together. The implications of this involuntary state of isolation on the students' capacity to engage with their studies and with others is something to be explored. More research is needed to understand the implications of this pandemic on students' mental health, sense of motivation and persistence, and overall mindset as they attempt to pursue the Ph.D. during this season of COVID-19.

We found that the open space methodology worked for us in the initial stages, both in identifying the issues and in collaborating with others to address them, and we feel this process could be applied to a variety of doctoral and graduate programs. Additionally, analysis of data generated by this process could yield specific information about the needs and experiences of the students

in any doctoral program, allowing for issues to be addressed, problems to be solved, and challenges to be overcome in collaborative and supportive ways. Ultimately, though, we feel that during this new paradigm of teaching and learning, it is more important than ever, especially in this time of COVID-19, to continue building connections with one another and supporting our peers through their participation in the Ph.D. program.

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