Reciprocal Peer Coaching an Instrumental Case Study of the Journey of a Three-Year Doctoral Cohort

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ABSTRACT
Reciprocal Peer coaching is a viable pedagogical strategy to use with doctoral students in order to encourage engagement, retention, collaboration, and engagement in a cohort model. This study explored a peer coaching model that randomly paired students in a three-year cohort doctoral program. Results indicated that doctoral candidates found that peer coaching and peer collaboration was beneficial both academically and personally. Moreover, candidates continued their relationship with their peers from year one to year three. Three themes emerged which included *random assignment*, *building relationships through dialogue*, and *obstacles to success.*

Keywords: higher education, doctoral cohorts, peer coaching, peer collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are approaching a crossroads, as the inevitable enrollment crisis will soon reach schools across the country. With the inexorable decreasing enrollment trends due to demographics across the United States, and most recently the effects of COVID-19, institutions will be scrutinizing their program offerings, target demographics, and future as institutions of learning. College enrollment in the U.S. has decreased for the eighth consecutive year, according to new data released (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Because of this inescapable enrollment predicament, schools are restructuring, realigning and re-envisioning in order to stay competitive in the marketplace.

The adult student will assuredly be the target for many universities, including doctoral students but the number of doctoral degree granting institutions will be fighting for a smaller piece of the pie. More importantly, the access and availability of doctoral degrees options in the United States is at an all-time high. Potential students have a menu of degrees and formats from which to choose making competition in the market extraordinary. In 2016, the number of doctoral degrees awarded were at its highest in U.S. history. Candidates earned 54,904 research oriented doctoral degrees according to the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), a report published by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) (www.nsf.gov). Almost two percent of Americans hold terminal degrees, and the number earned yearly is holding steady, so it is imperative that those

degree-granting institutions explore methods to recruit and retain candidates as the marketplace competition increases, and the availability of potential candidates decreases.

More recently, higher education (HE) institutions have begun to recognize that education is a service industry and acknowledgement of the clients' needs are ever increasingly at the forefront of university agendas. Tuition-based institutions must identify the retention issues as college education costs increase each year. Moreover, recognizing student satisfaction impacts recruitment and retention rates in HE and has become important in relation to degree completion (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Doctoral students are a unique group in that they have other challenges associated with retention including family and career.

The purpose of this study was to examine the implementation of a collaborative peer-coaching model in a PhD cohort at a private university in Western Pennsylvania in the U.S. More specifically, the implementation of a peer collaborative model is explored in one doctoral cohort over a three-year period in an effort to meet doctoral students' needs in and out of the classroom.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Retention
Attrition rates for doctoral students has been reported to exceed more than 50 percent in the last decade (Holmes, Robinson, & Seay, 2010; West, Gokalp, Pena, Fischer, & Cupton, 2011), and this number is on the rise with the increase of distance learning programs (Ali & Kohun, 2006). With this, HE must find ways to retain doctoral students and support them to degree completion. Strategies to combat attrition rates include increased financial aid packages, relationships with faculty, and intensive mentoring programs. Persistence to complete program requirements for doctoral students is plagued with issues such as lack of support from faculty, financial struggles, work obligations, emotional stress, and the structure or type of program (Stevens, Emil, & Yamashita, 2010).

The importance of trained faculty and strong student-faculty relationships is well established in the literature, but the idea of peer relations has been given less attention. Honneth (1995) theorized that student retention is affected, in part, by authentic recognition provided by others. Moreover, West et al. (2011) suggested that HE has a unique situation in that recognition of self lies in the wall of higher education institutions. That is, the program components, faculty-student interactions, peer relationships, and program relevance are just a few of the reasons doctoral students remain enrolled in programs.

Research indicates that a cohort model has been successful in recruiting and retaining students in doctoral programs, specifically in greater graduate rates (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Holmes et al., 2010; Nimer, 2009). Many times this unique group of scholars form relationships and networking opportunities that would not occur otherwise. The cohort model encourages interaction with peers, increased collaborative working relationships and sharing of feedback (Holmes et al., 2011). Moreover, West et al. (2011) posits that doctoral students enrolled in a cohort program are more successful than their non-cohort counterparts. Often, these relationships translate into peer coaching, which is valuable for persistence to degree completion.

Professional Learning Communities, Peer Coaching, and a Cohort Model

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are likely one of the most popular ways in which educators, in particular, are finding their professional development opportunities. PLC often involves teachers in research and peer coaching (Capraro, et al., 2016). The PLC framework fits with a cohort of learners working toward a common goal, such as doctoral candidates who have essentially common goals and objectives.

Benefits of utilizing a cohort-learning model boosts a sense of community and enhanced relationships with peers (Zahl, 2015; Olson & Clark, 2009), and the members of cohorts bring a variety of experiences and work histories, which enables varying perspectives relative to concepts and content. Furthermore, a cohort model allows for natural networking that evolves over the course of the program (Mullen, 2003). Because of these benefits, a peer-coaching model was implemented in a three-year doctoral program because cohort members are naturally united by program start date and requirements ultimately finishing the program of study at the same time (Maher, 2001).

Motivation and Adult Learning

Adult learners, in general, benefit from reflective learning that encourages sharing and collaboration with peers (Galbraith & Fouch, 2007). Learning with colleagues in a problem-based environment is beneficial for adult learners. Andragogy, defined by Knowles (1994), focuses on the learning situations and contexts of adults. Learning for adults, according to Knowles, theorizes that self-concept, experience, and orientation to learning and motivation to learn are central to the success of adults (Gom, 2009). Motivation drives people to accomplish a goal (Gom, 2009), and in particular, the negotiation of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation is dependent on the learners. Adult learners may be extrinsically motivation by the prospect of a promotion, new job or higher salary (Gom, 2009). Likewise, intrinsic motivation plays and important role in an adult's sense of self-concept and self-esteem (McKeachie, 1978).

A number of scholars in the field has examined PhD candidates' motivation to enter and persist in a program of study at the doctoral level. Fleming and Finnegan (2014) state "the aim of higher education should be to support the creation and sustaining of narratives and biographies that are loaded with self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem. These should form the habitus of a learning institution" (p. 60). A cohort model has the potential to nurture such learning.

The ability to support doctoral candidates is a complex dilemma in HE today. The capability to consider and examine adult learning theories, motivation and peer coaching as viable components of programs may be a piece of the retention puzzle.

METHODOLOGY
Reciprocal Peer-Coaching Model

Reciprocal peer coaching involves allowing students to engage in an equal relationship that allows for observation, feedback, and support (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002). This strategy served as a framework for the study.

Doctoral students, enrolled in a three-year cohort degree program, were randomly paired with a peer at the start of a research methodology course in year one of the program. The examination of

students' motivation to participate in a collaborative peer-coaching framework was examined. In year one of the program, the randomization pairing by the course instructor was distributed on the first day of class. Students were required to work with their peer on a number of occasions and encouraged to work beyond the classroom. Peer coaching was chosen as a model to encourage students to work on class assignments, development of the problem statements, research questions, and other related materials for the course. Likewise, the peers were encourage to consult with one another on matters related to the dissertation.

Design

The researcher utilized an instrumental case study design in this study. The case was bound by the confines of one PhD cohort of 14 adult learners in year one and year three of the program. The purpose of the case study was to explore the phenomenon of peer relationships and collaboration while also exploring the vitality and usability of the peer collaboration model implemented by the instructor. This instrumental case study was designed to "go beyond the case" (Stake, 2006, p. 8). The lived experiences of the participants were of upmost importance in order to understand the experience of working with a peer over the course of three years, first as a course requirement, but then on a voluntary basis. Stake (1994) contends that an instrumental case study allows the researcher to focus on understanding the issues of the lived experience of the phenomenon. In-depth exploration aids in understanding the phenomenon in an intensive manner. Baxter and Jacks (2008) would argue that by employing an instrumental case study design, the researcher allows for the initial data to aid in the further development of a theory.

Data collection consisted of a questionnaire, at year one (n=14) and year three (n=14) prior to completion of the dissertation. Additionally, the researcher conducted ten semi-structured interviews in year three of the program. Participants for the interviews were those who volunteered.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Results

Year 1.

The purpose of the questionnaire created for year one students was to determine in what ways the doctoral students utilized their assigned peer. When asked if students enjoyed working with their randomly assigned peer, thirteen (86.67%) students responded that did indeed enjoy working with their peer. Additionally, the questionnaire examined the areas in which respondents relied on their peer for help. The following data were collected: Ten (28.57%) stated they utilized their peer to aid in constructing research questions and nine (25.71%) stated they relied on their peer to give advice on assignments for class. Six (17.14%) candidates reported that they asked their peer to help with the direction of their dissertation and advice on other academic issues. Four candidates (11.43%) said they consulted their peer collaborator for other issues unidentified. Since the peer collaboration was instituted in a research methodology course, five (35.71%) stated they sought information related to methodology while six (62.86%) stated they consulted both the instructor and their peer equally.

Peer collaboration and learning communities are often linked to positive behaviors both academically and personally (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Moreover, programs that encourage collaboration and engagement are connected to better student retention and success (Astin, 1984;

Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Jones (2014) states, "Collaborative learning environments are appropriate and meaningful for the adult students who typically enroll in graduate programs across many disciplines and professional fields" (p. 166). By establishing a collaborative peer-coaching model, students had the opportunity to extend those relationships with colleagues beyond the confines of the semester or course term. Working together on course material and cooperative conversations about content was accomplished by utilizing this model with adult students.

Year 3.
A questionnaire was distributed to the same cohort of doctoral candidates (n=14) in year three of their program, and the purpose was to collect data relative to their peer-coaching partner and the continuation of the relationship throughout the three years.

Candidates were queried as to how often they still connected with their peer two years after the implementation. Six (42.15%) stated they speak to or with their peer collaborative partner once or twice per week. Four (30.77%) answered they connect once or twice a month while zero members said they connected daily. Three (23.08%) stated they no longer work with or talk to their peer. Moreover, when asked the reasons for their contact or interaction with their peer, five (38.46%) sought academic input, two (15.38%) used their peer for personal input, and four (30.77%) stated their reached out for both personal and professional advice. More specifically, four (30.77%) primarily used their peer for improved content through feedback, and three (23.08%) used their peer for motivation to complete schoolwork and the program.

The extension of the peer review and support process is supported by previous work by the author (Bernadowski & Aspinall, 2014). In that study, students who engaged in a graduate randomly assigned peer review semester long process showed an increase in self-efficacy in both the peer working relationship and confidence levels in their writing. In the context of the present study, the peer-coaching model allowed doctoral candidates to work collaboratively in a natural setting where the instructor supported the partnerships and served as a facilitator of learning (Keenan & Braxton-Brown, 1991).

Qualitative Results
The semi-structured interviews extended the discussion of how the process of peer coaching changed over a three-year period. Ten volunteer participants participated in a 45-minute interview that dug deeper into the qualities and nature of the relationships. Three themes emerged from the interviews that included *random assignment*, *building relationships through dialogue*, and *obstacles to success.*

Random assignment
Eight (80%) of the ten participants mentioned that the random assignment of partners in year one of the program ended up being a match for which they were satisfied. P2 stated, "It was luck of the draw. I didn't know my partner, but in the end, it was the perfect match." Likewise, P6 explained, "My peer and I get along so well. I didn't expect that at all since we are very different people. I can't believe how lucky I was." The same sentiment was echoed by P9, "It was a match made in Heaven. I have no idea how it happened, but it worked out perfectly." Dialogue played an important role in the relationships that formed between cohort members based initially on collective experiences. Preston, Ogenchuk and Nsiah (2014) describe cohorts "natural" peer groups and their willingness

to participate and learn side by side speaks to the determination of cohort members. The natural benefits of a cohort model allowed the instructor to capitalize and "sell" the idea to students. Many studies have documented the benefits of a learning cohort including enhanced personal and professional relationships and a sense of community (Mullen, 2003; Zahl, 2015). More importantly, the instructor was able to capitalize on the "shared experiences, collective efforts, and social and cultural engagements" (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010, p. 193). On the contrary, two participants (P1 and P5) mentioned a "mismatch culturally" that, in their opinions, played a role in the "inability to connect on a deeper level."

Building relationships through dialogue
Nine (90%) of the ten participants discussed the relationships that they built during the three years by working closely with one another. Candidates cited examples of reliance on their colleagues/peers for advice on academic affairs and, even, personal issues. P9 commented, "I couldn't have gotten through the program without my buddy. I depend on her for some many things, but the most important to the program, is feedback on my dissertation and helping me massage my research ideas." Likewise, P7 stated, "I couldn't have succeeded in the program without the relationship we built as classmates and friends. We probably wouldn't have been so close otherwise." Ford and Vaughn (2011) examined relationships in a doctoral cohort and found that dialogue played an important role in the cohesion of the group. In this study, cohesion was exhibited through the initial mandatory dialogue, which, for many, evolved into voluntary interactions beyond the classroom walls. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) speaks to social interaction and how it is situated in the context of learning with members leaning on and learning with one another throughout the experience. "New meaning is constructed in a manner that is reciprocal for all students involved" (Wolfe, Nelson, & Seamster, 2018, p. 296).

Obstacles to success
Seven of the ten participants (70%) mentioned some sort of obstacle or challenge they faced either at year one or year three with their peer collaborative partner. P1 stated, "I love the idea of having a friend to work with throughout the program. It is like a built in advocate, but I had issues with our backgrounds being so culturally different." This sentiment was also mentioned by P5, "I think our background being so different was a problem from the beginning so we didn't mesh as well as some of the other partnerships." Cultural backgrounds were not the only obstacles mentioned by participants. Prior experiences, professional interests and personal differences were also mentioned as barriers to success.

DISCUSSION
Learning communities and peer collaborative learning is not a new idea. Dating back to the 1960's, reemerging in the 1980's as active learning and student engagement, learning communities continue to earn attention in higher education. What differs in this study is the incorporation of the concept of learning communities in a doctoral cohort program over an extended period of time. This study was able to encourage ongoing connections over a period of time. Because of this connection, participants were able to connect personally, professionally and academically; the trifecta of professional student identity. According to Zhao and Kuh (2004), "The learning community appears to be a potentially powerful educational practice" (p. 117). Doctoral students made connections, both personally and professionally, they would not have other wise made. This, in turn, adds validity to the retention of students.

LIMITATIONS

Collaborative relationships built on mutual trust and understanding of a lived experience yielded positive results for this cohort at a small, private university in western Pennsylvania. A caveat not examined or considered was the match or mismatch between candidates' backgrounds or experiences. This simple consideration could have enhanced the experience for those students. Moreover, this study is limited in that it examined one case over a three year period.

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