Journal of Educational Research and Innovation

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Recommended Citation

Loyd, Stacy; Harding-DeKam, Jenni; and Hamilton, Boni (2014) "Hazards to the Doctoral Journey: Guidance for New Doctoral Students," *Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol4/iss1/2

Barriers to the Journey: Guidance for New Doctoral Students

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Beginning doctoral students enter academic programs with different purposes and expectations. The authors' vignettes below are the voices of a recently-tenured assistant professor, Author Two; her first chaired doctoral student advisee, Author Three; and a peer doctoral student, Author One, in a teacher education program at a university in the Rocky Mountain region.

Author One: *After teaching various grades in small private schools for fourteen years, I was ready to take a professional step forward. I was a successful teacher. I built quality relationships with students as I partnered with their parents. I planned multi-dimensional lessons and strove to engage students in active learning as we pursued academic excellence. But, I was bored. I was not cognitively and emotionally invested in my day-to-day activities. Having earned my master's degree early in my teaching career, pursuing my doctorate seemed like the next logical step in my professional journey.*

Author Three: *I applied to doctoral programs in order to find something more fulfilling. I had taught preschool through grade 12; public and private schools; regular, gifted, and special education students; as a tutor, knew about how to be an excellent educator.*

Author Two: *I am a doctoral advisor who has been at the college level for the past seven years. I have supported ten students in completion of their programs, comprehensive exams, and dissertation requirements. Prior to coming into higher education, I taught at the elementary and high school levels as a teacher and technology specialist. I decided to get my doctorate in mathematics education because I had taught with colleagues who were afraid and underprepared to teach math to their elementary children; furthermore, I wanted to make a difference with future teachers and understand why mathematics had such a negative connotation.*

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During six months of narrative focus groups (Suter, 2000), the authors met six times for three hours each time to share the stories of our doctoral program experiences. We also read research about doctoral advisors and advisees. We were surprised to discover how common it was for doctoral students to struggle with emotional and cognitive issues during the early years of the program. If only we had read the research earlier, our journeys might have been easier. This article attempts to equip you as a beginning doctoral student with awareness of the common challenges of doctoral programs and strategies for overcoming them. Recognizing that you, as a beginning doctoral student, may not be experienced with reading research literature, we chose an easy-to read narrative style.

Literature Review of Doctoral Students' Realities

Note to reader: Research is always grounded in a study of literature. To enhance the readability, we simplified this literature review, including using bullet points to highlight important ideas. As is standard practice, we included the authors and dates of references to give them credit for their ideas.

Students entering doctoral programs often do not fully comprehend the scope of doctoral studies and are not truly aware of the challenges they will face in their programs (Golde & Dore, 2001), which may explain why 40-50% of doctoral students do not finish (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2005).

At the beginning of the doctoral program, you may experience emotional turmoil in the following ways:

- social isolation (Ali & Kohun, 2007),
- the sense of being an imposter (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011),
- concerns about inadequacy to meet the academic demands (Austin, Cameron, Glass, Kosko, Marsh, Abdelmagid, & Burge, 2009), and
- the loss of professional identity (Austin et al.).

As you progress through the program, you may also be challenged by academic research and writing, two aspects of doctoral study with higher scholarly demands than previous educational programs (Ali & Kohun, 2007). Without adequate support within the university, students will often withdraw from the program. Support usually comes primarily through the doctoral advisor, although you may also benefit from connecting with other doctoral students.

Methodology

Note to reader: In the methodology section of a research paper, authors provide information about the procedures used to collect, analyze, and interpret the research data.

The doctoral experience is generally researched from the viewpoint of either the advisors or advisees independently. This paper explores the relationship of the doctoral students and their advisors simultaneously. Throughout the research process the authors tried to understand our experiences as individuals mediated within a social context (Richardson, 2003).

This research can be classified as an autoethnographic case study (Duncan, 2004). Autoethonography refers to the study of our (auto-) cultural (ethno-) story (-graphy). In this research, the authors are writing about one particular teacher education advisor/advising program

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at a Rocky Mountain university, which is a case study. The case study may be considered *intrinsic* (Stake, 1995), *holistic*, and *representative* (Yin, 2009). The case of doctoral program success holds inherent interest for the authors (intrinsic), is presented as a whole and not embedded parts (holistic), and focuses on a typical or commonplace situation (representative). You may not have the same experiences in your own program, although, based on published research, our experiences are typical.

Over a six month period, we collected data in meetings of two to three hours each. We discussed memories, literature, and artifacts, such as emails, course work, and professor feedback on projects. These discussions and artifacts highlighted similarities of experiences within the context of a doctoral program (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010).

We began our data collection with storytelling, recounting emotionally powerful doctoral experiences. When experiences or emotional responses were common among us, these became themes, or data categories. As themes emerged, we looked in the literature to see whether others had reported similar findings. Not all themes appeared in the literature because they were unique to our stories. This analysis process was recursive. Through dialog and writing, we identified the themes as barriers, which was our interpretation of the data.

Findings and Implications

Note to readers: Researchers typically report findings and implications separately, but for ease of reading, we combined them in this paper. Findings are the report of the data and often include context and quotes. Implications are the researchers'

conclusions and recommendations based on the findings.

Our findings are divided into two main categories: cognitive barriers to success and affective barriers to success.

Cognitive Barriers to Success

Cognitive barriers to success can create anxiety for students during doctoral programs. Through our research process, we identified five cognitive barriers that characterized our personal experiences: fragmented learning experiences, limited procedural theoretical knowledge, cognitive dissonance, lack of academic writing experience, and a focus on the dissertation as an end product rather than as a process of learning how to be a researcher and scholar.

Cognitive barrier 1: Fragmented learning experiences. Doctoral students take a number of courses within their chosen specialties and beyond. Because the content across classes may not naturally connect together, the knowledge and experiences sometimes feel fragmented. You may find it challenging to apply course-specific knowledge to your own inquiry.

As Author One shared,
One of the required courses of my program was a curriculum foundations class. The workload was time intensive and I began to be extremely frustrated. It felt like I was spending a lot of time reading and thinking about a topic far removed from my personal research interests. I wanted all my learning to answer my personal questions.
This class felt like a waste of my time.

The fragmentation is particularly hard to handle when doctoral students are advised to align each class project to build toward their eventual dissertation studies. Author Three was too overwhelmed in her

first semester to see connections between classes.

> *I took five classes – way too many! – in my first semester and, when it came time to write five research papers at the end of the semester, I had no idea how any class connected to any other. The only commonality I could see was they all required APA style, which was also new to me. I used a few peers outside the university as sounding boards to help me navigate the challenge. In the end, I wrote three papers about topics related to my past professional work where I felt competent to understand the research. Only two papers represented stretching myself to learn about new areas of research, and both eventually influenced the dissertation topic I chose a year later.*

This fragmentation is reinforced when doctoral level students create their own plans of study for their programs in order to receive all of the background knowledge they need in their program area and for their dissertation research. Unless students are in a cohort program, they take doctoral classes in different sequences, so professors generally prepare for their courses in isolation. The lack of continuity across courses can reinforce students' sense of fragmentation as Author Two elaborated:

> *I only have sixteen weeks to teach this course, scaffold instruction so all students can meet the learning objectives, make connections within my content area, and give the experiences students need with research. There is little time to talk to other professors to see what they are teaching to help students make connections from other courses to mine. Even if I had time to talk to my colleagues about*

activities/readings/projects used, how could I begin to know what courses this group of doctoral students has taken and what their specific experiences were within those classes? Therefore, I focus on general connections to other content areas because I do not know the specifics. I am confident the students will be able to make these connections on their own because they have lived these experiences.

Suggestions for decreasing fragmentation. Despite institutional structures that may lead to fragmented learning experiences, doctoral students must make the necessary connections to construct meaningful knowledge. You may be required to take classes that do not obviously fit with your personal interests, but each class will provide opportunities for learning. This learning may extend beyond content as you learn more about yourself as a learner and scholar, experience various teaching methodologies that could inform your own teaching practices, or interact with peers. Realizing that not all knowledge is *content* helps overcome the barrier of fragmentation.

Systematically journaling about your educational experiences can bind the pieces together. Writing is a way of thinking. As you write about your experiences, thoughts, questions, and frustrations, you create a concrete artifact of your experience. Over time, this artifact can be reread, and you can see how you are developing and how the individual pieces are working together to create a comprehensive whole.

Talking about your educational experiences can also decrease fragmentation because talking with others makes thinking visible. Find peers in the

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program or friends outside the program who can engage with you in conversations about the new ideas, questions, and challenges you are facing. These thinking partners can help you make sense of new information or simply reassure you that you are growing.

Not all connections are immediately obvious. As Author Three shared, two papers she wrote her first semester eventually influenced her dissertation. At the time she was writing them, she did not see how they connected to each other or how they would lead to her research, but reflectively she recognized the connections. As you begin the doctoral experience, knowing that the various pieces will eventually fit together may help you work through the frustrations of fragmentation. As Table 1, *Categories, Purposes, and Demands of Doctoral Coursework,* shows, depending on your program design, you may take five different categories of courses. Each category has its own purpose, academic language demands, and writing requirements. Understanding where each course fits into the structure of a program may build coherence. In Author Three's first semester, she took classes in four of the five categories – no wonder she felt fragmented.

Table 1

Categories, Purposes, and Demands of Doctoral Coursework

Categories of Courses	Purpose of Course	Academic Emphasis	Academic Language	Writing Types
Foundations	Develop deep historic and broad conceptual understanding of the field	Major theorists and the evolution of theory; philosophic terms	"Capital T" and "lower case t" theories	Scholarly paper applying theory to an area of interest in the field
Research	Establish foundational knowledge of types of research and their specific methodologies	Research paradigms (belief systems), methods, and reporting	"Capital T" Theory, Paradigm, Epistemology, Ontology, Axiology, Methodology, Methods	Research proposal, IRB, research report of results, literature review
Discipline-specific theory	Develop deep historic and broad conceptual understanding of the discipline	Major theorists in discipline; historical evolution of discipline-specific theory	"lower case t" theory about aspects of the discipline	Scholarly paper applying theory to area of interest in discipline; literature review in discipline
Discipline-specific pedagogy	Understand best practices for practitioners in discipline	Discipline-specific scope and sequence; identifying and clarifying misconceptions	Discipline-specific terms and "lower case t" theories	Book reviews; articles for practitioners; essays
Co-teaching as an assistant	Prepare student to manage an academic teaching load	Convey best practices in discipline to practitioners or aspiring practitioners	Scholarly language simplified for less experienced practitioners	Lesson plans, assessments, hand-outs

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Cognitive barrier 2: Procedural theoretical knowledge. Prior to doctoral experiences students may have declarative knowledge of theory. *Declarative knowledge* is mastery of *information about* a topic (e.g., that John Dewey is the father of progressive educational thought). In contrast, *procedural knowledge* is mastery of *how to do* something, i.e., to use theory to make decisions, analyze information, synthesize new information, form arguments, and construct understanding (Hillocks, 2007). Theoretical thought becomes the framework for academic action. We must use theory as we think, listen, view, discuss, read, write, and represent. The distinction between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge is crucially important. Knowing the names or tenets of a particular theory does not mean doctoral students can use theory to construct knowledge.

Author One shared:

During a pluralism class I was introduced to various sociocultural theorists and their individual contributions to multicultural education. The final project required me to write a paper using a theoretical framework to make an educational decision. I didn't know where to begin. The professor made it clear that this paper could not simply summarize knowledge about what he had taught us. He wanted to read a description of theory in action in my classroom. As I struggled through the process of writing the paper, I pushed back on a common use of multicultural literature and wrote a paper about how teachers could use various kinds of literature to enhance pluralistic thinking in young listeners. Writing this paper really
*helped me **use** my new knowledge of theory to enhance my own teaching practice.*

Making the transition from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge frustrated Author Three for most of the first semester:

*I took a seminar on reading theories during my first semester. At the first session, I realized that all the other students in the seminar were reading majors. I had never taken a reading course and knew only what I'd gleaned through observing elementary teachers, attending professional development seminars, and reading about reading. About halfway through the semester, my frustration bubbled over and I asked the professor how reading theories could all sound reasonable but often be contradictory. He explained that the theories **were** all reasonable and backed by research studies (or they wouldn't be theories), but that I should look for theories that resonated with what I believed about how students learned. Those would be the theories that would form the basis of my research paper for the class. Since at the same time I was struggling with theories in research (am I a constructivist, a positivist, etc.), his answer actually made my life easier. I didn't have to reject reading theories as much as understand how my own beliefs influenced what I valued in research findings. The same held true for research theories. It wasn't a dismissal of all belief systems but rather a choice about what I thought was the best way to answer the questions I regularly asked. For me, this was a turning point.*

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Suggestions for increasing procedural knowledge of theory. Understanding the difference between declarative and procedural knowledge is a significant step towards increasing your procedural knowledge of theory. In your pursuit of procedural knowledge, you will need to read and listen to theoretical writings and lectures differently from when you were constructing declarative knowledge. Paying close attention to minor distinctions in definitions can help you distinguish between various theories. Knowing what field of study or discipline each theorist is writing from can help you understand how the theory has been used historically. In addition to understanding the roots and history of a theory, read current studies that use the theoretical framework to help you see how the theory has evolved and how it is currently being used. As you read and listen, question how this theory could be used in your own personal inquiry. How would writing about your research from the lens of a particular theory change what you would notice? Journaling and talking about theoretical ideas can also enhance your procedural knowledge.

Cognitive barrier 3: Cognitive dissonance. Because doctoral students tend to be highly skilled students and successful professionals, as mentioned in the authors' introductory vignettes, they often bring rich experiences and strong beliefs into their programs. As they construct new knowledge and explore various perspectives, they may experience the unfamiliar discomfort of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1956). Cognitive dissonance is the mental conflict that people experience when they are presented with evidence that their beliefs or assumptions are wrong. Because the experience of dissonance is unpleasant,

the person will strive to reduce it—usually by struggling to find a way to change one or both cognitions to make them more consonant with one another (Aronson, 1997).

Author One first experienced cognitive dissonance in reading, where she felt confident as a practitioner:

I went into the doctoral program with appreciation for whole class readings of classic children's novels. I experienced cognitive dissonance as I continued to read current research about the importance of students having individual choice in school reading and the disengagement that occurs when the whole class reads the same book. I struggled to imagine adding modern texts that I did not personally value to my classroom library. I didn't like the idea of young readers reading "drivel." I wrestled with the unpleasant disconnect between current research and my own personal beliefs. In the end, I realized that my overarching objective was for students to enjoy literature. Students' reading experiences became more important to me than the classic stories I enjoy.

Author Three's first experience of cognitive dissonance happened in a research methods class that first semester:

All my educational experiences had privileged quantitative data over "anecdotes." But in that first research methods class, I began to understand that such studies answer only certain types of questions. The kinds of questions I generally had about education didn't seem easy to answer with numbers. Yet, it was hard to give up my belief in one discoverable truth. Then, when I was conducting a basic qualitative study, the first participant

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told me something so stunningly different from what I expected that it turned my understanding about teaching upside down! I was excited about what I had learned – and then chagrined that I had thought teaching could be best understood through Likert-style surveys. Qualitative research told the stories behind the numbers. I still struggle to find the balance between large-scale studies that show trends and small-scale studies that reveal the meaning of individual differences.

Professors expect that you will meet cognitive dissonance in your coursework and research as you continue to grow and learn as a doctoral student. Author Two explained:

The doctoral experience is like no other experience. You are moving from being knowledgeable in your field to becoming an expert. You are given the time to learn in depth, explore your thoughts and ideas, test conjectures, and make decisions as to how this knowledge all fits together. One thing I learned when I was doctoral student is: the more you learn about anything, the more you learn you still need to know more about the topic. Learning seems to be a never-ending process or journey. It is okay to be working through cognitive dissonance because it demonstrates you are intellectually challenging yourself and growing.

Suggestions for benefiting from cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance, like any tool or process, can benefit or hinder you. The brain has patterned ways of responding to this dissonance. For example, you can struggle through cognitive dissonance to align your

thoughts, values, and behaviors, or you can resist dissonance. Being aware of patterned responses can help you struggle through the dissonance and maximize growth. Common patterns of response include the following:

- **Avoidance** – people avoid information that is likely to lead to dissonance.
- **Distortion** – people delete and distort facts and beliefs to reduce dissonance.
- **Confirmation** – people are attracted to or perform selective bias on information that confirms or bolsters their cognitions.
- **Reassurance** – people look for reassurance from others that their cognitions are correct and okay.
- **Re-valuation** – people change the importance of existing and new cognitions to reduce dissonance (Soosalu, 2011).

The more effort and time invested in a decision or the forming of a belief, the larger the potential dissonance created if mismatching evidence is discovered. Our minds do not like negative change; we do not like things that do not match. When you find yourself avoiding, distorting, seeking confirmation or reassurance, or re-valuing information, realize that you may be fighting cognitive dissonance. It is then time to use valid and knowledgeable facts to adjust beliefs and behaviors. Re-valuation leads to the most growth.

Cognitive barrier 4: Lack of academic writing experience. Many graduate students enter their programs with basic writing capabilities and the ability to comprehend and summarize journal articles (Buck & Hatter, 2005; Granello, 2001; Harris, 2006). Generally, these students can relate the literature to their own

experiential knowledge and offer opinions. Some students lack strong writing skills and struggle to make their thinking clear. Regardless of students' writing proficiency, doctoral work requires students to write at a higher level than previously experienced.

Undergraduate and master's level writing skills do not always transfer to polished scholarly writing quality. Prior to doctoral programs, students are expected to master writing "good term papers" that demonstrate comprehension and the ability to articulate opinions. However, a significant difference exists between scholarly writing and term paper writing. In addition to the dissertation, you will be expected to be proficient in writing literature reviews, critiques, research/grant proposals and reports, and peer-reviewed journal articles (see *Table 1, Categories, Purposes and Demands of Doctoral Coursework*). Each genre of scholarly writing requires high levels of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

The cognitive complexity of academic writing may create stress for students. Additionally, as students struggle to articulate the depth and breadth of their understanding, they frequently become immersed in jargon, fragmented ideas, unsupported opinions, and disorganization 'fog' (Buck & Hatter, 2005; Granello, 2001; Harris, 2006). Fearful that they will leave an important point out, they spill every thought on the page.

Author One struggled to make the adjustment to writing at a scholarly level, and harsh critique early in her program made it harder for her to build confidence:

Although one goal for pursuing a doctorate was to become a more skilled academic writer, I wanted to learn first, write second. I used summary writing as a way of processing information, but evaluative critical writing did not come naturally for me. Early in the program I received feedback about my "lack of graduate-level thinking" as demonstrated by my writing. This feedback negatively colored my writer self-efficacy and greatly reduced how much risk I was willing to take in my writing.

Author Two articulates the other side of the writing issue from the vantage point of the professor.

Every course throughout the doctoral program uses writing as a means to understanding what knowledge the student has obtained. I assume a higher level of quality writing in order to help set students up to be successful for their written comprehensive exams and dissertation. I spend hours reading student work and making specific and lengthy comments on papers to guide students in their individual writing as well as their thinking about content. This feedback is meant to assist the future writing and thinking of the student.

Suggestions for overcoming the lack of academic writing experience. Writing experience improves writing skills, so adopt a goal to embrace every writing assignment as a learning opportunity. In our university, students were expected to write publishable papers by the end of each course, which was excellent practice and resulted in publications for many students, including Author Three.

Read, read, read the genres you are trying to write. If you are asked to write a literature review, read literature reviews and find one to use as a mentor text for writing yours. Also, talk out your ideas before you begin to write.

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Although doctoral students can construct understanding through internal critical reflection, dialogue within a collaborative community of learners is a more meaningful process for generating ideas (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Talking about ideas refines your thinking and pre-organizes the material.

Although difficult, separate *who you are* from *what you write*. You are a competent, growing professional. When someone critiques your writing, they are providing feedback about how you *communicated* your ideas. Even when professors phrase their feedback poorly and unhelpfully, as in the case of Author One's professor, they are responding to what you wrote, not to you as an individual. Remember that they may not have communicated their expectations well either.

The best strategy you can develop is to participate in a writing support group (Maher, Seaton, McMullen, Fitzgerald, Otsuji, & Lee, 2008). Even if it is scary, find a few peers who would be willing to meet regularly to discuss ideas, exchange drafts, and review professors' critiques. Ideally, the group lasts throughout the doctoral program, but even if it changes every semester, having such a group is invaluable. Author Three explained:

> *I had extensive writing experience before entering the doctoral program and knew the value of writing partners. Weekly I met with a small support group outside of the university who helped me clarify my thinking so that by the time I was ready to write, I also had a good idea of what I wanted to say. But many of my peers struggled with writing. Often, because they thought of writing as a solitary pursuit, they wouldn't let others read their papers. In one class, the professor was so critical of our writing and so unclear about her expectations that all of us decided to critique one another before we submitted our papers to the professor. That was a breakthrough because we all learned that someone else's eyes could catch foggy thinking or unclear passages or even grammar errors. I was involved in several small doctoral writing support groups after that class and believe it strengthened my own skills as well as benefited others.*

Cognitive barrier 5: Focus on products rather than process. One cognitive barrier to successful doctoral experiences is losing focus that the educational journey is a process of metacognition that builds a broader understanding of a discipline. Artifacts, or *products*, are public and visible; the *process* of scholarly growth is internal and invisible. Artifacts created in the doctoral program – papers, research reports, journal articles, and even dissertations – require so much time, effort, and focus that students can begin to think of these products as the goal, rather than as demonstrations of growth. Students place so much energy into the dissertation product, in particular, that it eclipses the more important process of transitioning from student to scholar.

The process of transitioning to academic scholarship happens as students gather data that contradict long-held assumptions, participate in academic conversations, and push their thinking to apply new information to familiar ideas. Attending to the process requires that students slow down on the journey, take time for metacognition, and emphasize learning over earning a 4.0 grade point average.

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Author One struggled with the product versus process in courses outside her discipline:

> *Although my degree was in reading, I took several courses from the English department to strengthen my knowledge of literary theory. I needed the literary theory knowledge to enhance my understanding of children's literature. Because the courses were in the English department, all the course readings, lectures, and practice assignments pertained to mainstream literature rather than children's literature. I wanted to just focus on writing five good papers to please an English professor. However, my advisor pushed me to take a chance. He counseled that it would be better to use the time to apply literary theory to children's literature even if it meant receiving a lower grade on the papers. My papers didn't please the professor as much as they would have if I'd written about a piece of adult literature, but I'm thankful my advisor kept the learning process in mind. He knew it was more important for me to practice being the scholar I wanted to be than write particular papers.*

This is one arena where a doctoral advisor can be helpful. Having someone outside ourselves reminds us of how we have grown and to value the learning process keeps us from losing sight of the goal. Author Three experienced this:

> *I entered the doctoral program in a hurry to be done. Partly, my hurry was driven by the leave of absence I had arranged; I felt I needed the security of a job when I finished the program. I also (mistakenly) considered it a badge of pride to finish quickly.*

> *My advisor regularly reminded me that I needed to take time to "sit with" new knowledge. I didn't really understand until I had finished my dissertation defense. Three months later, on reflecting about the dissertation findings, I realized I was finally taking time to process all I had learned. That processing time changed my understanding of the dissertation results and interpretation. Now I wish I had drawn out my doctoral experiences a little longer. I wish I had taken fewer classes and spent longer hours contemplating new understandings. I was mistaken to believe I needed to return to my previous job; I would not have been happy. My frantic pace delayed some processing I needed to do as a student until after I had finished my student life.*

Suggestions for overcoming the barrier of product versus process. It is easy to let the pressures of writing papers, reading, completing projects, and conducting research drive your focuses. Shifting to metacognition about your growth, rather than the products you are creating, requires conscious effort. Decide that how much you learn is more important than the grade you earn in any class. Doctoral students often aim for straight A's, sometimes to the detriment of their personal lives or even learning. But sometimes you may need, for a multitude of reasons, to be content with a B. Author One chose to take academic risks with her papers because the process of applying knowledge to her area of learning was more important than the graded product. Grades do not always represent students' learning.

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Set aside time for metacognition. For example, you could write growth goals at the beginning of each semester and then set aside time to evaluate how you have done after the semester is over. Or, discuss with your advisor how you are progressing. Author Two keeps the big picture of thinking at her forefront:

> *I purposefully arrange time to think about a topic and actually write it into my weekly schedule. This thinking time allows me to stop and ponder what I know about a topic, what I would like to learn more about, and how it connects to the knowledge I already know. Sometimes I ponder these knowledge ideas when I am out on a run and other times I reflect about what I know through writing and other times I have conversations with colleagues (especially those who think differently about it than I do). This allows me to connect and absorb what I want to remember.*

Affective Barriers to Success

Entering a doctoral program is equivalent to moving into a new neighborhood – you have to navigate unfamiliar turf. Your doctoral advisor will provide support by providing some socialization to the community, but feeling at home will take a while. Most doctoral students battle a sense of isolation and loss of identity. While you may not escape the affective barriers completely, you can take steps to minimize their impacts.

Affective barrier 1: Isolation. Family members and friends are often impressed when you tell them you are pursuing a doctorate, so you hardly want to confess that you feel alone in the program. Yet, until you get familiar with the people and procedures of the doctoral program, loneliness and isolation dog your footsteps.

Living a distance from campus or being from a minority group may prolong isolation as well. Both Author Three and Author One lived far enough from the campus that they arranged their schedules to minimize their trips to campus. As a result, they struggled to connect with other doctoral students and faculty.

Author Three has a vivid memory of her first sense of connection on campus:

> *Even though I took five classes that first semester, the roster in each class was different so I didn't see anyone more than once a week. Additionally, I scheduled my classes in a clump so that I made the 1.5 hour commute only once a week. One day as I walked into the student union for another solitary lunch, a student in one of my classes recognized me and said hello. We were simply passing by one another, but I remember the pleasure of having someone acknowledge me. Months later, he told me that same incident was his first connection outside of class too! We were never again in a class together and I don't even remember his name, but that moment of greeting one another gave me hope I'd eventually feel at home.*

Suggestions for Overcoming Isolation. Take steps to reduce the isolation. Hang on to the people from your past work experiences who knew you as a competent professional. Social interactions with them will ground you as you make the transition to student. Rather than rush to and from campus, schedule time to hang out. Ask your advisor about spaces on campus where you can study and meet with others. Invite conversations before and after class with students in your program. These peers may be willing to form a study or writing group. You can invite others to join you for

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lunch or coffee to help initiate these connections.

Affective barrier 2: Loss of identity. You were accepted into the doctoral program because the department saw you as a competent professional, just as the authors described themselves in the introductory vignettes. Somehow, though, early in the doctoral program, you may lose confidence in your capabilities. Everyone around you will sound so learned and confident. They will talk about theorists as though they lunched together yesterday. And you may struggle to spell the theorists' names, let alone remember what they had to say. As mentioned earlier, you may experience cognitive dissonance and ask whether you were really as competent a practitioner as you had thought. At this point, things may spiral downhill. Before you hit bottom, recognize that you are transitioning from practitioner to a scholar; you are in a different world. Doctoral students around you who appear confident are speaking from their realms of knowledge based on their past experiences. Inwardly, they are probably also wondering, just like you, if they are the only incompetent ones in the room.

This was the biggest surprise of debriefing the doctoral experience. Both Author One and Author Three thought the other was confident and knowledgeable, and both worried their own incompetence was evident. We internally compared ourselves to everyone else in the room and always came up short.

On your darkest days, console yourself that your mistakes probably will not be as humiliating as one Author Three made in that seminar where everyone else had a reading background:

One early assignment was to present an oral report on a major reading theorist based on a chapter in our text and doing research on the theorist's background. Since I always felt incompetent during class discussions, when everyone else seemed so knowledgeable, I was actually relieved to have a presentation where preparation would make me the expert. I researched diligently and then, just before class, found a recently-published obituary with the theorist's name on it. I wove the obituary information throughout my presentation and did I feel accomplished – until the professor pointed out that the obituary had been written by my theorist about another reading expert with the same first name! All the other students avoided my eyes; I'd just proven my unfitness for a doctoral class. It was weeks before I had courage to speak up again.

Author Two was always conscious of the knowledge, skills, and experiences we students brought with us, so she was unaware of our internal struggles.

Doctoral students come into our program with rich experiences and knowledge. I believed these backgrounds created confidence in students that would carry over into the doctoral program; furthermore, this intelligence should make them feel confident and capable within their courses. I had no idea until we did this research that these students felt incompetence because I never viewed them this way. Wow, what a surprise to me!

Suggestions for Overcoming Loss of Identity. Re-connecting with past co-workers can sometimes soothe you when you feel particularly uncertain. Be aware, though, that your relationships

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with them may change and cause some identity insecurity. Author One experienced this:

> *Having worked with many of the same co-workers for over a decade, I had multiple friendly relationships. We maintained contact as I progressed through the doctoral program and met often to catch-up. As time progressed we had less and less to talk about. I tried to share the exciting things I was learning, but my teacher friends took little interest. This frustrated me because it felt so relevant and I didn't understand why they wouldn't want to take the information I was sharing back to their daily practice. As they shared the stories of their daily teaching lives, I listened passively and became socially bored. I didn't make it a priority to meet with them and the relationships grew apart. Losing these friends was a difficult part of my changing identity. I didn't have new friends and I was losing the old.*

Candid conversations with peers in the doctoral program can also be a way to process and develop your changing identity. In fact, having an occasional lunch or social event with doctoral peers, even those in different programs from yours, can rebuild your confidence. The conversation will undoubtedly reveal areas where someone else feels unprepared or frustrated, and you will recognize a kindred soul. Journaling may also help; make a list of the things you have done well in your career and keep it handy for the times you feel most defeated. Eventually, you will be the one who builds up others because you finally have a full bucket of confidence in yourself as a scholar. But it takes time.

Conclusion

You should be commended on the embarking of a new journey into the field of academia where you will have the opportunity to gain wisdom as well as discover yourself as a learner, researcher, thinker, and knowledge creator. We have presented five barriers to the doctoral process: fragmented learning experiences, limited procedural theoretical knowledge, cognitive dissonance, lack of academic writing experience, and focusing on the dissertation as a product rather than on the process of learning how to be a researcher/scholar. We then gave specific examples to overcome each of these barriers for a successful experience as a doctoral student. We also discussed two affective barriers: isolation and loss of identity as being competent as well as suggestions for overcoming them.

The doctoral journey is fraught with challenges, but very rewarding when you persevere. Good luck as you navigate the trail.

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