

The Invisible Student: Benefits and Challenges of Part-time Doctoral Studies

Peter J. Bates¹, Lori Goff²

University of Windsor¹, Brock University²

This autoethnographic study explores the experiences of two part-time doctoral students as we document our journey of balancing our multiple competing roles. As we reflected and consulted the literature, we began to identify many benefits and challenges that part-time candidature brings to students, universities and employers. Through our autoethnographic analysis, considered in the context of research, we hope to shed light on the part-time doctoral student experience and raise awareness of the benefits that part-time students can bring to universities and to society.

Cette étude auto-ethnographique explore les expériences de deux étudiants au doctorat à temps partiel qui documentent leur parcours alors qu'ils tentent d'équilibrer leurs divers rôles concurrents. Au cours de réflexions personnelles et de consultation de la littérature, nous avons commencé à identifier plusieurs avantages et défis que présentent aux étudiants, aux universités et aux employeurs les études doctorales à temps partiel. Nous espérons que cette analyse auto-ethnographique, considérée dans le contexte de la recherche, mettra en lumière l'expérience d'étudiants au doctorat à temps partiel, et fera mieux connaître les avantages qu'apportent aux universités et à la société les étudiants à temps partiel.

The federal government has been calling upon Canadian universities to increase the admission of master's and doctoral students (Industry Canada, 2001). Master's degree enrolments have grown by 51% in Ontario (38% nationally) and doctoral degree enrolments have grown by 67% in Ontario (61% nationally) since 1999/2000, according to a recent analysis by Wiggers et al (2011). Since the turn of the century, the number of part-time doctoral students has almost doubled, such that today, there are over 1200 doctoral students who are studying on a part-time basis within Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2010). Further, there are increasing demands and calls for a reform and revolution of Ontario's post-secondary education system (Deane, 2011; Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities [MTCU] 2012; Zundel & Deane, 2010). With the rise in the number of part-time doctoral students and increased focus on the student experience, it is prudent to investigate the benefits and challenges encountered by part-time doctoral students, by their universities, and by their employers.

What does part-time status entail? Of the literature that describes part-time graduate studies, there appears to be little consensus and much ambiguity on what exactly constitutes part-time from those that do attempt to define it. Some of the literature suggests that part-time status is considered half-time in comparison to a full-time course of study (e.g., Rodwell & Neumann, 2008). Others define part-time students by how many hours they are employed full-time (e.g., Barnacle & Usher, 2003; Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010) or by how many courses they can undertake at any given time (Western University, 2011). Still others indicate the value of a

part-time student is 30% that of a full-time student (e.g., MTCU, 2009). In many reports, numbers of graduate students are reported in full-time equivalent (FTE) or effective full-time student units (EFTSU), thus aggregating all graduate students into a homogeneous group for the purposes of reporting (Barnacle & Usher, 2003; Rodwell & Neumann, 2008) and not recognizing the unique issues, benefits, and challenges that may delineate part-time and full-time students. Such reports and studies make it difficult to appreciate the abundance of part-time doctoral students, where in some education and political sciences programs over 60% of doctoral students are enrolled on a part-time basis (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Because part-time students are often not as present on campus and because part-time graduate students numbers get lost in FTE- or EFTSU-aggregated data, part-time graduate students have been called 'the forgotten cohort' (Barnacle & Usher, 2003) and 'invisible research students' (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009).

Brock University, Lakehead University, and the University of Windsor offer a Joint PhD in Educational Studies that accepts students on a full- and part-time basis. It is a unique program that combines three distinct university cultures, offers three fields of study, and provides a blended learning environment that incorporates face-to-face and online education with part-time students in mind. We, the authors of this paper, were accepted into and enrolled part-time in this program and in July of 2010 began our first course as a cohort with twenty other students from the three institutions.

While this program caters to part-time students, only five students (less than 25% of those enrolled) were accepted as part-time students. During our first course, after being told how beneficial for our professional development it was to demonstrate the ability to obtain government funding, we found out that part-time students in our program were not eligible for such grants. We also learned that the part-time students were expected to complete their coursework at an equivalent rate, or close to, as the full-time students. These realizations initially sparked feelings of marginalization that led us, as part-time students, to lament outside of class.

Subsequent to discussions regarding the importance of securing provincial and national grants, we conducted multiple searches that resulted in finding that part-time students are not eligible for such grants. It was our discouragement and feelings of being excluded that led to initial discussions amongst ourselves and ultimately to the rationale for this project. We hoped to learn more about the part-time doctoral student experience and decided to consult the literature on the topic. Finding remarkably little, and wanting to add to the body of knowledge that exists on the experiences of Canadian part-time doctoral students, we committed to documenting and reflecting upon our journey as we began and pursued our studies.

What follows in this autoethnographic study is a first-hand account of our part-time graduate student experiences. We offer a reflection of our experiences as we navigated the challenges and benefits that we faced throughout the first year of our part-time PhD programs in education at two Ontario universities. This study may be of interest to future graduate students as they consider the option of part-time studies, and it may assist those who design and fund part-time graduate programs.

Methods

Autoethnography is a research methodology whereby, according to Starr (2010), the individual engages in a cycle of reflection, enlightenment, and action in a critical process of self-analysis. An increased consciousness is made possible through the investigation of one's identity in

autoethnography. Chang (2008) suggests that autoethnography is intended to go beyond the notion of autobiography, and unpacks the term autoethnography: *auto* (self), *ethno* (culture) and *graphy* (research process). As a research design, we can learn much about society and culture through exploring the self, since self is socially constructed and irrevocably linked to culture. With hopes that our constructed autoethnographies would spark a transformative experience for ourselves as researchers and others as readers as suggested by Chang (2008), we decided to each keep an open, unconstrained, narrative journal throughout the first year of our doctoral program. We aimed to describe our feelings, thoughts, and experiences as we engaged in various forms of doctoral coursework including face-to-face classroom education, online education, and independent study. As is typical in autoethnography (Chang, 2008), these personal experiences and reflections served as our primary data. We did not limit our narrative writings to reflect only upon the experiences we were having through the PhD program. Rather, we purposefully examined the broader cultural experience of the return to academic life.

An initial strategy for analyzing and interpreting data was to identify recurring topics by holistically reviewing the data (Chang, 2008; Charmaz, 2006), comparing our two individual cases to one another and searching the literature. Zooming in on our individual cases, out to the literature, and then back in to our cases in cyclical fashion allowed us contextualize broadly and compare our experiences with social constructs. As espoused by Chang (2008), we tried to stay close to data for the purpose of analysis, then moved towards finding cultural meanings beyond the data as a way of interpretation. It was through this process that cultural themes were identified.

More specifically, we used the memoing process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to generate more ideas to share with one another and to check for commonalities. We simultaneously conducted literature searches and shared with each other annotated bibliographical citations of relevant literature as we continued to document, reflect, and memo our own personal responses and reflections in an effort to increase credibility and trustworthiness of our data.

To initiate the coding of our data, we first used a colour coding method to label and code the data from our journals. We grouped codes into categorical themes and collected examples from our narrative reflections that described a particular code or theme effectively. We then organized categories to depict the recurring topics (e.g., benefits, challenges) and cultural themes. This helped us to identify some differences in our experiences, but for the most part, we found that we largely agreed with one another.

After extensive conversations and debate on how to report our findings, we decided that instead of including direct quotations from the data as separate entities, narratives woven into the text better represented our experiences.

The Players

My name is Peter and I am a serial student. Having spent approximately eleven years in university in the late 1980s and 1990s, I began teaching art at the secondary level. Eight years on, I was looking for a challenge, and perhaps a career change; not my first. Among my four degrees there is the notable absence of a PhD. I began examining my options, and with a home, career and family, I was unable to commit to a full-time program. I was thrilled to be accepted into the joint PhD program, and added student to my many roles: husband, full-time teacher, part-time university instructor, and active union member. Since returning to academia, I have managed to increase my workload considerably; not only am I busy with the PhD now, but I

have also started teaching in an MEd program on-line, I am currently co-authoring a teacher resource book to accompany a new Visual Arts textbook, I joined a provincial union Education Services committee, and I accepted a department headship at another high school. Finding synergies is now a survival tactic.

My name is Lori, and like Peter, I see myself as a lifelong learner. I completed my first two degrees in science before entering academia as an instructional support staff and becoming involved in educating undergraduates in biology and life sciences. While working full-time, I decided to take a few courses that would help me to understand best practices in curriculum design in higher education. One course led to another and before too long I had completed a certificate in teaching and training adults and a master's degree in education. Not wanting to end this new part-time hobby, I decided to apply for doctoral studies, but I would only consider part-time studies. I have been engaged in part-time study for seven out of the past eight years, and I cannot imagine a life without some form of continuing education. The challenge is in coming up with strategies to balance all the responsibilities and obligations that come from having several roles and in making sure that my role as a mother stays at the top of my priority list.

Results

Benefits to Students

Through analysis of our autoethnographic narratives, we were able to identify concepts that struck us as important benefits to students who study on a part-time basis. This was very interesting to us, since we began the journaling activity ignorant of the benefits afforded to part-time students. However, in analyzing our reflections, the notion of scaffolding tasks and aligning work and study responsibilities was mentioned by both of us on multiple occasions. Perhaps out of necessity, we have both increasingly been aligning our research interests with our current careers. Lori appreciates how she can integrate studies and work so that her research and her work each inform each other. As she began her PhD studies in 2010, she accepted a new job that was better aligned with her research interests and doctoral thesis ideas. Now, working in a centre at her university to support teaching and learning, she is actively involved in initiatives that support both her employment and research. Because attending teaching and learning conferences is expected of her as part of her job, she is able to stay informed of current research and ideas that also benefit her doctoral studies. This also gives her the opportunity to present her research at conferences without all of the costs of conference registrations, membership fees, and travel expenses.

We both see this ability to scaffold and align doctoral research and employment practice as a major benefit to us as part-time students. As a secondary school art teacher, Peter's research focuses on the implementation of the new (2010) Ontario Visual Art curriculum. While a full-time teaching job provides a stable income, it also facilitates the negotiation of access to research data in his school and board. For example, a grounded theory pilot study entailed a survey of other art teachers regarding the new art curriculum. Autoethnographic action research will form the next phase of the study as he examines what changes are made in his own teaching practice. For both of us, the synergies found in working and in studying allow for refining and scaffolding work and for aligning smaller research projects with the bigger picture; the dissertation.

Another theme that emerged involved the importance of flexibility. We both noted that opting for a part-time PhD program allows for greater flexibility in terms of when and where reading and research takes place. Neither of us lives in the same city as the university in which we are enrolled. Fortunately, we reside very close to and work at other universities that serve as surrogate institutions where we can access libraries, journals and other resources. The flexibility of studying in an on-line environment makes it possible for each of us to manage full-time work, part-time studies, and sessional teaching at the university level to help finance PhD studies. In fact, when applying to PhD programs, Peter only considered programs with a part-time option, ignoring other PhD opportunities closer to home. In an era of declining enrolment at the secondary school level (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011), and an uncertain future as a tenure-track professor, he is not willing to give up his teaching career in order to study full-time. Lori too appreciates that most courses are online and can be completed at most convenient time of day or night. Upon reflection, it is clear that the flexibility afforded by part-time, largely on-line studies was a primary consideration when applying to programs and has been an added benefit throughout the first year of our studies within the program. While flexibility can be advantageous, well-developed skills in time management can help prevent the flexibility from becoming a detrimental factor that allows for procrastination.

Out of necessity, both of us have become experts in time management. In fact, we have both picked up additional roles and responsibilities since beginning our PhD studies. Lori finds that she wastes less time as she learns to balance an increasing number of roles now that life is so busy with her full-time job, her part-time sessional teaching position, her part-time doctoral studies, and her family responsibilities. Yet even though she is busier with all these multiple roles, she has picked up more personal activities like joining a soccer league and a book club that she never seemed to have time for before. Peter too seems to manage an increasing number of opportunities on top of school and work, including co-authoring a teacher resource book, teaching part-time through another university, joining a provincial union committee, and finding time to make art. As we take on more roles, we are learning to find ways to ensure as much overlap between roles as possible and to maintain some sense of balance in our lives by prioritizing personal time with family and friends. Losing a day planner at this point in time would be catastrophic.

The important benefits that we have recognized to us as part-time doctoral students include the ability to scaffold and align our work and study responsibilities in an environment that allows us the flexibility and autonomy to choose where and when we work. We see this as a great benefit to develop and hone our time-management skills. But the benefits of part-time candidature do not impact only the students. They extend to and impact the universities at which we are studying and our places of employment.

Benefits to Universities and Employers

It seems to us that there are possible benefits that we, as part-time students and full-time employees, bring to our universities and to our employers. One theme that surfaced in our narrative reflections involved the variety and diversity that we bring in terms of our backgrounds, knowledge, and experience. As we simultaneously work full-time and study part-time, we can use our careers to inform our research and our research to inform our on-the-job practice. Lori noted that part-time students benefit the university by bringing a wide variety of experiences and backgrounds with them. Between the two of us, we bring knowledge of and

experience in several fields: business, art, education, and science. Peter's background in business and art and eight years of teaching experience inform his studies and research. Likewise, Lori's B.Sc. and M.Sc. combined with seven years of undergraduate instructional support experience in biology has given her a scientific research perspective that has been challenged by her more recent studies in the field of education at both the masters and now doctoral levels. We are but two part-time students, but already the diversity in our backgrounds, education, and experience is vast.

The cross-pollination that occurs as we balance and manage both working and studying may also be an advantage for our employers. As Peter learned more about policy implementation issues in his research, he began to look more critically at his own teaching practice. This has led to a greater interest and participation in professional development activities. Additionally, in recent job interviews at other schools for department head positions, he was able to draw upon his literature review of leadership styles to impress upon principals the value of understanding transformational leadership approaches. With the knowledge and experience that we are gaining in our doctoral program, we decided to prepare and facilitate a conference workshop on educational research designs (Bates & Goff, 2010) for faculty members who were being encouraged to engage in researching their teaching without having experience in conducting research outside of their own disciplines. Since McMaster University does not have a faculty of education, this workshop was able to fill a gap that existed in providing support and resources on research designs and methodologies often used in educational research. Studying in an area related to our work requires us to stay informed and current with the field. This has immediate benefits for our employers. As part-time students who work full-time, we are able to immediately integrate new ideas, concepts, knowledge, and current research into the workplace.

These benefits to our institutions and places of employment complement the benefits we identified for part-time students in aligning and scaffolding responsibilities, maintaining flexibility and autonomy in study options, and improving time-management skills. But we cannot ignore the challenges or drawbacks that exist for students, the institutions, and employers when students opt to manage a full-time career while pursuing an academic life on a part-time basis.

Challenges for Students

While there are benefits, it can at times be quite challenging as well. Through our autoethnographies, we identified several challenges that we face as students. One of the challenges that we had each recorded involved the limited choice in programs. Finding institutions that offered part-time doctoral programs in education in our province was a challenge. Once the choice is made to study as a part-time student, there are few options available. Of those that were identified, none were close to home. If this program did not exist through the joint venture of Brock University, University of Windsor, and Lakehead University, Peter would likely have chosen an off-shore school with higher tuition and of questionable reputation. Fortunately, we were both successful in our applications, and we were each able to find a supervisor with a keen interest in our research topics.

After learning about how beneficial it is to have grant funding during our first course, we had both commented in our journals about our challenges with finding funding opportunities. Our stories are similar in many respects; what funding? Our search for additional funding for part-time students in Ontario yielded few options. Through our searches we have been able to

identify some limited funding to support travel and conference attendance from various societies and from our employers. Fortunately for Lori, her employment status in a university helps in that her tuition costs are reimbursed. Peter also looked into a variety of funding sources, but was not surprised to find that, due to his part-time status, he was ineligible for tuition funding from granting agencies like the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC, 2011), or from his home university, union, or employer. For both of us, full-time candidature in the doctoral program was not considered a viable option; the drop in income would have required drastic changes to family life and commitments, perhaps re-mortgaging or selling our homes. We were aware of this lack of financial support for part-time students when considered our return to academia. What we had not considered prior to entry into the program was what impact this lack of opportunity might have for us in the future. We lamented in our journals that a lack of successful grant applications would leave a glaring hole on the curriculum vitae and might carry implications when applying for academic positions and subsequent promotion in the future.

While the number of program options and funding opportunities were initial challenges, more difficult challenges began to surface as we progressed through the first year of our program. Time is one of the most difficult challenges for each of us; a notion that came up repeatedly in our narrative reflections and in our literature reviews. Lori feels continually challenged by the constant juggling of responsibilities that is required with respect to her family, work, student and personal roles. With a four-year old son at home, she recognizes the need for balance to ensure that her family's needs are met without sacrificing quality in the work she does for work and for school. She works hard to protect her evenings for her family and does not often let work or study responsibilities encroach on this important time. This requires her to find enough energy after 8 pm each night to tackle items on her to-do list. It is a strategy that has been working for her for the most part, but it continues to be a challenge to set and respect these limits when there are abundant demands on her time. Peter has many similar challenges, and now wonders if personal and family roles have been sacrificed to some degree as he has taken on more work commitments than are reasonable for one person. He also finds that a full-time job makes participation in university life difficult as many meetings, conferences, committees and presentations take place during the work week. There are times when Peter does not even reveal how much he has on the go for fear of someone questioning whether or not it is possible for him to do it all well. Yet, we are resolved to manage these many roles, to juggle everything, and to meet or exceed expectations for each role and responsibility we chose to undertake.

There is some research that has investigated the number of roles one person can manage successfully at any one time. For example, Potts (1992) found that students who enrolled in full-time graduate social work studies and worked full-time had lower psychological adjustment scores. The scarcity hypothesis (Goode, 1960) suggests that maintaining multiple roles can be associated with higher stress and role strain, while the expansion hypothesis (Sieber, 1974) suggests that multiple role enactment can increase the supply of resources and comes with rewards, relationships and less stress. Is there a limit? Potts (1992) suggests that a maximum of five roles is ideal: any more than that can result in a return to the scarcity hypothesis and potentially result in increased psychological stress and maladjustment. Many part-time students have a range of other roles or commitments. They may have homes, jobs and families competing for their time and resources. They may have careers, or work as research assistants, lecturers, project officers, or work in a variety of professions at a range of levels including senior

management (Pearson, Evans & Macauley, 2004). It can be a struggle or a balancing act, particularly when life gets in the way (Deem & Brehony, 2000). Potts (1992) identified lower psychology adjustment scores in single male part-time students and married female students who simultaneously worked full-time, perhaps because it is more difficult to fulfill certain combinations of roles. Despite the challenges of juggling so many responsibilities, O'Connor and Cordova (2010) found that part-time graduate students often survive and manage to excel professionally, personally and academically. Further, they found that it is often the support from family and friends that help keep a balance; those with relationships reported an easier time managing life, work and school.

Even when we have plans for managing our time and balancing our obligations, we encounter other challenges. There are pressures to accept opportunities to engage in collaborative research projects and thus continue to develop ourselves as scholars, but engaging in additional research projects has added another role and another challenge to our already busy lives. Not only do we need to consider our own schedules, but also the schedules and locations of others involved in collaborative projects.

While distance from our peers and research collaborators often poses a problem, our distance from our institutions adds to the challenge. We are largely absent from our campuses and have no real presence, leaving us feeling somewhat invisible. Peter finds it difficult to meet often with his supervisor, although he is fortunate that she also spends time in London where he lives, so meetings are generally scheduled there. As for a presence on campus, he rarely makes it to Windsor. This past term he once raced down after work to make an appearance at a guest lecture. But, it meant driving two hours after a full day of work, attending the lecture, brief conversations with colleagues and faculty, and an exhausting two hour drive home by 10 pm, with a full day of teaching the next morning! With the exception of the two 4-week residency periods, Lori has not been physically present at the main campus of her home university. Almost all communication with her supervisor has been made possible through technology. Admittedly, our invisibility, isolation, and absence from campus is not only a challenge for us, but likely a challenge for our home universities as well. We both miss most conferences, meetings and defences, and have little face-to-face contact with faculty, staff, or peers in our cohort. Our feelings of isolation from the campus were reaffirmed by other authors who have called part-time graduate students 'the forgotten cohort' (Barnacle & Usher, 2003) or referred to us as 'invisible research students' (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009).

Challenges for Universities and Employers

As we explored our personal challenges and reviewed the literature, we began to recognize challenges for our universities and our employers that we did not initially recognize. The lack of clear definition of what constitutes part-time graduate studies is problematic. We recognize that the definitions used by universities and government can impact the government funding that universities are eligible to receive. Since starting this study, we have become aware that as part-time doctoral students in Ontario, we bring in approximately 30% of the operational funding from government that a full-time doctoral student generates (MTCU, 2009). Further, we pay approximately one-half of the tuition that a full-time student pays. But, we recognize that our assignments and papers take just as much work to assess, and we require an entire supervisor, not one-third or one-half of a supervisor. While our universities are not-for-profit universities, they do have budgets to balance and they need to make the best use of the resources that they

have. If the universities identify part-time students to carry a larger burden than benefit, it would not be surprising to expect fewer resources and assistance to be allocated for part-time students.

The invisibility that we feel as students might be more of an issue and burden for our institutions. Because we are part-time students who work some distance from our home university, we do not have an active presence at our respective institutions. Sadly, we do not participate in many events, serve on committees, or attend our colleagues' lectures, defences, or social gatherings. We are simply not in positions where we can engage in such activities and contribute to our institutions during regular business hours. This may be seen as a drawback for institutions to accept distance part-time doctoral students and may create a burden for our full-time peers who must take on our share of service work on departmental and university committees.

In addition to challenges faced by the universities, we have come to appreciate that our employers also experience challenges due to our part-time studies. Each employer will experience different challenges to some extent. For Peter, there may be questions of how much time and attention is taken away from planning for teaching to plan his research, and whether or not the overlap is always in the best interest of his students. With more time and focus away from the classroom, there can be costs associated with supporting time release to present at conferences as well. Lori has other issues related to her employer. With her research and employment being so well-aligned, the line between what is employment and what is doctoral research becomes blurred. She finds herself questioning how much doctoral work can ethically be done at work and how much work is actually done at home during PhD-related efforts. She is now encountering questions and issues pertaining to intellectual property rights for data that she is collecting. Should it be Lori-the-PhD-student or Lori-the-employee who collects data for her various research ideas? Who owns the data, and which parts of her research and work can be included in her dissertation and publications? These are the questions that she and her employer are grappling with.

It is clear from our research that the challenges of part-time PhD studies are not borne alone by the student, as our employers and universities also share in the challenges presented by our divided attentions and commitments. Many of these were unanticipated findings, signposting our changing perceptions about the role of part-time students and the need for further research.

Our Changing Perceptions

In coding our narrative reflections for themes and categories, we have become more aware of the range of benefits and challenges that arise when part-time studies are combined with full-time employment. As we began this research, we were quick to recognize the challenges to us as students. It was immediately obvious to us that our invisibility and lack of presence was a challenge, that our opportunities for funding were limited, and that the number of roles and responsibilities that we had to balance seemed higher than those full-time students had to contend with. As we reflected upon these experiences in light of the literature on the topic, we were able to identify the beneficial aspects of pursuing part-time doctoral studies, not only to ourselves, but also to our universities and employers. We were also able to acknowledge that we, as part-time students, bring challenges to our universities and employers that perhaps we did not recognize from the beginning of this project. We are hopeful that the benefits we have recognized, in combination with other benefits gleaned from the literature, outweigh any

challenges that face each of the stakeholders, such that part-time programs continue to flourish. However, we recognize that more research is needed to determine which of the benefits and challenges noted in this paper are shared by other part-time students and how this might compare with subcultures and lived experiences of full-time doctoral students. Further engaging both part-time and full-time students to reflect upon their doctoral experiences beyond just their first year of studies would also be sensible and may yield new insights. Additional research may also help to provide a better understanding of how the literature on student engagement in online environments might enhance the doctoral student experience.

Looking Forward

As part-time doctoral students in our first year, the notion of retention or attrition has not weighed on our reflections; we fully expect to complete our programs successfully, and in a timely fashion. It is interesting to note some research coming from Australia that has investigated the attrition and time-to-completion statistics for part-time doctoral students. Full-time students in Australia tend to have higher retention rates while part-time students are more likely to complete much earlier than expected (Rodwell & Neumann, 2008). The lower retention rates of part-time graduate students might be indicative of the numerous challenges that part-time doctoral students encounter: obtaining new job offers, shifting family responsibilities (Evans, 2002), and a sense of loneliness or isolation (Evans, 2010; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Feelings of resentment for spending time and personal money on courses that are not related to their work or research have also been reported (Deem & Brehoney, 2000). The thought of dropping out of the program was not something that either of us had seriously considered in our first year. While we both maintain a strong commitment to completing our doctoral studies, attrition is perhaps something that we will face.

Anticipated post-graduation challenges and benefits were concepts that were largely absent from our journal entries. Once part-time doctoral students graduate, they continue to provide benefits, according to research conducted by Evans (2002, 2010). Through our autoethnographies, we recognized that part-time doctoral students bring significant resources, skills, knowledge, and experience that benefit universities and employers. Evans supports these notions with longer-term evidence. The relationships that part-time students are poised to build between universities and employers during their tenure as doctoral students extend beyond graduation. Graduates of part-time programs tend to be more useful to their supervisor through their professional links in pursuing new funding opportunities with industry, commerce, or public sector (Evans, 2010). As we journey through the program, our own thoughts and reflections may surface relating to issues, challenges, and benefits that part-time PhD students may face upon graduation.

Conclusions

Some universities are answering the government call to increase doctoral enrolment, and the Joint PhD program is one of few that allows for true part-time doctoral studies in Canada in the field of educational studies. What can be done to assist part-time graduate students in the timely and successful completion of their studies? How can we benefit ourselves and our universities through greater access to and participation in activities outside of the classroom that serve to induct us into academia? Providing flexible hours for workshops, conferences, office hours,

portfolio and dissertation defences would be a start. The majority of these activities generally take place during the weekday when part-time students cannot easily attend. Were more of them scheduled in the early evening, or dare we suggest on a weekend, there could be greater involvement from part-time students seeking to be a part of their university communities. Greater use of technology to allow for remote conferencing and presenting could also ameliorate this situation, if the technology could readily and reliably be in place such that we could participate in activities via Skype, Elluminate, or other web-conferencing software.

As we journeyed through the first year of the Joint PhD in Educational Studies program, we maintained our commitments to recording and analyzing our reflections and reviewing the literature on the part-time doctoral experience. Through this process, we noticed some shifts in our thoughts and perceptions. A notable shift occurred from our original predominantly negative perceptions that encompassed the many challenges we faced and to a more positive outlook that included recognition of the many benefits that we obtain and offer as part-time doctoral students. In doing so, we recognized new benefits and challenges to ourselves as students, but also ones we acknowledged must impact our universities and our employers.

Moving forward, we will continue to reflect and report on our progress as individual part-time students, and what impact our status has for us, our universities and our employers. We recognize that our experiences may be unique, or shared by others, whether part-time or full-time, graduate or undergraduate. We hope that others will contribute to the growing body of knowledge surrounding the challenges and benefits of the ever-increasing cast of part-time students. Together, with the help of other part-time students who choose to share their personal stories, we can bring more bring more visibility and awareness to the experiences that occur as a result of part-time graduate candidature.

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Peter Bates is currently a PhD candidate in the Leadership and Policy stream of the Joint PhD program offered through Brock, Lakehead and Windsor Universities in Ontario. His research interests include artist-teachers, second career teachers, and issues around curriculum policy implementation. In those rare moments when he has time for his own art making, he likes to work with clay and encaustic.
batesp@uwindsor.ca

Lori Goff is a PhD candidate in the Leadership and Policy studies stream of the Joint PhD program at Brock University. Her research interests revolve around quality assurance policies and leadership processes that emphasize the importance of enhancing teaching and learning within Canada's post-secondary education system.
lgo6hr@brocku.ca