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race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, exceptionality, language, religion and how these multicultural characteristics impacted their own sense of identity; and (3) discussed how their family background, culture, and prior experiences influenced their beliefs about teaching and student learning.

7. **Personal history anthology** – The students received copies of the personal histories of everyone in the class. The collection of the personal histories became a class anthology. Using the anthology as a text, each student read the collection of personal histories and conducted a content analysis of the readings. Each student wrote a synthesis paper, based on the content analysis of the personal histories. The resulting synthesis paper provided a collection of multicultural profiles that highlighted the diversity and commonalities of our class.
8. **Team lesson** – The students translated the theoretical concepts of the class into a lesson they prepared and presented to the class. The presenters were to assume that our class was made up of the types of students (age, content, and multicultural components) that they would be teaching in the future. At the end of the lesson the presenters distributed the lesson plans to their classmates as future resources.
9. **Lessons learned paper** – At the end of the course, the students wrote a paper that synthesized the information that they learned from the readings, their writing, class discussions, lesson presentations, and other sources throughout the semester.
10. **Other class activities** – These included large group discussions, guest speakers, simulations, concept mapping, lectures, and other inquiry-oriented activities.

Chapter 9

Dissertation Support Groups: Building a Community of Practice Using Noddings' Ethic of Care

Emily J. Klein, Megan Riordan, Amanda Schwartz, and Stacey Sotirhos

Introduction

As four women spending a quarter of a decade writing individual dissertations, our goal was not to write a chapter together. It was to complete the final step of our academic training with our sanity and self-images intact. Perhaps you too know the experience of dissertation writing: often brutal and isolating. There are no road maps or training guides – you need the stamina of a marathon runner. Dissertation writing demands deliberate and ongoing preparation, absolute devotion to a topic, commitment to months or years of research and writing, and an unwavering belief in the ability to realize a goal. Few sprint from start to finish. Instead, many get mired in a solitary, time-consuming process, often a decade-long endeavor (Hoffer & Welch, 2006).

Research indicates that approximately 25% of doctoral candidates abandon the pursuit upon reaching the dissertation stage (Ballinger, 2003). Those dropping out cite reasons such as lack of support systems and structure (Ballinger, 2003; Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). Other challenging pursuits, like marathon running, offer training programs, online regimens, and other organized support. Dissertation writing, however, offers few organized support systems. Although we discovered articles detailing structures for dissertation support groups, much of the literature was outdated or lacked practical information regarding sustaining a group while also “having a life.”

This chapter emerged as we began to transition from doctoral student to professional and we reflected on what our group had meant to each of us, describing a

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non-linear process to highlight the aspects of our learning, reflection, and study. We began to believe that making our inquiry public offered much to those seeking ways to support doctoral students: universities, dissertation committees, and students.

Our Questions

Below are the questions that organized our reflection and study about our work:

1. What purposes does a dissertation support group serve? How does a dissertation support group meet the various and changing needs of its members?
2. What are the issues/challenges involved in forming, structuring, and sustaining a dissertation support group?
3. How might our group's process and procedures be generalized and applied, offering a model to students, faculty, institutions, and other communities of practice?

Context of Our Learning Community

For approximately five years, our dissertation support group (DISGO) has been a high-functioning, caring community devoted to dissertation completion and career-building. We are colleagues from a large university who studied collaboratively, conducted joint research, and developed friendships as a result. Each individual comes from the field of education, yet with a different research focus, teaching background, and professional position. Amanda's research was in special education and policy decisions, Emily's work was in teacher professional development and communities of practice, Meg's dissertation was on experiential education and internship-based learning, while Stacey conducted research on teacher professional development with a focus on Japanese Lesson Study. We are women in our thirties who entered a doctoral program within one year of each other.

Research Context

Situated learning, as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), suggests that knowledge is acquired through social interaction in an authentic context. The gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills becomes evident as individuals learn from each other in the context of everyday activities. This theoretical model teaches us that adults learn through contextualized experiences, building habits and relationships between participating community members and developing a shared ethic about the activity at hand. In turn, improving the community's performance

becomes central to learning. Putnam and Borko (2000) write that "some scholars have conceptualized learning as coming to know how to participate in the discourse and practices of a particular community" (p. 5). In many ways our group was an effort to support each other's attempts to learn the discourse and practices of the academic community.

When considering how our group learned together, we see a community of practice as Wenger (1998) defines it: "members of a community are informally bound by what they do together – from engaging in lunchtime discussions to solving difficult problems – and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities" (p. 45). Our actions, work, and knowledge-sharing embody who we are as a group. As a community of practice, the way we created, shared and implemented what we "knew" depended on the dynamic engagement of each member (Dixon, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

Early on we established protocols that combined with our personal relationships to develop a group identity. In turn, this group identity impacted on each of us as individuals. We developed skills in selecting and communicating relevant information, finding and directing solutions to particular situations, innovating and implementing new ideas, and maintaining or regaining focus (Wenger, 1998). The dissertation support group is a community of practice which "navigate(s) the challenging process of completing the dissertation" by "gather(ing) to offer (and receive) support and information" (Sincell, 2000). Being a member of DISGO gave each of us a sense of achievement that comes from working in a community of practice. As Collison and Parcell (2001) write in *Learning to Fly*, "I have a sense that I have made progress because I have achieved something I could not have achieved alone" (p. 131).

Upon analysis and reflection, we found that the relationships we developed can also be viewed through the lens of an "ethic of care," as defined by Noddings (1992). This is a useful lens for meeting the challenges that dissertation groups face in their formation and life, one we both consciously and unconsciously used in our own work. Noddings (1992) describes caring as interactions marked by responsiveness and mutuality: "They are made up of strings of encounters in which the parties exchange places; members are carers and cared-for as opportunities arise" (p. 17). As Noddings suggests, we have been attentive to the reciprocal relationship that caring requires using ground rules to encourage reciprocity, for without it, a caring relationship cannot thrive. We also employed the four practices Noddings finds necessary to developing an ethic of care in a community: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation.

Our Study

In an effort to investigate our lived experience, we conducted a self-study of our dissertation group. We examined our roles and interactions and how we came to understand the support this group afforded us individually and collectively. Russell and Loughran

(2005) write that self-study can provide an important “context for productive learning” and as such, suited our purposes of learning through the documentation and narration of our work together. The goal of this self-study was “to provoke, challenge and illuminate rather than confirm or settle” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20).

While *self* in self-study is associated with individual practice, this methodology can also be collaborative: group members experience mutual learning, take risks, deepen understandings, consider alternatives and change perspectives (Dinkleman, 2003; Loughran & Gunstone, 1996; Northfield, 1996). Our investigation of DISGO validated our work as a learning community where members are supported, cared for, respected and valued for their work (Crowe & Whitlock, 1999).

Time Frame and Data Collection

The data for this self-study was collected from 2003 until 2006 and studied from 2005 to 2006. Data sources included conference call records (www.freeconferencecall.com), indicating an average of 300 recorded conference hours throughout that three-year time frame. To support our weekly two-hour conference call, e-mails were sent for overall feedback prior to conference call appointments, averaging over 650 pages. Detailed written feedback was also given to dissertation drafts and returned via mail or e-mail. The goal of comments was to confirm theory, articulate areas of confusion, and question validity. Approximately 2,000 dissertation draft pages were read and critiqued. Analysis of e-mails, conference calls, and dissertation draft comments allowed for triangulation of data.

Toward the end of our data collection phase, we conducted hour-long interviews with each other to learn individual perceptions about our experience. We reflected on the following: “In your opinion, what makes for an effective dissertation group? What might you do differently in a future type of group?” The 15 pages of interview notes were transcribed and analyzed giving a participant check from multiple sources, confirming theories constructed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Schwandt, 1997; Wolcott, 2001). All data was loaded onto Atlasti, a qualitative data analysis software program.

Data Analysis

As in most case study methods, the process of collecting data and its analysis is interlaced and recursively examined (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Ely et al., 1991). As data was read, categories were constructed. These categories help identify patterns in the data (Tesch, 1990). As data was examined, we wrote reflections such as observer comments and analytic memos. The notes highlighted emerging theories generated from the data and underscored analysis of research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

Why Did Our Dissertation Support Group Work?

The dynamic relationships of DISGO created six distinct support areas (Table 9.1). Through investigating our e-mail conversations and interviews, threads of conversation or single e-mails capture our story and demonstrate how we learned.

Writing Support

Throughout the dissertation process, each of us struggled to transform ideas into the written word. Meaningful writing support is prevalent when group members provide feedback that shapes one’s structure and style, fine-tuning mechanics through editing, and developing a personal process associated with dissertation writing. Two of us had significant anxiety about sharing our writing, which required time to overcome. Stacey reflected: “I learned that ‘letting go’ of drafts for critique was productive, not harmful or embarrassing.” Sharing our work was important personally as writers and academically as participants in the discourse.

We each struggled with writing and found meaningful ways to ask for help. In our early DISGO days, Stacey sought support on a particular chapter she began to write. She asked for feedback on writing structure, mechanics and overall style:

Dear Emily, Meg, and Amanda,
 It's late on Friday night and I'm feeling pretty good about my relatively productive week! I'm attaching the four teacher profiles as promised.
 I try to use several common threads to familiarize my readers with some important info here. ... I've cut down a lot of unnecessary info already, but need lots of feedback, especially on the following:
 1) How to tighten what's here
 2) Comments on writing (edits, style, etc.)
 3) Ideas of how I can better thread each story together
 4) Questions/ what you want to hear next
 We can talk at our next meeting!
 Stacey
 (Stacey, February 14, 2004, personal communication)

As Stacey highlighted the “threads” she was trying to use, she began to synthesize the best way to present each member’s story. Stacey sought specific writing support to develop her style and structure. In this next example, Stacey continued to grapple with the same chapter. However, her needs for writing support shifted. She was

Table 9.1 Six supports of a dissertation support group
Writing support
Conceptual support: the development and exploration of ideas
Technical and bureaucratic support
Development of academic voice
Personal support
Job support, including job applications and résumés

working on connecting her practical observation to her conceptual understanding. Once again, she used lists of questions to think through her own writing style.

Dear Emily, Meg, and Amanda,

Okay, here's chapter 4 looking a bit more complete. I need both general feedback and suggestions on the following:

- 1) How can I thread Part I (profiles) and Part II (group activity) together to make it read more fluidly?
- 2) How can I incorporate my actual research question, so it's clear that chapter IV is intended to deal with Q1 specifically? Q1: What were the experiences of this particular group of teachers engaged in lesson study in one school? Do I need an introductory paragraph or can I start as is?
- 3) What do I include that may not be necessary? What else might be necessary to include?

Thanks,

Stacey

(Stacey, July 21, 2004, personal communication)

While Stacey continued to ask for writing support associated with structure and style, her focus was to articulate an important connection between her data and research question. Using a targeted list to request specific feedback helped her learn to craft her writing appropriately.

Writing is not simply about getting the words onto paper, but rather communicating complex thoughts in concise and articulate ways. Shaping structure, fine-tuning mechanics, and developing a personal writing process occur when writers grapple with the challenges and questions associated with their writing or colleagues' writing. In addition, DISGO shaped the particular ways we approached complex writing. The specific requests focused the feedback and assured the written word captured our meanings. Learning also occurs when group members read each other's work, mull over a study's concepts and consider how they would approach the same writing task.

Conceptual Support

In DISGO, our discussions supported the development of our ability to articulate a research framework and identify themes. Grappling together to extract and develop concepts related to our individual research, we learned the skills of sifting through data, noticing and highlighting salient features, and gaining clarity in naming themes that resonated within the work. It was also here that caring for the ideas of others was most clear.

We see manifestation of this conceptual support in Meg's study of students learning through internships. In her data collection she amassed hundreds of pages of interview transcripts from students, advisors, and mentors. At various points, Meg struggled with identifying the recurring patterns or themes that arose from the data. Turning to the support group familiar with her data, she sought specific conceptual support, asking for feedback and suggestions on how to articulate themes emerging from the text:

Y'all,

Hi kids! Hope your weekend was divine! I'm attaching another memo here, and looking for feedback on the following:

1. What connects and disconnects do you see here?
2. What themes arise?

Any other specific/broad thoughts are greatly appreciated and encouraged. ☺ Also, I'm going to send on a few other attachments (sorry in advance) that are transcripts of interviews, etc.

Talk to y'all on Thursday!

Love, Meg

(Meg, August 23, 2004, personal communication)

Because of the group's familiarity with Meg's research, members could provide critical insights that enabled her to identify themes and create categories. DISGO helped by assuming the role of a sounding board for ideas and critical friends in responses and feedback.

Seen within the context of the ethic of care, another important point emerges: Meg sought conceptual support from the group members and they responded by helping to categorize themes and build on ideas. She felt comfortable turning to others to articulate thoughts closely tied to her research analysis. A deep level of care for ideas, for the individual, and for the group processes is clear in that the group shared a commitment to uncovering hers.

Technical and Bureaucratic Support

In conducting our dissertation studies, we depended on each other for understanding the nuances in navigating the system. We guided each other in completing paperwork, talking to the right people, and sorting through other logistical challenges.

As each member was attempting to coordinate her proposal submission to the University Internal Review Board (IRB), complications over language, permissions, and consent forms created unforeseen challenges. For most of us, the process was uncharted territory and we felt left to our own devices to navigate it. We provided each other with examples of consent forms and informational letters to ensure each member met necessary requirements. For example, as Amanda had to revise a consent form several times for IRB approval, Meg connected her to staff to guide her. Ultimately, the IRB process was simplified by working together. Because we went through the process at different times, we learned from each other and avoided the pitfalls others experienced.

We emphasized support for the most challenging part of the process: preparing the dissertation defense. By practicing ahead of time, posing challenging questions, and offering a debriefing about the group dynamic, the bureaucratic challenge of addressing committee members and outside-reader questions was anticipated and confronted with support. In the following e-mail, Emily reported on a conversation with a fellow doctoral student about the defense:

She told me we get twenty minutes at the beginning to introduce ourselves, our story, why we chose our topic, how our research unfolded, and what we feel we have learned from the process. Then our two outside readers get time to ask their questions about the data and its analysis. They don't usually get into any questions about the lit review. Often committee members will get into conversations about some of the questions – and we should just sit back and let them talk. Towards the end committee members might get time to ask questions, but that is not always the case. Then at the end, we are excused, they have a conversation and a vote, and then apparently they invite us back and say "congratulations Dr." (Emily, March 14, 2005, personal communication)

DISGO offered each of us a safe haven to learn about the process, ask any question, anticipate pitfalls, and prepare us for success in our work.

Development of Academic Voice

Evans (1996) suggests that benefits derived from a dissertation support group exceed simple process-oriented tips and include rich intellectual supports such as developing – or further developing – an academic voice. We strengthened our abilities to use, explain, and define terms, while we honed the skills of presenting ideas, evidence, and data in the terminology of our disciplines. Individuals developed a professional tone as we practiced and became part of a new discourse community.

As the literature reveals, many doctoral students struggle with the transition from full-time student to independent researcher/writer (Ballinger, 2003). A support group can help by exchanging pieces of writing, sharing sample methodologies, and offering references for literature reviews. Engaging with others in the processes of dissertation research and writing may help to scaffold an individual's skills and increase his/her confidence as a *real* researcher. The group serves to develop and affirm one's academic voice and status as a professional.

E-mail exchanges illustrate the ways in which we probed for stronger definitions, tighter structures, and evidence. Below, Emily sought advice on the inclusion of a study in her literature review:

To: Meg, Amanda, and Stacey

From: Emily

I have a question about a literature review thing. Originally I had a section on teacher networks that I removed from the proposal because I felt like networking teachers might be one of my findings ... is it okay to have literature in my sections on my three questions? I'm afraid it will read like a literature review but it seems weird to put in my current chapter because it anticipates something that I find later. Does that make sense?

(Emily, May 7, 2004, personal communication)

To: Emily

From: Stacey

I would think that using those pieces from the literature in other chapters would strengthen your findings. However, I'm not sure such citations should "read" like a review of lit., but rather supportive literature either evidencing or negating what you found to be true. ... The

only piece I think important to keep in mind is you don't want to veer off on tangents unrelated to your review completely ... think "tight." (Stacey, May 7, 2004, personal communication)

To: Emily

From: Amanda

I'm on board with Stacey ... I see sprinkling in evidence with your findings as strengthening your argument and yet, don't overdo. Citing a seminal study that has a similar finding makes sense. And remember, stay focused on your questions.

(Amanda, May 7, 2004, personal communication)

To: Emily

From: Meg

I'm wondering if you might do this: introduce the idea of teacher networks and institutional memory in your lit review as some of the possible outcomes of quality professional development; then, in your findings, you can analyze whether or not and to what extent [the organization] achieves this.

(Meg, May 8, 2004, personal communication)

This series of e-mails illuminates the way DISGO offered guidance to Emily, who sought advice on an academic question: What is the right way to voice these ideas as a researcher, and am I doing it correctly?

The dissertation support group "takes our pulse" as emerging researchers. We help each other to gauge whether or not the structures, language, evidence, and findings we offer reflect an academic and professional voice. By creating a safe culture of caring, we contribute to a support group in which our academic voices have the space to develop. Putnam & Borko (2000, p. 5) write: "These discourse communities provide the cognitive tools – ideas, theories, and concepts – that individuals appropriate as their own through their personal efforts to make sense of experiences." Doctoral students need practice with these cognitive tools, practice that cannot come in classrooms or isolation. Learning in this way requires work in communities if we are to succeed in meeting the demands of our new roles after graduation.

Personal Support

One of the least planned for, but most significant, purposes of DISGO emerged as providing members personal support, particularly when personal problems competed with dissertation goals. We see personal support as providing attention to individual members, generating options to a member in distress, and helping members maintain focus on goals of dissertation completion and transition beyond.

The problems we tackled have been numerous: beginning and ending relationships, celebrating and struggling in marriages, illnesses, workplace conflicts, and the general stress that occasionally arises during dissertation writing. Helping group members learn to manage these problems was *integral* to degree completion.

We originally approached our group as an intellectual and social entity, not recognizing that this would lead to emotional and personal support.

From the beginning, Amanda struggled with issues related to working full time, long-distance research, and maintaining a personal life. In 2004, this issue arose as Amanda faced illness, job stress, and challenges in her data collection. During a call she suggested that she felt overwhelmed by the weekly conference calls, feedback commitments, and other responsibilities of DISGO membership. She needed to focus on other aspects of life and pull back from the group. We discussed various alternatives through e-mail. Amanda wrote:

I really appreciate your support. ... I think I'm just in a different place because I'm in a holding pattern until I can get my data collection issues worked out. And I really just cannot commit to every week right now. I'm sorry. ... I feel guilty about it, but it's just too hard to do. I'm working and making progress, but it's just a little stymied by outside systems. ... If my being on the call twice a month is a problem, though, I'll try to find another solution.

(Amanda, September 16, 2004, personal communication)

Hi Amanda:

I understand that it's a busy time right now and how you might be feeling swamped. What concerns me is if you taper back on DISGO, your work will also take the back burner – a risk not worth taking.

my two cents,

Stacey

(Stacey, September 16, 2004, personal communication)

Amanda,

I, too (like Stacey) don't want to see you stray too far from our flock of seagulls (get it – like the 80's band ...) Ok. enough.

Anyway, I know you're swamped with work and are stalled in your data collection ... anything you do have, or any progress made is definitely something we want to hear about, though.

Plus, you have great insights to share when you give feedback on our work, and that's also something we value. So, I'd like not to lose that, of course. So, maybe for this time period – a month or so – if you need to e-mail feedback and talk every other week, cool.

Lots and lots of love,

Meg

(Meg, September 16, 2004, personal communication)

Hey ladies,

We're all here with you Amanda – guilt shouldn't keep you from being with us when you can. It's a lot of energy to expend on working on our stuff when you're not getting back because you're not there yet. Do what you can and we'll work around it okay? Until you're done we're not letting you go too far.

Emily

(Emily, September 16, 2004, personal communication)

In the series of e-mails we see a number of elements that define the kind of personal support we offered each other: listening, giving reassurance, providing an open door when needed, but encouraging continuous ties to the group for reentry.

Personal support alone may be insufficient. Key to this interaction and noticeable in others is that we recognized that pressure in any form would be ineffec-

tive. Pressure abounded in our lives: from our professors, in meeting deadlines, from our families wanting us to spend more time with them, from our jobs and from our friends. While we wanted a mutual commitment to the group, ultimately that group had to be a place that relieved, rather than added pressure; the benefits had to outweigh the sacrifices. When it did not, guilt would only increase anxiety and resentment; each member needed to feel that the group offered sanctuary and support rather than restriction and judgment. In the end Amanda decided to continue with regular phone calls and gave feedback on other's work as best she could for a number of months until she felt able to reengage in full participation.

Job Support

One of the main functions of the dissertation support group over the last two years (2004–2006) has been to support members throughout the job-search process. Our data suggests that the dissertation support group functions as an informal professional network where members share ideas about possible career paths, as well as job-search-related resources and processes.

As each of us made the progression from student to professional, the focus of DISGO conversation shifted from dissertation completion to job support. Our long-term relationship allowed us to easily offer contributions to each other's decisions. Deeply connected to dissertation completion is having a forum to contemplate and discuss our future plans, our personal needs (e.g., sustaining family and friend relationships), and our own happiness. These decisions require people around us who recognize the multiple roles in our lives and our developing attitudes towards our work. Other people knew us better and differently; but only this group understood our work deeply enough to help us contextualize work decisions.

In 2004, Emily applied for jobs at various universities, deciding which were most appropriate given her background, skills, and professional goals. Dissertation group members helped her develop interview questions, fine-tuned her resume, and edited her cover letter. They offered feedback on her presentations.

Finally, upon receipt of several offers she described what she found appealing about different options:

Hey ladies, so I got the official offers from University A and University B (meaning they gave me my salary). I'm so confused. I'm heading to University B next week for the day to meet with some people but then I HAVE to decide (University A has asked for a decision in two weeks and it's no longer in anybody's interest to postpone). I'm sending you guys my chart of the two schools. If you have any time to read it and give me some feedback that'd be great. The one thing that may not get emphasized in it is the major difference in the jobs – University B being the English Education position and University A being a Generalist Education Position. Any thoughts you might have would be great! (Emily, March 15, 2005, personal communication)

After years of knowing Emily on a personal level and her professional interests in community, DISGO members demonstrate how well they understand her goals and factors she might consider in her decision.

First, Congratulations, smarty pants! How exciting, and what a great position to be in. Now, I think the support and connection with colleagues is super important – a place that you feel valued and comfortable. ... To me, that's a huge factor – you're planning to spend four or more years there (before tenure), so a positive atmosphere is necessary. (Meg, March 15, 2005, personal communication)

Her e-mail goes on to detail some of the challenges each job will bring, the different skills each will demand and the strains location may have upon her personal life. Similarly, Amanda responded:

I agree with everything Meg has said and I looked at the chart to see if I can offer any insight. As someone who has held many, many jobs – I appreciate the rational approach that the chart has afforded you, but I'll just say that my best decisions were made with my heart. So I am going to ask you some questions which may make your decision a little more clear.

Where do you feel most "at home?" Where do you think your passions will be satisfied?

Where do you think you will be able to find a mentor and/or peers to help you through rough patches? Which place will be the best place to manage the ups and downs of everyday life? Where will you be able to grow into the professional you want to be?

Resumes, money, and time only matter when you are unhappy in your job. ... Choose the place where you will be happiest.

(Amanda, March 15, 2005, personal communication)

Recommendations

There is much anecdotal work on the challenges that come with creating a dissertation support group. They are extensive and will vary widely for different groups but we believe that membership, structure, competition, and commitment are important to confront.

Membership

In the formation of a dissertation group, people need to believe they can both meet their own needs and others' needs; in particular, we found it was essential to care for the *ideas* of other members. In order to invest the time needed to be an effective support group member, it was critical to understand and care about the stance of the other members. Our recommendation is not that members must be of similar fields, but rather by interest or commitment, they must deeply invest in the ideas of others.

Structure

Our dedication to reciprocity and mutuality framed how we addressed structural challenges. We structured our conversations in the following way: (1) A "clearing protocol" (McDonald et al., 2003) for 10–15 minutes to discuss personal issues and clear our minds of other life issues, share/receive support, and focus on the task at hand. (2) Following the "go-around," we allocated 30 minutes per person to address an issue, challenge, or idea, and receive feedback. We allowed for flexibility, as sometimes one individual's work required a longer period of time.

In the case that someone needed feedback on a larger piece of work, that individual e-mailed it to the group members one week prior to the meeting. On the day of the meeting we would adjust our regular schedule and exchange the go-around for a focused discussion. As we were all on different schedules in the process, we sometimes were able to expend more effort on one member's work for extended periods, recognizing our commitment to reciprocity. We renegotiated the protocol regularly to assure fairness and equal participation.

Conflict and Competition

Dissertation groups face challenges in the interpersonal relationships and conflicts that inevitably develop and arise especially in a career where there is competition for grant money, publication, and jobs. Our group faced few of these challenges perhaps because of our diversity of interests and styles. The vulnerability we encountered in sharing our work, listening to critical feedback, and sharing struggles ensured that no one felt that others' successes were "unearned." We were deliberate in celebrating victories, small and big. Most importantly we shared resources – grants, calls for papers/presentations, and job opportunities. We recognized that competition lay outside us in the thousands of doctoral students around the country.

Commitment

Finally, caring for each other's work for a sustained period of time takes personal commitment and flexibility (Sergiovanni, 1994). We tackled issues early on in our formation. After only three face-to-face meetings, two long-distance moves forced us to transition to weekly conference calls. We decided that we would periodically reevaluate our commitment and our ability to sustain the activity in order to adjust accordingly.

Implications

Universities that help develop and sustain dissertation support groups can help students navigate the challenges of the research and dissertation writing process. One helpful practice at our university was the use of organized "support groups" in qualitative research classes. This provided training and early support group participation to experience the benefits of writing and conceptual support. Doctoral programs should provide this kind of training through various sustained group projects. And, while a self-chosen group is most effective, universities could begin by designing open dissertation groups possibly facilitated by a faculty member (Inman and Silverstein, 2003; Pauley, 2004; Sincell, 2000). These should not be required, but should be a regularly scheduled opportunity for students to join. By introducing students to each other and support group structures, smaller groups may break off if they find compatible styles and interests.

Our findings also have implications for those initiating their own dissertation groups. This chapter highlights the most essential kinds of support dissertation groups can provide: writing; conceptual, personal, and bureaucratic support; the development of the academic voice; and job support. We found that our group not only supported us during our dissertation writing but also in our post-dissertation job pursuits. This study provides a solid example of how situating doctoral students in this learning context enabled individuals to develop and extend the habits and skills necessary for any type of adult community participation and learning. Group members may find that they are seeking support in certain areas, but this chapter provides a broad vision of what areas of support a dissertation group can offer.

Ultimately, what does our experience offer those interested in understanding and building communities of practice? Maintaining an ethic of care is an important aspect. This means there is a shared caring for ideas and learning that serves as the primary focus. Those who define such communities describe the importance of focusing on shared practices and work (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). But a truly effective community of practice requires that we care for the practice of others. It is this element that most significantly influenced the effectiveness of our group in our work and in our lives. It impacted our ability to finish our dissertations, contribute to the knowledge base of support groups, and carry those skills into our future positions.

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