

Chapter 16

Faculty Support and Guidance for Doctoral Candidates: Promotion of Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes practices of doctoral faculty in their efforts to support and encourage doctoral candidates for the EdD in conducting reliable and valid research for the writing of the dissertation. The setting of the degree program is in the School of Education in a private, four-year, liberal arts university in the Midwest United States. In guiding the doctoral candidates in their research endeavors, the faculty are promoting critical thinking applied to research design. Critical thinking is a process that represents a collection of skills difficult to teach in a doctoral program, as students who enroll bring a wide range of skills. The chapter includes a description of the doctoral program, some of the challenges faced by the doctoral faculty, and some of the strategies applied to promotion of strong research design among student work.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is a process which requires a skill set useful in decision-making, similar to the research process. Researchers begin with a problem, gather information, analyze and synthesize, and draw conclusions. Educators responsible for development of critical thinking within their students must consider application, analysis, and evaluation, as well as identification of appropriate sources of information for problem solving, contribution of life experiences, and

forms of communication, as they guide students in strengthening their skills. Everyday life requires an intake of information through communication and observation. Everyday decisions make demands on the individual to apply and analyze. This ongoing project explores deliberate choices within an Educational Doctorate program to promote development and strengthening of necessary skills for critical thinking in its students.

Scriven and Paul (2013) defined critical thinking as a process an individual engages in by “actively and skillfully conceptualizing, ap-

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plying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (p. 1). This process requires many skills of the individual. Everyday life requires an intake of information through communication and observation. Everyday decisions make demands on the individual to apply and analyze. The project described in this chapter is an application of the critical thinking process and evolved through the gathering of information used to assess progress of the students and the program itself. Synthesis and evaluation of the data gathered contributed to decision-making regarding guidance given to the students on their own research within the doctoral program. This chapter describes the approach taken by department faculty to promote critical thinking in doctoral students in the School of Education with regard to their doctoral research.

Critical Thinking

At the time of this writing, the concept of critical thinking was a topic of discussion among student clientele enrolled in the education doctoral program. Many worked as K-12 teachers and administrators in schools and districts and were faced with the Common Core State Standards movement to promote critical thinking and problem solving in their own younger students (Burkis & Yaris, 2012). They faced the need to strengthen their own critical-thinking processes, promotion of critical thinking within their colleagues and subordinates, as well as promotion of critical thinking skills among the young students they supervised. Burkis and Yaris pointed out the connection between the Common Core State Standards for reading and found “language like ‘analyze how individuals, events, and ideas develop’ and ‘interpret words and phrases’ and ‘integrate and evaluate content’” (p. 1), which brings the educator to the conclusion

that critical thinking processes will be expected. “These words—analyze, interpret, integrate—reflect the vernacular of critical thinking” (p. 1).

From the viewpoint of the School of Education supervising the doctoral program, the challenge was to promote critical thinking in the higher education students seeking the degree. The application of critical thinking discussed in this chapter is connected with the skills necessary and processes followed for both doctoral faculty and doctoral students.

Willingham (2001) described critical thinking as “demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, [and] solving problems” (p. 8). This description is in complete alignment with conducting research, especially within an education doctorate program in which students are seeking to apply the knowledge they gain. Deducing and inferring conclusions in the doctoral research setting can assist students’ home educational institutions with decision-making concerning programs, facilities, staffing, and curriculum materials. In consideration of promoting critical thinking among students of higher education, Willingham had a view that may oppose the views of those in the higher education profession. When addressing whether critical thinking can be taught, Willingham indicated that, “Decades of cognitive research point to a disappointing answer: not really” (p. 8). He indicated that critical thinking was not a simply a skill, but a process of thought utilizing content knowledge. The promotion of critical thinking in higher education, or in any setting, may pose a challenge since it is not simply a skill. Process, in the opinion of this author, is much more difficult to teach than skill.

Willingham’s description of critical thinking is in alignment with its application to the research process in a doctoral program. And, with any research, consideration of the Scientific Method of inquiry can be a good place to begin. Many of

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