Chapter 3
Cognitive Apprenticeship for Dissertation Writing

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to make explicit how faculty members at one institution adopted the cognitive apprenticeship model as a way to support doctoral students' development from student to scholar. The efforts in doing so focus heavily on dissertation thinking and writing because the dissertation is such a significant, culminating element in any doctoral student's experience. Writing a dissertation is something one only does once, and the process is typically designed to be an individual test of the ability to make connections between theory and practice, conduct research, and communicate about research in a scholarly manner. The isolation of dissertation writing often results in doctoral students' remaining ABD (all but dissertation). Most professors who have mentored a doctoral student through the dissertation process can attest that success in completing coursework does not necessarily lead to success in completing a dissertation. Because dissertation writing is markedly different from other kinds of academic and professional writing, many doctoral students need explicit support such as cognitive apprenticeship to guide their journey through the dissertation writing process.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to make explicit how faculty members at one institution adopted the cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins, 2006; Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989) as a way to support doctoral students' development from student to scholar. Our efforts in doing so focus heavily on dissertation thinking and writing because the dissertation is such a significant, culminating element in any doctoral student's experience. Writing a dissertation is something one only does once, and the process is typically designed to be an individual test of the ability to make connections between theory and practice, conduct research, and communicate about research in a scholarly manner. Liechty, Schull and Liao (2009) caution academics to remember that "scholars are made not born. Seasoned academics may forget the arduous developmental process by which they attained this level of scholarly confidence and competence" (p. 492). The isolation of dissertation writing often results in doctoral students' remaining ABD (All but Dissertation). Most professors who have mentored a doctoral student through the dissertation process can attest that success in completing coursework does not necessarily lead to success in completing a dissertation. Because dissertation writing is markedly different from other kinds of academic and professional writing (Carter, 2011, p. 731), many doctoral students need explicit support such as cognitive apprenticeship to guide their journey through the dissertation writing process.

According to Shulman (2010), doctoral education should prepare students for being researchers, which, he asserts, is at the heart of scholarship. Doctoral programs should include instruction and modeling of research related activities such as identifying a theoretical framework, creating a research question, designing and implementing a research plan, and identifying opportunities for publication (p. B7). The cognitive apprenticeship model responds to Shulman's call for the practices of scholarship and mentoring required in the development of doctoral students. These two foundational aspects of doctoral education—scholarship and mentoring—are perhaps seen most clearly in the work of writing a dissertation.

Writing throughout the research process is the way in which we build understanding about the work. Taking notes, creating reading logs, and emailing the professor about research ideas are all forms of informal writing. Through these various forms of writing, researchers make meaning and blend their own ideas with those of previous authors.

Cognitive apprenticeship emphasizes both the faculty and student roles in the development of processes, skills, and habits of mind required for the formation of scholars (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Dissertation writing, as Kamler and Thompson (2014) have noted, is a collaborative endeavor that shifts over time:

The supervisor begins with expertise in all aspects of the process—the literature that must be read, the design of fieldwork or text work, the production of the thesis. Over time, the supervisor must relinquish control and the doctoral researcher must use their growing expertise to speak and write with authority. A 'student' identity is gradually replaced by that of 'researcher/scholar.' (2014, p. 1)

The cognitive apprenticeship model provides a framework for faculty to design embedded and progressively autonomous support throughout the dissertation process, from reviewing existing research and conceptualizing a research question all the way through the writing and defense of a complete research project.

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