

Chapter 18

Improving the Online Dissertation Writing Process

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online doctoral programs have been developed rapidly over the years due to the advance of technology, and educators are seeking a new educational paradigm and innovative instructional strategies for online doctoral programs. This study presents cases of doctoral learners and dissertation mentors in online dissertation courses. The goal of this case study is to raise awareness for the need of an interactive mentor-mentee relationship in online higher education and to provide pointers and guidance for both mentors and mentees in navigating the maze of ill-structured learning. The findings of this study imply that social presence in distance education affects doctoral learners' learning, course satisfaction, and faculty-student relationships in the dissertation writing process. This case study has implications for instructional designers and educators in infusing faculty-student interactions with technological support.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Founded in 1976, University Z is the largest private university in North America. It comprises seven colleges (i.e., College of Education, College of Humanities, College of Information Systems and Technology, College of Nature Sciences, College of

Social Sciences, College of Nursing, and College of Criminal Justice and Security) and two schools (i.e., School of Advanced Studies and School of Business) with brick-and-mortar campuses and learning centers in 40 states as well as in foreign countries. University Z confers degrees at the associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, and offers a variety of online education programs. The online program of University Z was launched in 1989 to offer distance education degrees on the undergraduate, Master's, and doctoral levels. University Z focuses on working learners and has made investments in online technology through its proprietary learning management systems (LMS) and mobile apps to reach doctoral learners. The LMS was up and functional 99% of the time and in case of technical difficulty, messages were posted in the homepage area to announce server status. Doctoral learners who are working could use the University Mobile 3.0 for iPhone and Android to manage school, work, family, and other obligations. The University Mobile 3.0 for both iPhones and Android systems help doctoral learners to keep up with courses while they are not in front of computers, to access instructor's materials from their smartphones anywhere and anytime, to chat with friends and classmates in the Chat Forum, to view attachments, and to receive notifications immediately if there are new threads or replies from the instructors.

University Z, like many other traditional and online universities, supports distance learners with rich archives of sources such as journals, encyclopedias, dictionaries, e-books, PDF documents, newspapers, periodicals, dissertations, and online databases (e.g., EBSCOhost, ProQuest). The online library in University Z offers Skillsoft®, the WritePoint®, Turnitin® Plagiarism Checker, Center for Mathematics Excellence, and other virtual library learning services to facilitate learning and teaching. All tutorial labs are facilitated by faculty members from a distance and provide a central point of entry for learners to ask questions and work out problems. The Skillsoft® allows students to access online business and technology tutorials from the Skillsoft® library. The Center for Writing Excellence in online library is an online writing lab designed to assist students in developing essential written communication skills. The WritePoint® automated review system provides feedback on basic grammar and usage by inserting comments into the text of a paper at the point of the error. The Turnitin® Plagiarism Checker promotes originality in student work and identifies papers containing material authored by another writer within minutes. If the Checker indicates that another writer's material has been used, students are expected to add appropriate citations and quotation marks using APA format or to rewrite their papers using original material. The Tutorials and Guides section in the virtual university library is designed to help students improve grammar and writing skills. An online reference citation generator and an online thesis statement generator are included as well. Research software, such as IBM SPSS statistics and QSR NVivo 10, are also provided in University Z. SPSS® is a quantitative software

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