

Words of Wisdom Gathered during the Online Doctoral Student Journey

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Abstract

Although the journey to pursuing an online doctoral degree is unique for each student, reflections of success offered by those who completed the journey can be helpful both in normalizing certain experiences and in detailing strategies for success.

Keywords: online; doctoral student; dissertation; obstacles; support; success

I still remember when I started my online first graduate course. It would be 2,061 days until my dissertation oral defense. During that time, I made three critically significant discoveries about myself. These discoveries had little direct connection to my research, but proved to be monumental in my survival of the entire doctoral program and dissertation process. First, I discovered that I really did not know myself or my capabilities until I had gone through the fire, so to speak. Second, I realized the importance of keeping things in perspective. Finally, I found that this whole process of earning my doctoral degree online was not as much about me as I had initially thought. Armed with a constantly changing

timeline that I posted next to my computer, I set out to climb this hill, which transformed into a mountain and became my quest.

Overcoming Obstacles and Finding Strength

Although the successful completion of my dissertation was important professionally and academically, the more significant personal outcome of my experience was a far better understanding of me. This personal understanding did not focus on my limitations, but it revealed my ability to achieve. Like many doctoral students, school was always easy for me and left me feeling academically unchallenged. However, this all changed after I completed my doctoral coursework and attempted the comprehensive

examination. This exam was the first academic task that I was not able to complete easily and with confidence. After several weeks of uncertainty and anxiety, I received the official letter from the university declaring my status as a doctoral candidate. Immediately, I scanned and uploaded the letter to my computer to make it my desktop background for the remainder of my doctoral journey. Its presence served as a constant reminder of how far I had come and how far I had to go.

Feeling accomplished, I transitioned to the dissertation process, which was exciting, yet equally challenging. My initial thoughts and ideas about my dissertation were replaced by new approaches and inquiries. As soon as I pondered one question, three other issues probed my mind, awaiting immediate responses. As these new questions emerged, my previously developed problem and purpose statements and methodology were no longer relevant. I was once again rethinking my entire approach. The scientific process could be a cunning, yet unpredictable animal.

In fact, there were occasions that I received feedback during my dissertation reviews

that was emotionally difficult to accept. For example, sometimes the feedback included suggestions for an overwhelming number of changes. There were also times when I disagreed with the feedback, but believed that I could not challenge the revisions without repercussions. With each submission and subsequent resubmission, I held my breath, hoping that I had responded with the necessary corrections. After receiving feedback one time, the impact of those comments on my emotional psyche was just too painful for me to handle. Consequently, I packed all of my research into a box, apologized to my husband for spending all of this money, and announced that I was done! I was ready to quit.

Obviously, I did not quit. My husband was pivotal in supporting me through this difficult time. In addition to letting me vent to him, he helped with household duties, so I had more time to devote to my academics. I also found encouragement among my peers at the university. It was comforting to have others going through this same madness, as many of my family members and friends could not relate to my experiences of obtaining a doctoral degree online. The support that my family members, friends, and

others offered as I endured this process gave me the strength to resume my work. I discovered that I could sit at my computer, working late into the night when the rest of the world had gone to bed. I learned that I could read and understand volumes of information. I realized that that I could synthesize multiple research findings into a single paragraph. Moreover, I never imagined that I could memorize so much about APA formatting, but I did. Furthermore, I certainly never anticipated how elated I would feel when the final committee member approved my dissertation manuscript. Needless to say, I was ecstatic! Eventually, I began to see things come together. My dissertation was accepted, allowing me to defend my work. As I reflect on this experience, it was surreal when I heard my chair congratulate me and address me as “Doctor.” Those were remarkable words to hear 2,061 days after this journey began.

The Anatomy of Brush Strokes: An Analogy To Remember

Writing a dissertation can be a ridiculously daunting task. However, an analogy about brush strokes that was shared with me in the middle of my journey helped me to keep my

ordeal in perspective. Imagine a beautiful Impressionist painting, such as a Monet piece. From a distance, a beautiful, complete picture can be seen. Upon closer inspection, you begin to notice individual colors applied side-by-side, where assorted textures have developed through many varied layers of paint. Then, when you finally are standing directly in front of the painting, you see the small, thin, yet visible and well-defined individual brush strokes on the canvas, which in total form the painting. One of those brush strokes, I was told, symbolized my dissertation. On the one hand, it might suggest that an individual dissertation is insignificant. On the other hand, each brush stroke is equally important. Some stand out on top, whereas others offer the foundation upon which layers were built. Individually, some might appear more vibrant than others, and many are not even directly connected to one another. However, when you stand back to grasp the entire scene, the Monet piece emerges. In other words, your work is important; however, it is crucial that you not let the process of creating the work overwhelm you like I did. Remember, it is not your goal to paint the entire field of research on your own. Choose a

topic that you are passionate about because it will remain with you for a long time. Then, you must work hard to positively influence your field.

Researchers before you have given you findings from which to build and further explore; others will follow you to complement your contribution. Eventually, all of our academic contributions merge to create a beautiful mosaic of inquiry and discovery.

You Might Be Far Away, but You Are Not Alone

Remember, the people giving their support, time, compassion, generosity, and wisdom to you because they are incredible. For a short time, as I mentioned earlier, I thought that I was alone in this process, but I was wrong. Recognize your supporters because they do exist. Use them and rely on them in whatever form they present. You might be located near one of the university's physical locations or you might be miles away. However, they do exist; my family and I have seen them. The day before graduation, we drove to the university's physical location and requested a tour. The energy and enthusiasm that radiated from the individuals in that building were contagious. There was activity everywhere, from those working in enrollments and in advising to

administrators who were engaged in planning and conversation to the folks in the information technology department who were working hard on a new course room environment. Amid the hustle and bustle, every person there was working on my behalf, on your behalf, on our behalf. Do not forget that they exist to help you because they do!

Personally, there are so many wonderful people that I want to acknowledge for the support that they provided to me along my path to obtain my doctoral degree. My accomplishment is certainly not mine alone. First and foremost, my chair was with me for the long haul, which not all online doctoral students experience. Her patience, words of advice, and unwavering encouragement helped me to persevere through the highs and lows of this journey. My committee members' comments and insights were always thoughtful and positive and undoubtedly helped me to improve my research and dissertation at each step. I also found support from other online doctoral students at the university. I would have never imagined such strong friendships could develop over the Internet, but they did! I think meeting all of them in person was one of the greatest benefits of this program. A few summers

ago, four of us met up for a couple days of relaxation, good food, and camaraderie. I believe that we will stay connected in some way. In addition, constant queries from my colleagues at work about the status of my dissertation also helped me to remain focused and to endure. I also have a wonderfully diverse and awesome circle of personal friends, some of whom actually read my dissertation! I encourage you to ask the same of your friends. Their inspirational words, inquiries about my progress, shared excitement, instant messages, Twitter replies, and “likes” of my periodic Facebook updates meant more than I could possibly convey.

Finally, my family believed in me all along and offered the greatest support. They never had to wonder about my whereabouts. The clicking of the keyboard gave away my location every time. Oftentimes, they tolerated poorly prepared meals, delayed laundry, untidy living space, and unattended piano concerts for my daughter, which I gave up to pursue my degree. Throughout my life, my family has always encouraged my passion for education, providing me with some of the brick-and-mortar tools that I needed to actively pursue my dreams. These attributes helped me to

achieve this goal in a virtual environment! I have an amazing life. I have everything that I need and nearly everything I could ever want. I will certainly acknowledge that I put in my share of hard work, but I simply cannot ignore the efforts of so many individuals who helped me along the way. I hope that all online doctoral students will realize the strength that they possess within themselves and the wisdom that they can gain from others on their journey to becoming successful online doctoral graduates.