Debriefing the Interpretive Researcher: Spider Sniffing with Critical Friend

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Abstract

This auto-ethnographic study describes a practical application of qualitative research skills in an intensive writing retreat. The retreat was held in response to an inadequate dissertation defense just three weeks before final university deadline for graduation. It uses narrative and double- storytelling to step in and out of the experience of a debriefing process that put the writer in a vulnerable position with a critical friend. The reality of not completing the PhD demanded aggressive and immediate action – an intense commitment to critical analysis of the dissertation. The reflective self-study of the writing retreat experience describes the significance of a critical friend, a safe place, commitment to task, trust, respect, and risk-taking that resulted in an approved dissertation and completed degree program. The unconventional action encourages exploration of alternative approaches for both doctoral committees and students struggling with the final phase of dissertation writing. Insights on collaboration and reflection are shown in the analogy with the playful spider sniffing activity.

Keywords

Interviewing Researcher, Debriefing, Critical Friend, Dissertation Completion

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Debriefing the Interpretive Researcher:
Spider Sniffing with a Critical Friend

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This auto-ethnographic study describes a practical application of qualitative research skills in an intensive writing retreat. The retreat was held in response to an inadequate dissertation defense just three weeks before final university deadline for graduation. It uses narrative and double- storytelling to step in and out of the experience of a debriefing process that put the writer in a vulnerable position with a critical friend. The reality of not completing the PhD demanded aggressive and immediate action – an intense commitment to critical analysis of the dissertation. The reflective self-study of the writing retreat experience describes the significance of a critical friend, a safe place, commitment to task, trust, respect, and risk-taking that resulted in an approved dissertation and completed degree program. The unconventional action encourages exploration of alternative approaches for both doctoral committees and students struggling with the final phase of dissertation writing. Insights on collaboration and reflection are shown in the analogy with the playful spider sniffing activity. Keywords: Interviewing Researcher, Debriefing, Critical Friend, Dissertation Completion

With only 3 weeks between the dissertation defense and the university deadlines for graduation, the authors came face to face with a student's greatest fear in a doctoral program; not graduating. With the committee's hesitancy to approve the dissertation, opportunities for achieving the valued Ph.D. were quickly slipping away. Instead of backing away from the challenge, the two of us committed to an intense 4-day writing retreat to critically analyze the qualitative research data and more clearly communicate its significance for the academic audience. We became the participants in our auto-ethnographic analysis of the experience and applied our qualitative skills of interviewing, listening, member-checking, re-coding data, interpreting findings within context, and relating results to a broader community. Success came as we challenged biases hidden in the original work and drew on our individual strengths to understand levels of complexities within the stories. In the study are two participants: Jan is the Cohort 1 doctoral student with background in special education; Reese is an 11-year faculty member in Curriculum & Instruction serving on the dissertation committee and is the person who took on this task for the committee.

One of the unexpected strengths for identifying biases was Reese's environmental science experience of spider sniffing. The activity became a metaphor for success in reconstructing a successful dissertation, but came with some hesitancy. As Jan explained,

> I was really skeptical of going hunting for spiders, of all things, at 10 p.m. when I was trying to finish my dissertation. What was this woman thinking? But then. . . the mystery of finding spiders in the grass began to seem like a metaphor for uncovering deeper levels of meaning within my data. It reminded me to focus on my participants' voices, and the stories they actually told me. Unexpectedly, it revealed previously unseen relationships in the data. Maybe there was a method in this woman's madness?

Spider Sniffing Background

The reader may wonder, "What IS spider sniffing, anyway?" The simple answer is that it is a playful summer night's activity of locating common wolf spiders foraging for food in the grass and gardens around our homes. It can be done almost anywhere and requires only a willing adventurer and a strong flashlight to locate the hidden spiders. When a person shines the beam from a flashlight directly into the eye of a wolf spider, the person holding the light can see a greenish-colored sparkle in the grass to show them where the spider is. The reflected light is the key, but it seems to be a mystery to observers because the area of reflection is so small. It is only visible to the person whose line of sight is exactly within the small cone of reflected light.

Reese learned about spider sniffing at an outdoor education workshop more than 20 years ago, where environmental science educators led us to discover the secret and even provided *Spider Sniffing Certificates* as part of the fun. It has been a favorite activity to share with people of all ages for many years, so it seemed just the right activity to give Jan a respite from late night dissertation writing. Calling the adventure "spider sniffing" enhances the mystery and fun, yet the naming also has a practical purpose. By emphasizing the sense of smell, the inexperienced spider sniffer willingly places the base of the flashlight just above the bridge of her nose, which aligns the cone of light with her line of sight.

The science behind the activity comes from the structure of the spider's eyes. Wolf spiders, like other primarily nocturnal creatures, have an iridescent layer behind the retina of their eyes (they have 4-8 eyes) to increase the amount of light for them to see in the dark. That iridescent layer also reflects light when we focus a flashlight on the insect or animal. Unlike my cat's eyes which reflects a large area of light that several of us can see it at the same time, the spider's eye reflection remains invisible to those nearby because it creates such a small cone of reflected light. The invisibility of the sparkle of light increases the mystery for observers until they actually engage in the process of looking for the spiders on their own. Then, suddenly, it is no longer a mystery, and they are able to find spiders in the grass anywhere. For doctoral students, the dissertation writing process itself may seem a mystery which is only revealed after they have actually been engaged in the prolonged process.

A Metaphor for Dissertation Writing

Shining the strong light into the grasses to "sniff spiders" grounded us in the natural world, while metaphorically shining a strong light on analysis of the data led to meaningful interpretation. Other supportive committee members, the department chair and family partners made space for us to discard traditional academic roles to risk becoming colleagues in the culminating stages of the writing venture.

The story of the intensive writing retreat process and its eventual positive outcome is the topic of this ethnographic study and offers an unconventional approach to overcoming obstacles preventing success in the final defense of the candidate's dissertation.

Attrition in Doctoral Programs

Over the past several decades, researchers have identified attrition in doctoral programs as a severe problem for both students and universities (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Hoffer et al. 2007; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Blum (2010) found nearly 45% of PhD candidates lacked only the dissertation to complete the program after pursuing several years of course work, yet many never finished the dissertation. In distance education programs, attrition is

estimated to be even 10-50% higher than traditional on-campus programs (Diaz, 2002; Storrings, 2005).

Gardner (2009) recognized the challenge that occurs as the candidate transitions from instructor-determined course work to the self-directed dissertation writing phase of the program. With the redirection, the expectation changes from the student being a consumer of knowledge to becoming a scholar and a creator of knowledge. Rather than summarizing and commenting on the work of others, the new task is to conduct significant research and report it to the academic community. Students report feelings of loneliness, loss of motivation, and miscommunication with committee members among the reasons for not finishing the dissertation (Bloom et al., 2007; Gardener, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Neale-McFall & Ward, 2015).

Students in both traditional and online programs encounter similar issues. Across all groups of doctoral students, the following themes are common explanations of the high rates of attrition in research studies: isolation (Cassuto, 2010), lack of skills for self-directed learning (Nash, 2005), miscommunication among learners and educators (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), and lack of teaching presence and interaction in the distance education environment (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Swan, 2003).

Specific to online doctoral students, Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) studied the persistence of 93 candidates in an online program in Educational Leadership/Curriculum and Instruction at a large public university as they entered the dissertation writing phase. Her study concluded that high levels of "student-to-student connectedness and advisors-to-student connectedness are vital to persistence in the dissertation process" (p. 268). Students completing the dissertation from a distance are challenged by the limited opportunities to consult with their faculty advisor or peers due to the distance between the students and the university (Barclay, 2001; Bryant, 2004).

Universities have responded to students' interest in online learning and the advancement of technology by offering an increasing number of online doctoral programs. As these students complete course work and begin their dissertation research, more students face issues that leave them without the desired doctoral degree. Studies that describe alternative approaches to the dissertation writing process may reduce some obstacles preventing students from completing their graduate degrees. Addressing the attrition rate can benefit both students and universities and mediate their loss of money, time, reputation, and intellectual capital.

Regardless of the reasons preventing students from completing their dissertations, many candidates feel that they have disappointed both themselves and their departments when they do not finish (Blum, 2010).

Overcoming Challenges: Intensive Writing Retreat

This autoethnographic study focuses on one online student's completion of the dissertation process with the aid and encouragement of one of her committee members. It also considers a committee's alternative approach to meeting the challenge for successfully assisting a student at a distance to complete the doctoral program. The study describes the significance of an *intensive writing retreat* following an inadequate defense in order to address academic rigor through critical analysis of the final revision of the dissertation. This research seeks to answer the questions of meeting the challenges faced by the student and the doctoral committee: (a) How do doctoral students in a non-traditional distance program overcome challenges of dissertation completion and (b) How can a doctoral student and her committee employ a collaborative effort to address the inadequacies of a dissertation defense and achieve success in completing the doctoral program?

The account of the intensive writing retreat can assist faculty in online doctoral programs to assess and strategically plan the improvement of the dissertation completion rates

of doctoral students, particularly those enrolled in online distance programs. We focus on the completion of the dissertation process from a distance and consider ways that the challenge of a student's completing the doctoral program can be facilitated.

Critical friend theory offered an approach to meeting the challenges faced by an online doctoral student as she reached the end of her degree program and defended her dissertation. A brief discussion of the context of the situation shows the interplay of multiple factors contributing to potential failure of the doctoral student receiving her PhD and provides a setting for the participants' stories to show how they overcame obstacles by their commitment to finding success.

Critical Friend Theory

Context. Prior to the intensive writing retreat, Jan had worked independently at her home office for nearly 6 months before sending a final copy of her dissertation to her chair and scheduling a defense date with her committee. Committee members had reviewed separate segments of the dissertation, but not until the committee reviewed the entire piece during the 2 weeks before the oral defense did they grasp the extent of the unresolved issues. Qualitative themes overlapped and lacked meaningful analysis; organization of discussion was confusing; significance of the study was unclear. Committee members consulted with one another and considered cancelling the defense. We questioned whether it could be revised enough to be acceptable. How much revision could be accomplished with just 3 weeks between the defense and graduate school deadline for graduation? Who would help Jan make those revisions? She had done all she knew how to do on her own. We feared that even if she worked every day, she could not improve it enough. We struggled with our options. Finally, we agreed to go forward with the oral defense, and then, reassess the quality of the dissertation.

During the defense, Jan talked about her research in greater depth than her written analysis demonstrated. Yet, when it came time to sign the final documents each of the committee members hesitated. Had she successfully completed the written and oral requirements for the degree? We reluctantly decided not to sign the official papers until the revisions were completed, while wrestling with the possibility she might not be able to make so many complex revisions within such a short period of time. When we recognized that the research document was completed and submitted, we felt some freedom to consider alternative approaches. Our perspective shifted from our traditional academic roles into a more collaborative, professional relationship in much the same way a journal editor might require major rewriting prior to accepting a manuscript for publication. Except for one small detail. . . it would involve an intensive time commitment by both the student and at least one of the committee members.

Literature. Literature on critical friends offered an appropriate framework for establishing a new relationship. A critical friendship as a supportive yet challenging relationship between professionals (Swaffield, 2007). Costa and Kallick (1993) further explain that the relationship between researcher and critical friend is one where the trusted friend will ask provocative questions, provide an alternate lens to examine data, and offer critique of a person's work as a friend. A knowledgeable and experienced critical friend may support and empower the participant through a process of in-depth dialogues and reflections that lead to new insights and may facilitate reflective learning capacity of the researcher in a supportive, cooperative manner (Kember, Ha, Lam, Lee, NG, Yan, & Yum, 1997).

Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) engaged in self-study of their relationship as critical friends and noted the positive effects of conducting open-ended and semi-structured interviews as they listened to their colleague's ideas, reserved judgement, and gently probed into the underlying pieces of the story. They drew upon the work of other researchers who identified

useful elements of developing a collaborative relationship. To be successful, the relationship between a critical friend and a researcher depends on making a commitment to the task, defining specific time and place, and includes a discussion of the protocols or preconditions that will guide the intense work to be done (Schuck & Russell, 2005; Swaffield, 2005).

Interviewing the Researcher

Interviewing is a strong component of data collection in qualitative research and can be used effectively within the framework of the critical friend relationship (Schuck & Russell, 2005). Lincoln & Guba (1985) explain that the researcher is the best instrument for data collection, data analysis and data interpretation in doing a qualitative study; however, they caution, that while the human researcher contributes valuable experience to a study, they also bring their own biases that may cloud their collection and interpretation of data. Frels and Onwuegbuzuie (2012) propose debriefing interviews as a technique to expose bias, hunches, and lack of clarity of the researcher's thinking and to explore deeper understanding of concepts and implications hidden in the data. Bias can threaten the qualitative researcher's ability to find meaning from data and present problems in representation, legitimation and praxis as Onwuengbuzie and Leech (2004) discussed. Debriefing empowers the researcher to understand and act more fully on the information that emerges from the interview process with a trusted colleague while confronting their own vulnerability as the personal story of the research is shared and examined (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Design of the Study

To understand the context of the *writing retreat,* we engaged in collaborative, auto-ethnography that Boylorn (2014) describes as a form of "doubled storytelling" that draws on the "lived experiences as data and allows researchers to be fully conscious as writers and participants in their narratives" (p. 313). The emergent professional relationship provided a broader context for describing personal experiences of the researchers who were committed to the task of completing dissertation revisions to standards required by the doctoral student's committee.

Chang (2013) explains that the process is not only personal because of "the personal experiences of the researchers," but also a "highly social process" as researchers "carefully examine how they have interacted with other people within the socio-cultural contexts and how social forces have influenced their lived experiences" (p.107). We began to see how a lack of professional social interactions with faculty or peers slowed the writing process on reporting the data and findings and collapsed highly rich layers of analysis into a few thin layers.

The writing retreat reclaimed understanding of the context of the study by broadening our perspectives of the data. We embraced ethnographic alternatives for insight into the significance of the research. As Ellis and Bochner (2004) explain, "the alternatives for the expression of lived experiences might include autobiographical, multi-voiced, conversational, critical, visual, performative, and co-constructed representations" (p. ii). We adopted Ellis' (2004) guidelines for personal writing to address limitations that occur in any ethnographic research.

> You should know and understand more at the end than you did when you began. Get inside your experience. Then get outside it and view and edit it from a distanced perspective. Then go back inside and re-experience it. Moving in and out is what makes a good personal narrative. (p. 365)

The development of the personal narratives is shown in the stories of the two participants in the study. Jan was a doctoral student in an online cohort; Reese was teaching faculty in the cohort and served on Jan's doctoral committee.

Participant Stories

Jan's Narrative

Our cohort had worked together since entering the program in January, 2012. We talked often online and had our own Facebook page that was very active. Our program was totally online except for the two-week intensive on our university campus each of 3 summers. My dissertation journey began in the summer of 2015 during the last summer intensive session. My professor announced in class that for the past three years our online cohort had worked as a group and in the future that would not be the case. I did not know what that exactly meant until I went home and was working on the plan for finishing my degree. Almost immediately I sensed a change in our group when returning home and viewing the number of postings drop on our FB page. There seemed to be a much smaller group that communicated on a regular basis and I felt pretty much abandoned. Being independent, I charged on but ran into some difficulties with my proposal and the Human Protection Board. For a semester, I felt like I was going nowhere. With less communication with members of the cohort, it seemed like I had been cut off. I really suffered from the isolation. The chair of my committee was going through her own challenges, so I received little feedback on the material I sent. I finally got IRB approval in January, 2015 and was really energized to complete my research, write my dissertation and defend. I wanted to graduate in August, along with 10 others from our original cohort of 16.

I was encouraged that my data gathering went very smoothly and I was pleased with the quality. I started the sifting and interpretation process and writing the last chapters when my chair suggested that my project would fit another research paradigm. I began rewriting. Ultimately the shift in focus left me confused and without a clear understanding of either approach. I lost the logical development of my themes as I tried to fit my data into a new structure. I left out essential description, weakening the discussion of my research. I accepted that this was a natural turn of events in the dissertation writing process. Peers had warned me about the struggles of the final stages of the process. Thankfully, I was not employed and could deal with this blow, which would completely change the trajectory of the study. I have to admit that as long as I was working and writing I could mentally stay on top of such change. I finished the entire document by the May deadline set by my committee. It felt as if I were going to sail through the last steps of the process—scheduling a defense date, creating a power point presentation, presenting an oral defense, receiving approval from my committee, and collecting my diploma. I even ordered my regalia and made hotel reservations for family to attend graduation.

I traveled to the university to defend my dissertation. One other cohort member defended in the same time frame, so we supported each other through the grueling defense. It was like no other event (except maybe childbirth) I have endured. I cannot say that it turned out successfully because I found out that my "baby" was written incorrectly. In order to graduate I must make significant corrections in the document in less than three weeks. I felt like a very naïve beginning graduate student instead of graduate with a Ph.D. I did not realize how far off my analysis was until that day sitting with my committee. I was trying to make sense of it when I realized that I was in jeopardy of not finishing by degree. Pain and fear griped me at that point and I felt the most helpless I have ever felt in all of my life. Personally,

I was prepared to do anything to correct my manuscript and not disappoint my family or my committee by not graduating in August.

My committee was totally supportive and recognized that I would need help to finish my writing and submit an acceptable product. They kept saying they knew it was a big project and the time was short to get it completed. Out of the blue (or maybe not so out of the blue) a member of my committee suggested that I come to her home and spend four days in an "intensive writing retreat" so we could complete the revisions needed. I did not know this professor well. We completed a short consulting project prior to my asking her to be part of my committee. That experience and taking one of her classes was the only history that we had before coming to the defense. Her offer to open her home and work with me for four days was a surprise. But it was a surprise that I gladly accepted.

I traveled home and immediately made plans to fly to the "retreat" the very next week. I really did not know what to expect and had some reservations as to being able to work in this type of environment. I had to admit I was anxious about the unknown. I felt somewhat better after she sent pictures of where we would work, eat and sleep while I was there. In my mind, I thought I could write at my own computer and send the manuscript back and forth with the technology available to us.

I will forever remember landing in Oklahoma City and being met by my soon-to-be friend. From the very beginning she made the process seem like a party that we were having instead of four days of writing drudgery. I had no idea of the work that could be accomplished in those four days. No time was wasted once I arrived and we got right to work in the data analysis process and rewriting. We worked almost non-stop from early morning to late into the evening and slowly a transformation occurred. I am sure that the intensity and volume of work came from the short timeframe that we had to complete the document.

Through a thoughtful questioning technique, my critical friend interviewed me and exposed things in my research data that I had not recognized. It was during this questioning that I realized how painful the process of research and writing could be. I think anyone who writes a dissertation realizes that your heart and mind are put on the line. I had an intimate relationship with my data and was painfully aware that I had missed the mark in its analysis and presentation. Additionally, having my work torn apart and examined by multiple committee members was not a comfortable experience. I realized the dissertation was not just using the correct APA format or citing references but a deep analysis of the data and the importance the research has to the field. I found that is not possible for the researcher to do it independently because of her closeness and possible bias to the work. To be successful, I had to allow the painful experience to happen.

The questioning by my critical friend seemed to follow a pattern of attempting to understand the participants and what they were saying. The questioning also opened dialogue about how I felt about the participants I was interviewing and the questions I was asking. The second night of our writing retreat, I read the transcripts of my interviews to Reese while she was making ice cream. During the reading, she asked questions that seemed to focus on the similarities between the teachers' answers in two areas I had not considered. It seemed that I had listened to the words they were saying but did not hear the underlying meaning until questioned. I began to understand what my participants were telling me at a deeper level than I had recognized in my earlier analysis. They were voicing a need for empowerment. I had not picked up on feelings of helplessness or attempts to have some control of their issues. I did not recognize the dissonance that existed between teachers, the district, and the students until I really heard their answers more clearly through this process.

The most surprising activity of the *intensive writing retreat* was my introduction to Spider Sniffing. Yes, spider sniffing really does exist. Cowen (1992) described the art of spider sniffing as a project to teach his fourth grade class about reflecting light. Reese showed me the

process of Spider Sniffing in the midst of our writing intensive. She picked one of the darkest nights to show me how to do it. She explained that to find the spiders we would need a very dark night and a flashlight that would shine with a very strong piercing light. We went outside to the front yard where she was confident we would find many spiders. She demonstrated shining the flashlight into the grass. She put the flashlight on her forehead about eye level to shine the light directly into the grassy yard. She slowly moved the light in the grass until she stopped and focused my attention on the small light. There was a small light that could be seen from the flashlight. She called it a "shining eye" of the spider that looked like a shining drop of water. Cowen (1992) called the shining eye a mirror reflection. The last step was to go toward the spider to verify I had found it.

Reese found several spiders before I tried. She showed me how to find them, but it takes some practice to find them in the grass and move toward them. We found a number of spiders that night and I learned a lesson from the experience of "spider sniffing." My critical friend used questions as the very strong light to reflect hidden concepts in my work as she debriefed me during the interviews.

On the third day, we started pulling all of the parts together with introductory and summary paragraphs for each section and transitions that guided the reader through each section and on the fourth day we polished the final product. Taking the first steps into the intensive writing retreat was terrifying, but Reese softened the experience with ice cream, good food, walking at a nearby lake in the evenings, and teaching me about spider sniffing. I had written an acceptable dissertation. I was proud to have my name on the document. I flew home and sent the manuscript to an editor/proof reader. I submitted it to my committee several days ahead of the deadline and I waited to find out if it was accepted. Fortunately the committee was satisfied with the revisions and signed the documents certifying I had "fulfilled the requirements". I would not remain ABD. I had achieved my goals.

Reese's Narrative

The role of advising doctoral students is a generative part of my life as college of education faculty member. I celebrate students' successes in completing dissertations and grieve when they do not. Some dissertations become derailed in the final phases of the process, shattering an educator's dreams to affect positive change in schools. Often the difference between success and failure can hinge on having an academic mentor, or critical friend at just the right time. For one graduate student, an intense four-day writing retreat, following an inadequate dissertation defense brought together timing, commitment, and determination that meant success for a student and affirmation for me.

My invitation for Jan "to work on my dining room table for four days" came from an awareness of her uncertainty and lack of clarity during the defense, specifically about modifications the committee requested. I saw that some revisions required reexamining fundamental aspects of the research to address incomplete understanding and I knew she could not do that alone. I had considered the possibility of an intense writing retreat as I read the material before the defense and discussed the presentation with her, even to the point of asking my spouse if he would agree to it. I had successfully collaborated with other doctoral students in making modifications at the final stages of the process and I saw in Jan a commitment, determination, and personal work ethic that could bring forth a successfully completed dissertation. I could not stay on campus, but we could work together at my house. Other members of her committee could not commit the time it would take to complete the project, although we agreed that the dissertation fell below our expectations. As an online doctoral student, Jan faced the added disadvantage of separation (500 + miles) from campus and face-to-face conversations with her committee members. With graduation deadlines fast

approaching, I decided I could make the time commitment to the student. My colleagues offered their full support. As a member of the graduate faculty, I had Jan in class. We also had a bit of history together beyond the classroom as I had consulted her on her expertise of horse culture in relation to some curriculum development I was doing with the Comanche tribe. She gave me valuable insight and I thought this would give us some "friend" credibility that would allow us to collaborate effectively.

Her situation exemplified the challenge of online programs. Giroux (2014) critiques online programs in today's economics driven educational environment that "sustain a high level of students not completing programs" and is an often-overlooked cost of online programs for students. She had already paid for courses, textbooks, travel, lodging, collection of data, and many hours of academic work. Faculty on her committee had also invested extensive time in guiding her studies. They struggled with options that would meet the program criteria and allow her to graduate. Denying graduation at this point was an enormous economic and emotional loss, not to mention a failure on the part of her committee!

How did the intensive writing retreat work? As Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) noted in the evolution of their critical friendship, one way of offering a colleague space for critical self-assessment and problem solving may be silence. I followed that protocol and said little as Jan figured out what aspects of her work should be pulled to the foreground and which parts played a supporting role. Re-ordering the hierarchy of the findings sharpened the significance of her work. Our work progressed as we talked about implications of particular findings. We sipped an extra cup of coffee in a common space, and then moved to our separate workspaces to elaborate on our insights. Cycles of discussion and reflection emerged to give each of us personal space while maintaining collaborative support within a recursive spiral of learning.

Our intense determination and commitment to meet deadlines fueled our energy. I continuously read/re-read segments of the document, added transitional sentences, refocused vocabulary in subheadings, and sought clarification in phrases and conclusions. We also took walks, cooked simple meals, and documented our time together with silly photos and captions. With just days to spare, a final copy was ready for an external editor's pen and a final review by the rest of the committee. We had a celebratory steak dinner together at the OKC landmark Cattleman's Restaurant in anticipation of graduation ceremonies just a few weeks later. Success! Dissertation was finished and a new collaborative relationship continues to grow.

Discussion of Findings

The intensive writing retreat provided us with some answers to the questions that guided our study as we identified common challenges that doctoral students encounter in completing their dissertations. We then applied our research knowledge and skills to overcome those obstacles. Using an auto-ethnographic approach to analyze our experience emphasized our commitment to finding a solution that encompassed concerns of us both and resulted in an experience that was mutually beneficial, personally and academically. Reporting on our experience might offer others space to consider non-traditional approaches in the "dissertation writing process"

We sought to answer these questions: (a) How do doctoral students in a non-traditional distance program overcome challenges of dissertation completion, and (b) How can a doctoral student and her committee employ a collaborative effort to address the inadequacies of a dissertation defense and achieve success in completing the doctoral program?

Our personal commitment to the task, our trust of one another in the process, and our confidence in professional collaboration served as the foundation for overcoming four primary issues preventing successful completion of dissertations. The writing retreat addressed four

primary issues: (a) student isolation, (b) gaps in student knowledge and skills, (c) miscommunications, and (d) a need for teaching presence and interaction.

A. *Isolation*

Jan had worked alone for much of the preceding 6 months with only limited interaction with her chair or her peers. Without discussions with others, she slipped into a single-minded interpretation of her data which exacerbated the effect of her biases in analyzing the data. Although she continued to review literature, she missed critical relationships in understanding her data. She was accustomed to interactions with peers on a daily basis and felt the loneliness in her intellectually and physically isolated space. She had become separated from the social aspect of her work. As she became further isolated, self-doubt crept into her thinking. The writing retreat offered a partner for dialogue and a sounding board for expressing ideas that had been in her head.

B. *Gaps in Skills and Knowledge*

Although Jan had completed all the coursework along with other doctoral students in her cohort, she lacked independent experience with some research methodology. She successfully collected data, kept her researcher's journal, and coded the data. However, when she encountered snags in interpreting her data, she had limited experiences with alternate approaches to data analysis that could shed light on underlying themes. Her dilemma is common in online programs in which students have less time to learn from other students' questions and professors' explanations. In traditional classrooms, these exchanges may clarify aspects of research and raise questions a student may have not considered and thus fill in some gaps in skills and knowledge. However, in the online program, neither she nor her chair identified misconceptions or incomplete skills in the research process until she was deep into writing the final chapters. She became caught in an intellectual whirlpool without the knowledge to pull herself out. The face-to-face writing retreat allowed us to gain clarity on misconceptions relevant to her research document

C. *Miscommunication Among Learners and Educators*

As cohort peers focused on their own research, communication among cohort members became less frequent. They were at different stages of the writing process and pursuing various research designs. An exception to this pattern was one small group who met regularly with chair and continued to review each other's work. For students who were struggling independently, it was tempting to try to assimilate a process that worked for someone else when the writing was not going well. That produced further confusion and derailed her success in the writing tasks. Added to the loss of peer conversations, she and her chair communicated infrequently. It is difficult to maintain an appropriate level of communication unless both chairpersons and students dedicate scheduled time for discussion during the independent dissertation writing stage. Indeed, faculty with too many doctoral students at one time and heavy responsibilities in teaching and professional service may seem unavailable to students who find themselves adrift. Students may hesitate to request a meeting with the chair when they do not know why they are off track or what questions to ask. The advantage of the writing retreat was intense interpersonal interaction with student and educator in the same location 24/7. The contrast to isolation was part of the positive dynamic important in filling the gap that had grown over several months.

D. *Lapses in Teaching Presence and Interaction*

During extended times without social interaction, self-doubt creeps into the dissertation process. Students struggle with personal motivation to continue writing. The writing retreat's constant discussion and reflection alleviated that doubt to some extent, but having someone "traipsing through my dissertation," as Jan said, remained a painful experience. The critical friend model provided trust, encouragement, and knowledge that bridged the potentially devastating gap. In contrast to daunting obstacles, we had strengths to meet those obstacles. We both had a strong work ethic, determination to be successful, commitment to the task, and trust of one another and with our committee. Additionally, Reese had extensive experience as a dissertation chair and in teaching-learning collaborations. The discussion and collaborative work allowed us to engage in learning dialogue with questions: "Why did you include the quote?" "How did you bring the two parts together in your analysis?" What data do you have to support that conclusion?" All are questions commonly heard in research seminars, but not always heard in online small group conversations or one-on-one conferences with professors. In our intensive writing workshop negotiations with one another, we re-engaged in "the rigor, self-reflection, and commitment to the practice of freedom" that Giroux (2014) noted was needed in teaching, and, additionally, made a "commitment to a critical sensibility capable of advancing parameters of knowledge, addressing crucial social issues, and connecting private troubles and public issues" (p. 46).

Conclusions and Implications

Shining a strong light into the grasses to "sniff spiders," metaphorically, directed a strong light on issues obscuring a rigorous analysis and interpretation of data during an intensive revision of a dissertation on the verge of failure. It was indeed a private trouble for the student, but the act of shining a light into the darkness also illuminated a public issue of factors that contribute to high rates of attrition within an online doctoral program. The research answered the questions of the study:

a. How do doctoral students in a non-traditional distance program overcome challenges of dissertation completion?
b. How can a doctoral student and her committee employ a collaborative effort to address the inadequacies of a dissertation defense and achieve success in completing the doctoral program?

The cohort model served the student well for most of her program. Regular meetings with course instructors, on-campus seminars for two weeks each summer, peer conversations, small group projects, peer reviews, and ongoing collaborations created a supportive community of learners. However, in the final phase of dissertation writing, students separated from one another as they focused on their own research. The obstacles of isolation, gaps in skills and knowledge, miscommunication, and lapses in teaching presence and interaction became larger and loomed between her work and her completed dissertation.

When she proposed scheduling the defense, the committee could have refused to allow it to go forward. They could also have rejected it outright or even blindly accepted it. However, they sought an alternative solution that represented their commitment to students in the program, their trust of one another, their professional standards, and their understandings of themselves as educators. It entailed some additional costs but also led to positive results for the participants.

While the study focuses on one particular student and her committee's action at a final stage in the dissertation process, the significance has far broader implications. The increasing number of online or blended programs puts academia into a state of flux and transition. It challenges educators to examine their role in "the dissertation process."

Recognizing the unique characteristics of doctoral advisors and their students sheds light on using our particular experiences to pursue alternative solutions in academia and circumventing the potential constraints of an online learning environment. The approach of taking the role of critical friend, challenges faculty to walk a fine line between too much and too little intervention in the process. If too little, students are stymied by cognitive blocks that may stop their work for weeks at a time. If too much, students do not become independent scholars contributing to academic research.

As in the spider sniffing experience, the student becomes more successful in finding the sparkle of light within the tall grasses if the friend intervenes by slightly redirecting the beam of light, repositioning the flashlight to align with the student's line of sight, or shifting the student's position. The process of following the movement of the spider through the nighttime environment, reveals a previously hidden dimension of our world. In the dissertation writing process, the face-to-face time with faculty advisors can reveal hidden dimensions of research in an academic environment by honing the student's skills in observation, interpretation, and analysis of data.

If the student loses sight of the pathway in the midst of the complex research environment, the teacher who is present in the process focuses her own light on the logical paths of interpreting data and drawing significant conclusions. The redirection allows the student to continue the writing process in a timely manner, bringing the confidence and skills of an emerging scholar.

In visionary universities, guiding doctoral students to successful graduation not only reduces the overall attrition rates but also raises the measureable benefits of high costs of higher education. When students do not finish graduate programs, the university loses their investment in maintaining university services for students and faculty. Their reputation as a Tier 1 Research University is questioned and with it, consideration for numerous awards, attracting of prestigious faculty, and acquiring external financial support. Ultimately, a public university holds responsibility to produce graduates that contribute back into the community through education, business, policy making, health care, and other fields, one student at a time.

The significance of the study will be found in future discussions among faculty and students as they discard traditional roles and risk investigating divergent ways of interacting with one another and perceiving the dissertation process for the benefit of a new academia.

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