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Negotiating knowing and not knowing: An identity perspective on doctoral students' experiences in the dissertation defense (0039)

Context

An oral defense of the written dissertation is mandatory for completion of the doctorate in most universities in North America. It is an integral component of doctoral examination and the last milestone of the doctoral journey. However, how doctoral students experience the final oral defense is largely unknown. No empirical research can be found in North America, and the existing literature is mainly about the U.K. defense, which differs in many ways from the North American one. There are numerous how-to guides providing doctoral students with strategies for surviving the defense, but little has been written about doctoral students' actual experiences.

Perspective

Producing researchers is one of the goals of doctoral education. Through doctoral studies, doctoral students learn how to conduct research, complete a research dissertation, and gradually develop a researcher identity. Being mandatory in most countries in the world, the dissertation defense is often the culmination of doctoral studies, with its major purpose being examining the doctoral candidate through talking about the research project that he/she has just completed. The dissertation defense is therefore a site for studying doctoral candidates' researcher identities.

Identity has been defined in various ways. In this research, identity refers to "being a certain kind of person" in a given context (Gee, 2000/01) and has two dimensions: a social dimension and a temporal dimension. Socially, identity is composed of thinking about oneself as, being thought of as, and performing a certain kind of person (Tonso, 2006). Temporally, identity construction forms a trajectory and any identity at present has its past and future (McAlpine & Lucas, 2011; Wenger, 1998). Doctoral candidates' researcher identity in the dissertation defense can be analyzed by exploring the meaning that they make of being doctoral researchers and doing dissertation research (thinking about themselves as researchers), observing their performance in the defense (performing researchers), and eliciting their reflections on how their defense performance meet the committee's expectations (being thought of as researchers) and on defending their research by answering the committee's questions (performing researchers). Further, doctoral candidates' researcher identities as performed in the defense are shaped by their previous research experiences and are related to their (imagined) future research career.

When answering the committee's questions, doctoral candidates think about themselves as researchers, seek the committee's recognition as such, and perform the researchers that they assume are appropriate for the situation. Particularly, they negotiate their researcher identities when negotiating the boundaries between what they know (knowledge of their

research topic/area and/or questions that they expected) and what they do not know (areas beyond their research area/topic that they lacked familiarity with and challenging/unexpected questions).

Methodology

The literature has suggested that doctoral students' defense experiences vary. The research was thus designed as a qualitative multi-case study in order to capture the variety in the defense experience. The participants were 11 doctoral graduates who successfully defended their dissertations in the past two years in a Faculty of Education at a Canadian research-intensive university. While all the participants were from the same faculty, their research areas and specializations varied. As well, the participants had different backgrounds, research experiences, and held various job positions immediately after their defense.

Data included pre- and post-defense interviews with all of the participants, observation notes and hand-recorded examiners' questions from all the defenses, the participants' background information, and institutional and departmental documents regarding the conduct of the dissertation defense.

Findings

Since all the doctoral candidates successfully defended their dissertation and thought their defense performance had generally met the committee's expectations, they had been recognized as researchers. Yet these candidates identified themselves as different kinds of researchers depending on their respective past research-related experiences and their imagined future research experiences. This self-identification seemed to have shaped their interpretations about the committee's questions as well as the way in which they negotiated answers to questions. For example, Hank had been working as a research officer at a research institute since his late PhD years. He saw himself as a researcher and saw his dissertation defense as a re-confirmation of his researcher identity that had already been recognized. In the questioning session, Hank (pseudonym) evaluated the relevance and importance of the challenging and difficult questions and knew which questions he had to answer and which ones he did not. Laura (pseudonym), on the other hand, was a professional who had only conducted two research projects (her master's thesis and doctoral dissertation). She saw herself as a novice researcher who was confident about doing research but needed to continue her learning. She was intrigued by a question although she could not answer it, and interpreted the moment when she could not answer another question about a statistical definition as a public confession of her not being "a heavy statistician."

Also, in many cases the candidates' research journeys shaped their negotiation of knowing and not knowing in the questioning session. For example, when some questions and issues that had been raised during the research process were raised again in the defense, the candidates negotiated their answers by revisiting their earlier thoughts.

Significance

Using identity lenses to look at doctoral students' experiences in the dissertation defense is long overdue. Given the importance of the identity issue to doctoral education, this

research will contribute to the literature on doctoral students' socialization, doctoral examination, and doctoral students' development.

References

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