

Appendix CC. Sample Interpretation Outline Tool

Analytic Category 1: Course work did not prepare students for the dissertation process

It is conceivable that the course work is not the primary reason that students are not progressing. Why? What are other possibilities? There are two major underlying themes:

Program design

Why?

- The primary purpose of higher education is to foster critical thinking by exposing students to philosophical and theoretical concepts. The focus, therefore, is not to prepare students to be practitioners, but rather to develop students as academic scholars.
- Aside from the research skills, writing skills are not easily taught. Course work cannot be expected to fully prepare one for a project as intense and complex as a dissertation.
- Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is not as structured, systematic, and procedural. Students have no prior experience with this type of work. It is unfamiliar to them. As such, course work cannot fully prepare students for the experience of *doing* it. Students learn by *doing*—that is, through experience.
- Design of the doctoral program. Programs don't provide a supportive environment.
- The academic institution in general and doctoral programs in particular have an expectation that students working on a terminal degree will most likely be highly self-directed. This expectation is often unspoken. Is this expectation realistic? The expectation among many doctoral students is that, as part of their educational experience, they will be prepared to carry out research and write a dissertation.
- Unprepared may mean that students are *unsocialized* as to the scope and meaning of a dissertation. This is about the traditional institution of a doctoral dissertation and all the expectations that go along with it, including the political aspects involved with faculty, the university system/institutional protocol (ambiguities, nuances, rules, regulations), working with committee members (who often have differing requirements), and so on. Students often do not have a grasp of the policies and procedures involved. It is unfamiliar to them, hence the general feeling of "unpreparedness."
- BUT: We must acknowledge that some programs do a much better job at preparing their students than others. This is not reflected in this study's sample.

Personal factors

Why?

- Personal idiosyncrasies can come into play, including such things as motivation, commitment, academic ability, and other psychological and personal factors and inadequacies. It may be that some students are not sufficiently motivated to do the rigorous work, others are not confident in their own ability, and still others simply do not possess the requisite skills to conduct research and write the dissertation.
- BUT: Some students do succeed. So what are the factors that lead to success?

Links to literature on higher education/doctoral programs and adult learning theory (self-directed learning; experiential learning; informal learning).

Analytic Category 2: What students needed to learn and how they acquired that learning

Students acknowledged that to do the dissertation they needed knowledge of both content and process. Why? Because content and process are intertwined.

What Did They Need to Know?

Content knowledge

Why?

- It may be that during the course work they were focused on other course demands. That is, they were not ready to learn about research because they had not yet begun really thinking about their dissertations. Therefore, the work was not yet “relevant.”
- When they did start paying attention to dissertation work, they didn’t know how to go about conducting research.

Process knowledge

Why?

- When they later embarked on dissertation work, it was completely unfamiliar. They have never carried out a project like this before and did not understand the rigor involved.
- They were not getting the necessary support in the process.
- They didn’t have the confidence that they would get the help they needed from advisors or post-course work seminars.
- Motivation is dissipating. Students have spent many years at this point and, despite all good intentions, are not sufficiently motivated to get the dissertation done. Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors come into play. Which are more compelling?

Course work seemingly wasn’t preparing them adequately, so they sought knowledge elsewhere.

How Did They Get the Knowledge They Needed?

Largely through informal learning

Why?

- Reliance on self. Reading and conducting literature searches. Why?

We draw on personal strengths when all else fails.

We have a preference for finding things out on our own. Adults want to be independent.

- Reliance on colleagues. Why?

We draw on strengths of others “in the same boat” both for support and for know-how.

Learning with colleagues is less threatening than approaching “experts.”

Literature shows that adults tend to learn best through dialogue, reflection, and collaboration, rather than in isolation.

- Informal learning is not surprising. Why?

Literature shows that adults tend to learn informally in unstructured ways.

Sometimes through formal learning

Why?

- Students received some help in post-course work seminars.
- Seminars are not always successful. Why?

There is a lack of accountability. There is not enough structure, and therefore lack of commitment.

Students are not involved in planning and setting objectives, and therefore are disconnected.

Links to literature on adult learning as it relates to cognitive development (Knowles's principles of adult learning; informal learning theory) and theories of motivation (Houle, Wlodkowski).

Analytic Category 3: Supports and Barriers Influencing Students' Progress

In the absence of formal help, through either course work, faculty, or advisement, they had to rely on themselves and their colleagues to try to understand and carry out their research.

Supports:

- Personal attributes. People speak about needing dedication, commitment, determination, tenacity, perseverance, and persistence.
- Colleagues

Why?

Reasons discussed in Analytic Category 2.

Barriers/Impediments to Progress:

Advisement was seen as the biggest impediment.

Why?

- Advisor plays a critical role at all stages of the dissertation process.
- Advisor is needed for guidance and support.
- Students want to be able to seek advice from advisors.
- Students can have unrealistic expectations of advisors.
- Advisement can indeed be inadequate, and thereby not meet the needs of students.
- Not all advisors are committed to their students. Some might prefer the European method; that is, students should largely be independent and fend for themselves.

Advisement can intentionally or unintentionally be less than suitable; that is, it can be a real impediment to students' progress.

BUT: We must acknowledge that all things are not equal; some advisors do much more to prepare their students than others, and this contrast is not reflected in this study's sample.

Professional work demands and personal life issues are also impediments.

Why?

- Dissertation work is highly demanding.
- Dissertation work is often in conflict with life demands and other commitments.
- Most of the participants are working adults who are confronted with the challenges and demands of both work and school. Need to understand the challenges holistically within the context of adulthood.
- Look across cases: Does not appear that in this study any demographics play a significant role in explaining the findings one way or another.

The reasons that some students do not progress more quickly and that others abandon the process altogether are most likely the result of a complex set of factors and combinations of factors. In other words, it does not appear to be a function of course work not preparing students, advisors not providing guidance, students not being able to handle the pressures of daily life, or students not being sufficiently motivated or self-directed. It is most likely due to a combination of these factors.

Link to literature on higher education/doctoral programs and adult learning theory.

*Source: An initial version of the interpretation outline tool first appeared in Bloomberg, L. D. (2007). *Understanding qualitative inquiry: Content and process* (Part I). Unpublished manuscript. A revised version appears in Bloomberg, L. D. (2011). *Understanding qualitative research: Content and process* (Part III). Unpublished manuscript.*