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Professional Seminar: Valuing a One-Credit Course Through the Lens of Doctoral Students

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Professional seminar for doctoral students at a Research I University is a 1-credit course, 2 below the conventional courses. However, the course content covers at least 3 years' worth of experiences, knowledge, and processes compressed into a single school year. The course typically extends over 16 weeks and 24 actual contact hours with 1 professor to 7 students on average. Assignments expose students to professional jobs in academia, resources available on campus, grant writing procedures, and facilitate the trajectory and purpose of the doctoral process. The purpose of this study is to investigate doctoral students' narratives on the value they hold for seminar. Findings indicate an overarching theme of value among 5 categories: opportunities, cohort, departmental support, overcoming obstacles, and vested interest.

Doctoral students have more than just coursework to complete. The entire doctoral journey is one that entails many levels, each with various components that need to be practically experienced and performed rather than known theoretically. To navigate these experiences, doctoral professional seminar courses are designed to address evolving student identities. An important component of the doctoral professional seminar course is to provide opportunities to experience these roles of academia (Green, 2005). Apprenticeship models such as seminars establish socialization processes, allowing for the legitimization of role identities. A more concerted effort needs to be made to increase the development of various role identities in academia (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). Professional seminar provides multiple interactions between faculty and doctoral students.

In this study, theories and literature related to doctoral student role identities were critically reviewed, illustrating the effectiveness of professional seminars in solidifying the emergent academic identities of students. The purpose of this study was to investigate doctoral students' narratives regarding the value held for a professional seminar course. Through an analysis of narratives, effective aspects of a particular doctoral seminar were investigated.

Theoretical Framework

Identity is established in new roles when individuals are able to view themselves in newly assigned occupations (McCall, 2003). Blumer (1969) described role identity as a model where individuals respond differently depending upon the group in which they are associating themselves. Jazva-Martek (2009) used a social psychological framework in analyzing a qualitative analysis of doctoral students and agency, and he echoes this interaction between role identity and

social groups as an individual who "categorizes, classifies, or associates oneself in relation to a social grouping" (p. 255). For instance, the interaction between social order and meaning derived through the actions of individuals establishes appropriate responses to life events. Moreover, Jazva-Martek (2009) explained that as individuals derive meaning from social exchanges between participants of the same social classes, identities are confirmed and reconfirmed. Consistent alignment with supervisor identities within a social class, further solidify and internalize role identity. Specifically, doctoral students seek clarification of newly assigned roles through interactions with experts in their field (Jazva-Martek, 2009). In response to the social context to which they find themselves at any given moment, doctoral students also engage diverse and multiple identities. One identity does not completely define their persona. For instance, doctoral student identities oscillate between the various roles that individuals are expected to perform (i.e., teaching assistant, academic writer, and/or research assistant). Intellectual engagement through scholarly, in-depth discussions and collaboration on research further confirm academic roles. Trajectories from student to academic roles described by the participants in this qualitative study were subtle, and these roles developed when attention was centered on the prospects of "becoming" (Jazva-Martek, 2009, p. 260) an academic.

Review of the Literature

Confirmation of role identity in academia is one important result when students engage in discussions with experts from academic social classes. However, results from empirical research investigating effective characteristics of doctoral programs indicate that engaging with experts working within academia in

doctoral seminars also support student retention, degree completion, and transition into positions held in higher education (Dorr, Arms, & Hall, 2008; Griffiths, 2010). A review of the literature shows that programs that focus on guiding graduate students with an agenda that includes the voices of more seasoned graduate students as well as new and tenured faculty forms the foundation for a successful seminar.

Doctoral seminars invite professors to the table in order to share their expertise on specific topics regarding career development and socialization of the doctoral candidate (Austin, 2002; Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2000; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Seminars that purposefully manage enrollment, in an effort to include doctoral candidates who are in different stages of earning their degree, yield a higher return on doctoral success (Dorr et al., 2008). Seminars contribute to the current trend of an apprenticeship model in educating doctoral students involving a socialization process. Socialization of doctoral students provides an environment in which candidates glean knowledge from their advisor, program professors, and senior students. This knowledge of an academic life and the doctoral process materializes via observations, modeling, emulating behaviors, and interacting with faculty (Delamont et al., 2000).

Dorr et al. (2008) explored the value of seminars conducted within University of California, Los Angeles' (UCLA) PhD education department. Funded by a research training grant from the Spencer Foundation, the study spanned a 9-year period, in which a control group of doctoral students ($N = 52$) were awarded a Spencer Fellowship focused on research training by using an apprenticeship model. A comparison group of doctoral students ($N = 52$) and 10 faculty from the Department of Education at UCLA also participated. Both comparison students and research training grant (RTG) fellows were invited to attend the Spencer seminar. The content of this seminar included, but was not limited to "faculty panel discussions, professional development activities, and working in small multiyear peer groups on their writing" (Dorr et al., 2008, p. 1143). When the RTG Fellows were interviewed regarding best practice during the PhD experience, a little over 80% named the Spencer seminar the most relevant aspect of the program in its entirety. Comparison group participants did not frequent the meetings. While the comparison group was notified about the times of the seminars, Dorr et al. (2008) commented that more effort could have been made to publicize the dates and encourage the attendance of the candidates in the comparison group. In contrast, RTG Fellows were required to attend the seminars.

While the Dorr et al. (2008) study focused on the value of seminars in one university, Barton and Donahue

(2009) conducted a larger study of seminar programs in 821 universities measuring for attendance and participation in relation to student satisfaction and academic engagement. Of the 821 universities that offered a first-year seminar course, the outcome after one year showed student persistence toward graduation, a higher grade point average, and increased student/faculty connections (Barton & Donahue, 2009). Data compared students participating in a full year of seminar with students participating in a summer seminar course. Using pre and post writing samples results showed higher student satisfaction among the full year seminar students as opposed to those that attended only the summer sessions (Barton & Donahue, 2009).

UCLA Spencer Fellowship participants also voiced increased student satisfaction and gave the highest ratings in regards to best practice to the seminar portion of their experience. Learners and instructors valued activating prior knowledge and/or learning needs and a culminating exercise that showcased what students gained throughout the seminar (Sullivan & Haley, 2009; Griffiths, 2010). Since evaluation of a course must not rest on measuring the intervention of the seminar but instead should measure the effect of whether or not the professor guided the students towards mastery of the course objectives, UCLA Spencer Fellowship participants were tracked following graduation (Buck, 1998).

Going beyond course evaluations, Griffiths (2010) posited an effective way to measure growth of students' gain in her course by giving an ungraded preassessment in the first week of seminar followed by an in-depth culminating activity that showcased what they learned during the course. Griffiths (2010) argued that to measure effective teaching the students must demonstrate how much they have learned over the course of the semester. In her discussion of a reflective essay, students wrote in response to the essay at the start of the class (Griffiths, 2010). Griffith points out that the opportunity to reflect allows students to become aware of their intellectual gains in the class and to realize the value in their newfound knowledge. In her assignment she asked students to access their work, which placed them in the position of both learner and teacher and allowed them to realize the effectiveness of their learning in the class (Griffiths, 2010). Griffiths' (2010) results proved to be positive for herself as a teacher and for her students. "Students reported that this was an exercise that they genuinely enjoyed working on, at least in part, because it illuminated how much they had learned" (Griffiths, 2010, p. 34). The seminar experience, therefore, may prove to be a popular and practical experience for participants, yet knowledge gained should not be measured on course evaluations alone, but also measured for the benefit of the student, the professor, and future students in the program.

Jessup-Anger (2011) conducted a single-case study of a student enrolled in a one-credit seminar in order to understand expectations and actual returns from the course. Data consisted of the course evaluation, observations, semi-structured interviews, and coded transcripts (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Findings revealed that the student held low expectations regarding assignments and time commitment for a one-credit course as opposed to a three-credit course (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Also, motivation to enroll in a course that afforded only a single credit was a limiting factor. The instructor of the seminar leveraged academia in the context of a student's personal life, giving constructive feedback, to intrinsically motivate the student to experience how related and useful the course was for their future academic and personal lives (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Related to the "U" component in Jones' (2009) MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation (eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest, and Caring), the student became motivated because the teacher made clear how the material related to the student's long-term career goals and interests.

Sullivan and Haley (2009) looked deeper into knowledge and skills gained at a community college that provided seminars for department chairs. In their study, they tested two levels of evaluative measures (reactions and learning) as a means for ensuring whether or not training outcomes are achieved. The researchers used a preliminary questionnaire on learning needs and a retrospective pretest that covered 35 knowledge and skill areas. A significant level of learning occurred in six out of the 35 areas that participants noted as high priorities, and was the focus of analysis for this particular study (Sullivan & Haley, 2009). These six areas encompassed a variety of management and communication type skills which higher education faculty typically depends on in collaborative settings. The retrospective pretest, an instrument that has been used successfully in measuring higher education professional development events and continuing education offerings, evidenced that the seminar sessions attributed learning that had occurred as a result of the seminar.

Sullivan and Haley (2009) pointed out that training assessment needs to move to higher, reflective levels in order to assure that the training was a good investment. Similar to Griffith's (2010) analogy of "clearing a misty landscape" (p. 32) with reflection, intrinsic motivation for education is reinforced for teachers and students when the opportunity is provided to reflect upon growth during the semester. The process of this reflection trends toward transformative in that the student synthesizes course content and learning to better reflect what is learned. The study by Dorr et al. (2008) revealed high ratings from students and faculty in higher education for both intervention (i.e., the seminar mediated the doctoral

process) and effect (i.e., the course produced growth for the doctoral student), it makes sense that the focus on both the specific learning objectives along with the practical and affective experience should take priority in the planning stages of seminars.

While studies have shown the value of the seminars, more input from doctoral students around the specific benefits of seminars will shed light for programs on the structure of these sessions. Heathcott (2005) posited that the central purpose of a graduate education is to aid students in mastering the content of disciplines, conceptual frameworks, and skills in research. While Heathcott (2005) affirmed that graduate seminars help in this preparation, he asserted the need for the transformation from the master-apprentice model to the organic mentorship that privileges a graduate student's autonomy and professional aspirations. "Molding a graduate student in our own image through a period of indentured servitude does not constitute mentoring" (Heathcott, 2005, p. 15). Seminar expectations need to include communication between doctoral advisors and advisees to provide for this autonomy. Opportunities for doctoral students to engage in discussions that center on research of their interest, while receiving constructive feedback, confirm academic role identity in higher education.

Method

Curriculum Design

The course description for this seminar was designed for doctoral students in the Department of Teaching and Learning in the School of Education. The course was designed to establish a learning community, provide support in finishing the doctoral program, and support the transition into professional roles in academia. This particular seminar was led by the department chair who organized and invited multiple institutional faculty members to speak to their expertise, experiences and provide advice. The purpose of the course was to establish a learning community, provide peer support, and share knowledge related to navigating doctoral studies at a Research I University. Objectives for this course were:

- Understand expectations of doctoral studies and its relationship to the academic world.
- Encourage collaboration among doctoral students across programs.
- Develop knowledge of graduate school policies and procedures at various stages of programs of study.
- Introduce students to university resources that enhance professional development including funding, library, and academic supports.

- Identify research interests and develop professional networks with School of Education faculty who are involved in ongoing research, teaching and outreach.
 - Use existing resources to enhance, writing, communication, technology, and leadership skills.
- Student outcomes for the course were:
- Develop a personal and professional website to manage a variety of documents to facilitate the students doctoral process using reflections, writing samples, presentations, and pertinent documents and information that showcased the students’ doctoral journey.
 - Design a final curriculum vita and post to personal website.
 - Attend and reflect on a minimum of two presentations made by potential candidates for open positions in the School of Education.
 - Attend higher education pedagogy conferences and write a four to five page reflection linking learning to professional goals.
 - Design a five to 10 page research proposal grant to fund a potential or real doctoral research.

Participants

The six authors had dual roles in this study: participant and researcher. Therefore, throughout this study these individuals are referred to as *participant-researchers*. The roles taken on by the participant-researchers is described as first-person research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The seminar enrollment over the academic year ranged from 15 students in the first semester to nine students in the second semester. Six of the second semester students chose to become participant-researchers in this study, while one student chose only to participate, as shown in Table 1. Two students elected not to participate at all.

The six participant-researchers and one participant, as shown in Table 1, ranged in the type of degree program and progress toward their doctoral degree. All seven of the doctoral professional seminar students were female, ages ranging from 35 to 55; three were first year doctoral students while four were third year doctoral students.

Site of Study

A Research I University situated in southeastern United States was the site for this study. The doctoral professional seminar participant-researchers were doctoral students currently enrolled in five programs within the Department of Teaching and Learning under the School of Education. This professional seminar course was listed as a one-credit course per semester and met for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes every other week. The purpose of this course was to expose students to the facets of academia while facilitating their trajectory towards professional jobs in academia. Additionally, resources available on campus, grant writing procedures, and issues with publishing enriched students repertoire for the doctoral process. The department chair led the seminar, organizing faculty speakers to add expertise to the course. Some examples of class topics shared by faculty members included establishing professional contacts, interviewing and job talk strategies, constructing a curriculum vita with a cover letter, interviewing strategies and exploring grant writing.

Research Design

Adopting a “participatory worldview” paradigm, as explained by Reason and Bradbury (2008), the participant-researchers’ collaboratively aimed to ascertain effective aspects of this particular doctoral seminar, suggesting that an inferred reality is socially constructed through a blend of multiple perspectives. A

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participants (pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Years in program	Program areas from Teaching and Learning
Ann	35	F	1	English Education
Britney	40	F	3	Mathematics Education
Jane	55	F	1	Career & Technical Education
Jan	41	F	1	English Education
Ruby	53	F	3	English as a Second Language
Trudy	52	F	3	Special Education
Whitney	43	F	3	Career & Technical Education
	<i>M</i> = 45.57		<i>M</i> = 2.28	

Note. F = Female. N = 7

participatory research type design, specified by Small (1995), was utilized as participant-researchers found reason to gain access to scholarly acts through “research, education, and action” (p. 943). Together, the class decided that the aspects of the course design needed to be researched and investigated further. Therefore, at the end of two academic semesters, six participant-researchers and one participant each wrote a two to three page narrative describing their experience in the doctoral professional seminar. Familiarity with literature and other participant-researcher perspectives were not discussed until after all the narratives were written (see Appendix).

Narratives, composed independently, voiced individual perspectives regarding the values gained from this one-credit professional seminar course. Very little guidance was offered in the composition of the narratives, allowing individual reflections to be unencumbered. Narratives written by participant-researchers and the participant described specific course strengths and suggestions for curriculum design. Through a qualitative (inductive) analysis, two participant-researchers open-coded (e.g., Burnard, 1991) narratives independently and descriptively before, cohesively forming conceptual themes. Blended participant-researchers’ perspectives framed this interpretative qualitative research design, as collaborative writing continued into the summer from different geographical locations through video conferencing and real time text editing tools. The bridging of multiple voices and perspectives together enriched findings which were discussed and synthesized by multiple authors.

Results and Discussion

Analysis

Blinded copies of the seven narratives written by the participant-researchers and participant were

descriptively coded independently by two participant-researchers using an open coding strategy as described by Burnard (1991) to identify the meaning of each narrative. To remove bias, the two participant-researchers did not code their own narratives, but coded the remaining six and the other participant-researcher’s narrative using a line-by-line analysis to identify common descriptions of doctoral student perspectives.

During a second session of coding narratives, the two participant-researchers jointly reached a consensus on categories to describe the conceptual aspects of the codes, thus allowing for interrater reliability and multiple perspectives. Conceptual codes that emerged were repeatedly discussed in relation to the coded narratives. Disagreements about categorical and thematic definitions were revisited through an analysis of positive and negative narrative codes until a definitive consensus was reached, allowing for the constant comparative method described by Glaser (1965). As categories became confirmed, value was found in each category, situating value as an overarching theme in relation to five conceptual categories (see Figure 1).

Finally, the two participant-researchers confirmed emerging conceptual categories and the theme observed, as relationships between concepts were jointly defined. An overarching theme of value was defined by five conceptual categories: opportunities, cohort, departmental support, overcoming obstacles, and vested interest. All six participant-researchers reviewed the categories and theme in relation to the data, allowing for multiple perspectives in the formation of final conclusions.

Theme and Categories

Value, the overarching theme that emerged from the narratives, included subcodes such as use of curriculum, benefits, and established goals. Negative subcodes which described the absence of value were

Figure 1
Thematic Map

Value - curriculum, benefits, and goals				
1. Opportunities	2. Departmental Support	3. Cohort	4. Overcoming Obstacles	5. Vested Interest
employability	mentorship	sharing	clarification	choice
scholarly work	advice	belonging	communication	ownership
learning	encouragement	collaborating	organization	purpose
	leadership	supported		meaning

limited choice, a small number of credits, and disinterest of the course description. Value, as defined by the participant-researchers is adding opportunities, departmental support, and a professional community to overcome obstacles and provide vested interest for the seminar. The following excerpts illustrate the participants' descriptions of value as offering useful topics, discussions, and speakers to the time spent in the professional seminar.

Ann, a first year doctoral student, stated that a seminar with only a one-credit value attached to the description under emphasizes the value this seminar holds. Expectations for seminar experiences were simply measured by the number of credits attached to the course of study, and resulted in an unanticipated set of valuable experiences:

In the professional seminar class I found valuable insight, companionship, and support for my doctoral studies. Although the course offers one hour worth of credit, the learning and growth it offered well exceeded this. The most valuable aspect of the class was that it offered a balance between necessary program information and that which we were interested in knowing and needed.

Value was also described by Ann as experiences which offered opportunities to consider new perspectives and gain support from colleagues and peers. From these experiences, Ann also explained that she grew as a doctoral student and learned about doctoral program expectations. These results are similar to Dorr et al.'s (2008) findings, as value was found by students when opportunities were given to students to network and support one another.

Britney, a third year doctoral student, also stated value to be found in the informal discussions between students and faculty members, as program expectations held more purpose. Moreover, Britney also described the value that resulted from the chosen topics as, "these discussions gave purpose to the program and an awareness of the anticipated learning trajectory." Quite simply, it was not enough to simply hold discussions between students and experts in their field, but to purposefully organize these discussions around salient topics.

Therefore, it appears a doctoral professional seminar, from an outsider's perspective, may appear to be an easy course to teach, as it is only given one credit. For instance, to gather guest speakers and set up the syllabus constitutes a course. If done well, however, it is not as easy as it looks (e.g., finding the best speakers and a time slot on their calendars, choosing useful topics for graduate students, and setting high, yet reasonable expectations for graduate students' growth). Thus, anticipating value that a doctoral seminar has to

offer should not be based on the number of credits, but on the opportunities to collaborate, find departmental support, overcome present and future obstacles, and find purpose in doctoral program expectations.

Value was considered a powerful characteristic of each narrative, as participants interpreted the useful topics, discussions, and speakers as types of opportunities, cohorts, and departmental supports. The aforementioned three subcodes for value (i.e., curriculum, benefits, and established goals) were instrumental in overcoming obstacles in the doctoral program and providing the participants a type of vested interest or usefulness for program expectations. As doctoral students were able to set long term goals, in line with Jones' (2009) discussion of academic motivation, usefulness motivated students and assisted in developing their identities in academia. Support from both cohorts and departmental support resulted as a category within value. Opportunities was also a strong category which was described as being advantageous in offering support in attaining goals and overcoming obstacles. These categories will be described in coordination with the overarching theme, value, to frame value, which resulted from this particular doctoral seminar.

Opportunities

Opportunities were defined by participant-researchers as the act of becoming more cognizant of employability, scholarly work, experiential learning or growth, and career identities. Subcodes included in this category were, participant-researchers' descriptions of opportunities and timeliness of opportunities. These types of opportunities were meaningful due to the moment in time that they were offered. Therefore the timeliness of these benefits were described in the following excerpts by participant-researchers when they felt "supported" or "cheated" for gained or lost opportunities, respectively.

One participant, Ruby, a third year doctoral student, emphasized the value that comes from when this seminar is most helpful. For instance, if this seminar is taken by students earlier on, Ruby explained that she would have been able to plan a more effective use of "time and finances" to better establish expectations and timeframes:

Looking back, I wished that I had the opportunity to take this class the first semester of my doctoral program. If I had done so, I would have had a better idea of what I was really involved in, and what my commitments would be. Having that understanding would have helped me plan my time and finances differently than just go with the flow not knowing the direction or the process of a true doctoral experience and education.

Ruby explained that anticipating time commitments and planning finances offered both direction and steps to take in finishing a doctoral program. Therefore, opportunities which revealed doctoral program structures seemed to support students' expectations for completing doctoral programs. When these opportunities were offered, they also impacted the value gained from the doctoral seminar.

Trudy, a third year doctoral student, echoed the importance of timeliness in regards to the doctoral seminar as missed opportunities, which were described as feeling cheated. Specifically, this doctoral seminar was described as providing Trudy with an awareness of campus and scholarly opportunities too late in her doctoral program, revealing missed opportunities, a negative subcode of opportunities. Thus, timeliness was an important subcode of opportunities, indicating that doctoral seminar discussions are deemed as useful when scheduled to appropriately meet students' present needs:

Now that I have been through one year of this class and I am so near the end of my doctoral program, I have felt "cheated" because I needed this class: the narratives and experiences of professors; the advice and tips from professors; the additional tasks that professors do that we need to be aware of and try out; the services available on a campus that we as doctoral students do not take advantage of unless directed to; the time constraints, planning and organizational skills needed to keep our heads above water.

Trudy also described missed opportunities as a need for direct and purposeful connections between university expertise and doctoral students. Moreover, Trudy's excerpt suggested that doctoral students do not anticipate the need for these resources and conversations with experienced faculty; missing out on these opportunities robs doctoral students of the potential value in a doctoral program. This finding reiterates findings from Griffiths (2010) study, indicating that new knowledge reflected by students is more powerful than instructors measuring student learning. Lastly, value gained from scaffolding typical doctoral exams and theses expectations, offered guidance and purpose for Trudy; allowing energy to be spent on successful completion of doctoral exams. It seemed as if knowledge of why and how doctoral students progress and process through programs and transition into academia gave doctoral students the opportunity to depend on multiple resources that doctoral students do not anticipate needing.

Many opportunities that were considered valuable by participants stemmed from conversations with speakers, writing assignments outside of class, and

awareness of campus resources. The conversations with speakers provided opportunities to learn about what to anticipate as a doctoral student and as a professor. Writing assignments provided students with opportunities to develop ownership of their experiences by aligning career goals with their current stage in the doctoral program. Introduction to campus resources gave participants tools and resources in accomplishing stated goals while supporting choice of tools used. When opportunities were not presented in a timely manner, participants described missed opportunities; thus revealing an importance to these experiences.

Departmental Support

Departmental support was defined as established professors and advisors offering opportunities to align emerging identities and job-related skills with academia. Departmental support had subcodes such as: mentorship, advice, encouragement, leadership, and empathy for doctoral students. The following excerpts illustrate the purposefulness of doctoral expectations gained from discussions between professors and doctoral students.

Britney, a third year doctoral student, described the value gained from having these informal discussions with professors in the participant-researchers' diverse fields; thus shaping the purpose of the doctoral trajectory. Moreover, Britney explained the importance behind generalizing salient aspects of academia which emerged from discussions with experts from a variety of fields:

A variety of professors supported us by discussing grant writing, vita development, making conference connections, and submitting journals for publication. These discussions also gave purpose to the experiences we had in our doctoral program. Meaningful discussion centered on how all of these job related skills were unique to each of us in our own field, yet transferable to all scholars in the higher educational field.

Support from departmental experts also linked doctoral program expectations directly to academic skills necessary for successful transition into higher education professions. These findings were also supported by Delamont et al.'s (2009) findings which indicate that doctoral candidates glean knowledge of the academic doctoral process when interacting with advisors and program professors. Britney also indicated the importance in discussing with scholars the usefulness for doctoral expectations, as long term goals linked directly with short term goals. The setting of long term goals in relation to short term goals motivates students as usefulness for short term goals is illustrated,

similar to Jones' (2009) discussion of academic motivation.

Whitney, a third year doctoral student, also stated that expertise was valued as scholarly expectations were further established through discussions as, "having guest speakers share their expertise in writing for publication, grant writing, composing curricula vitae, and interviewing has solidified my positive opinion about this seminar." Moreover, Britney and Whitney both described types of scholarly acts as becoming accessible through discussions centered on job related experiences in academia. However, it seemed as if scholarly acts were not only made accessible, but offered purpose and usefulness to present, doctoral program goals.

Thus, it seemed that seminar topics, often led by a different visitor each session, invited discussion similar to a conference round table. Discussions about anticipated career expectations were described as meaningful by doctoral students regardless of the professional field or stage of the doctoral program. Awareness of these generalizable aspects of higher education connected the participants to each other, offering similar goals and expected obstacles in their chosen career and doctoral program. The connections between doctoral program expectations and career expectations were made clear; however, ties between students were also present when students reflected on the importance of this departmental support and expertise.

Cohort

In this study, *cohort* was defined by the participant-researchers as a community of doctoral students establishing common goals within the multiple doctoral programs and stages. The doctoral group dynamics were described with subcodes such as: sharing, belonging, collaborating, and supported. Negative subcodes: apprehension, isolation, and uncertainty illuminated a need to develop relationships through similar experiences and collegial companionship. The following excerpts provide evidence that pace and direction within the doctoral program differed greatly among participants, however did not affect the professional and collegial connections made between participants.

Whitney emphasized both the differences and similarities the cohort held in her analogy to the children's novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900). More importantly, Whitney described the sense of belonging and direction gained from being part of the seminar:

Immediately following the first two sessions, I felt as if I were a part of a distinct group. . . . We were

a group of wanderers, all on separate paths. Some of us were sprinting, some were running, some were walking, and a few were even crawling. We were looking left, then right, and then left again, attempting to discern which way to turn next. Eventually, we were like the characters from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* led by the Good Witch of the North. We were all following the yellow brick road to Emerald City, dancing to the same tune, and skipping to the same beat.

Diverse aspects, such as direction and pace enriched the cohort, as belonging to this diverse group tended to support Whitney and other participant-researchers, regardless of the wide levels of variance in direction and pace. The support gained from this companionship, was also echoed by Ann who described the value gained from the group support. However, the companionship, also voiced in this excerpt, provided a sense of escape from regular coursework, which helped Ann relax in times of stress:

Finally, the most valuable aspect of our class has been the companionship and support it offered. After a long day at school, it was nice to spend a relaxing hour talking with others about our program. It offered me a chance to get to know others in our program and in the end it felt like more like a cool PhD club rather than a class. We are all in this process together, and it feels comforting to know that we are going through the same things and are so supported by our department. I feel extremely lucky to have this support network and I'm only a little sad that it's over. Perhaps an outgrowth from this project could be a Teaching and Learning Doctoral student organization.

It is suggested by Ann that this cohort model be used to guide the construction of a "Teaching and Learning doctoral student organization." Companionship was found to offer value to the cohort by providing participant-researchers with a sense of belonging and a network of support regardless of diversity within the cohort. Thus, establishing this network of support might indicate a need for seminars to adopt longitudinal models to establish effective means for support. Doctoral seminars which are purposefully designed for students to be enrolled for more than one semester, also allow students opportunities to confirm and reconfirm academic identities both with peers and with experts in a variety of fields (Jazva-Martek, 2009).

The companionship and community aspects of the professional seminar experience offered participants professional and emotional support. These supports

were important for participants to overcome obstacles in the doctoral program. Being part of this cohort was an opportunity which gave added value to the professional seminar experience.

Overcoming Obstacles

Overcoming obstacles was defined by the participant-researchers as gaining self-confidence when meeting typical challenges through the doctoral student journey. Clarification, communication, and organization of doctoral exams and programs of study guided participants' understanding of the complexity of the degree process and took away the mystery of obtaining the highest degree awarded by a university. Excerpts from narratives illustrate how discussions during the seminar centered on collegial "lingo," expectations for doctoral students, language and cultural barriers.

Ruby, an Asian student, described language and cultural barriers for foreign doctoral students. Obstacles for Ruby included simply understanding fully different educational expectations and new processes. For obstacles to even be fully understood, Ruby stated that she needed to engage informally with peers to discuss educational expectations specific to American schools:

All these pieces of information are important to doctoral students, especially for students who have a different cultural background, and language background, because where they come from may not have the same education system and the same education processes, therefore they may not know the system as much as the native students. Having certain information may be second nature to the native students, but for students with diverse backgrounds, it becomes another learning process.

American students also described obstacles in understanding educational processes and expectations. In this excerpt, Ann mentions challenges in knowing how to construct a curriculum vita which would support her transition into academia. Presentations from scholars in Ann's field provided doctoral program and career tools, illustrating the foreign aspects academic expectations have for native students as well:

These presentations took the mystery and fear out of what lies ahead for us after we complete our program. What I appreciated most was knowing ahead of time how competitive and challenging it can be to find a job and to create full curriculum vitae with publishing's, conferences listings, and experiences.

Ann describes obstacles that doctoral students encounter regardless of culture while Jane, another first year doctoral student, explains obstacles in understanding the language situated in academia. Language was described previously by Ruby, an Asian student, as a typical obstacle, but for native speaking students, scholarly expectations are sometimes difficult to access due to language as well:

When first trying to navigate my way through all the hoops associated with getting a PhD, I had more questions than I even knew to ask. There is a "lingo" and a code that was unintelligible to me as an "outsider." I felt like I would never figure out what I was supposed to do, or how I was supposed to know I was supposed to do it!

Jane explains difficulty meeting doctoral expectations, stating that obstacles such as access to scholarly acts were relative to how she perceived herself in relation to the group as a whole. Fears such as being "unintelligible" or feeling like an "outsider" illustrate how Jane perceives herself relative to the social class she aims to access. Jazvac-Martek (2009) also describes identity as not being formed through one experience, but through multiple interactions with scholars and in multiple roles. Establishing an identity in academia can be daunting if doctoral students have not had opportunities to confirm scholarly language or discuss methods for being successful in academia.

Whitney feared that obstacles encountered might not have been overcome without the support the seminar offered. It seemed that Whitney overcame these obstacles through the support from the cohort and simply informed her openly about doctoral expectations through class discussions and assignments that correlated with the written exams required throughout the doctoral trajectory:

Without this doctoral seminar, my journey on the road to PhD would have succumbed to these obstacles. I am not completely convinced that I would have successfully met all of my objectives either. For instance, I relied on documents that I had written in the seminar to facilitate the preparation I needed for the written portions of both my qualifying and preliminary exams.

The companionship established in the cohort and departmental support offered from guest speakers were described in these excerpts as aiding in the participants' ability to overcome academic obstacles. Preparation and organization resulted from these revelations, providing participants with a range of anticipated obstacles to overcome with tools on hand. Value resulted from participants' success on graduate exams

tied to degree process and/or ability to visualize success in securing a position in higher education.

Vested Interest

The code *vested interest* explicates the motivating factors which influenced participants' level of interest and the anticipated results. Participants' initial dissatisfaction with one-credit seminar descriptions quickly shifted once they were engaged in the course and its requirements. Student autonomy provided choice and ownership, further establishing purpose and meaning to professional seminar. The following excerpts illustrate a need for topics to be transferable to multiple educational fields, allowing for common characteristics to emerge, defining what it means to be a scholar.

In Britney's excerpts she stated the importance in not only accessing these academic skills, but expressed plans to use products created in this seminar for future reference. Also, Britney described the importance in transferring generalizable skills and resources to her own field. Generalizing effective skills and resources was also discovered as offering value to the departmental support, a conceptual category, as discussions from a diverse set of experts were able to be transferred effectively by a diverse set of doctoral students:

A variety of professors supported us by discussing grant writing, vita development, making conference connections, and submitting journals for publication. These discussions also gave purpose to the experiences we had in our doctoral program . . . meaningful discussion centered on how all of these job related skills were unique to each of us in our own field, yet transferable to all scholars in the higher educational field. . . . I am going to organize the projects done thus far in this seminar to refer to often. The importance behind these ideas will carry me forward to graduation and beyond.

It is also evident from Britney's excerpts that vested interest stemmed from two different types of goals, short term and long term goals. Usefulness in terms of connections between short and long term goals has also been evident as offering value, the overarching theme, and found in opportunities, a conceptual category. Thus, vested interest described a sense of purpose in regards to how useful an opportunity was perceived by doctoral students.

Moreover, Jane reiterated the potential value advisors perceived the doctoral seminar as having by explaining, "advisors need to emphasize the benefits of the course so that all students realize the impact it will have on their future studies." Jane's excerpt illustrates how useful the doctoral seminar was for students, but

also expressed concern regarding an advisor's perception of the doctoral seminar. Jane's concern was expressed by several doctoral students throughout the narratives, as one credit does not typically indicate to advisors or advisees a useful course for doctoral students to add to a plan of study.

Vested interest was gained through discussions with speakers and among participants on poignant topics to the participants' career path. Vested interest in the course also pushed participants to consider the doctoral program as a means to an end, providing an accessible career for all students. Heathcott (2005) also discovered that although usefulness can be gained through apprenticeship-type models, too much scaffolding can prevent doctoral students from establishing their own unique identities within academia. Thus, results indicated that it was useful for doctoral students to be given opportunities to discuss scholarly acts with faculty the discussions should not offer too much guidance, as it is also useful for doctoral students to construct their own scholarly identities when engaging in these discussions.

A low level of usefulness, a negative subcode for vested interest, tended to be perceived initially by students when a low number of credits were attached to the course description. A need to better define the value of this course to future doctoral students was expressed throughout the narratives several times.

Conclusion

The participant-researchers' perception of a single credit course and the disinterest of the course based upon the course description are detrimental to the value of professional doctoral seminars. For example, the vagueness of the course description did not inform participant researchers why professional seminar would enrich their doctoral experience. Additionally, lack of motivation to enroll in a one-credit class adds to the devalued aspect of seminar classes. Addressing these issues is essential to developing a better sense of value for courses other than a number of credits attached to it. In fact, one student said that professional seminar could have been "sold" to students to attend by advisors rather than discourage enrolling in the class. That said, participant-researchers think that consistent and specific information regarding the course description needs not only to be advertised but also consistently encouraged throughout the department by emphasizing the usefulness (Jones, 2009) of professional seminar. Since this course is designed to encompass three or more years of seminar, a 3-year course content rotation would lend itself well to encouraging continuous enrollment. If this rotation existed and was clearly communicated in the fall semesters, there is a higher likelihood that enrollment would increase. Professional seminar course descriptions

and number of credits should be re-evaluated to make the course more inviting.

Building the professional seminar learning community required time for development. The facilitating professor put time on the front end into lining up meaningful speakers, yet she also allowed unplanned days on the syllabus for seminar students to choose topics of other interest to them. Based on these student-selected topics, she invited additional experts to share their experiences and knowledge of the student-chosen topic. In addition to planning, the learning community naturally developed through time spent on collaborative projects (e.g., developing this paper, e-portfolio design, grant funding searches, and reflections from conferences). Not only did class participants voice interests in the course design, but they shared personal experiences of professional developments throughout and beyond the class semester that was initiated by course assignments.

Aspects of role identity emerged indirectly when the participant researchers described what they valued from the seminar class. Participant-researchers recognized that the course encouraged them to seek their role and identity with each speaker's presentation on various aspects of the higher education world. Specifically, one student said the course assisted with finding appropriate journals for paper publications as well as finding grants to fund research projects. The social construction of the course included freedom to talk and to share in the learning process which facilitated the formation of individual academia identities and professional development. For instance, in the results, Jane's excerpt stated that before taking this doctoral seminar, "there [was] a 'lingo' and a code that was unintelligible to me as an 'outsider.'" As faculty presented and students shared their experiences a socialization process occurred that demystified the fear and uncertainty some students held for the doctoral process. Ann's excerpt expresses the importance behind these presentations, as they "took the mystery and fear out of what lies ahead for us after we complete our program."

Discussion focusing on program expectations tended to reveal realistic strategies to meet doctoral goals. Mitigating these trajectories allowed for peer and expert collaboration and support establishing purpose for doctoral requirements. After spending two consecutive semesters in professional seminar, students were more confident and secure in the doctoral program. Listening and learning from peers who were further along in their program of study both benefited and encouraged students to navigate through the doctoral journey more effectively (Dorr et al., 2008). Furthermore, interactions with faculty also provided insight into the role identities of academia for the research-participants, confirming scholarly acts and language typically used in academia (Jazva-Martek, 2009).

In conclusion, future professional seminars may profit from a more explicit course description. Along with this print communication, departments need to

verbally advertise the benefits gained from professional seminar. Since professional roles and identities develop over time, a 3-year curriculum rotation has a higher probability of strengthening these roles and identities. Finally, socialization fosters both ownership and collaboration across content areas within the department. The entire doctoral journey is one that entails many levels, each with various components that need to be practically experienced and performed rather than known theoretically. In order to further understand the impact of a professional doctoral seminar course, future research could examine doctoral students' who participated in a multi-year doctoral seminar to better infer successful transfer of professional job related skills and resources.

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