Becoming an Expert: A Classic Grounded Theory Study of Doctoral Learners

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Abstract

The theory of Becoming an Expert is about the transformation from a student who consumes knowledge to expert and scholar-researcher who creates knowledge. However, more conceptually, the theory is equally applicable to anyone who progresses from novice to expert in a specific endeavor or field. The process may start with an innocuous idea as "I would like to learn more about ABC." Through a series of trials and tribulations—referred broadly as juggling in the theory—the person gains necessary experience in this area. These needed trials and tribulations are what help the person transform to an expert. Without these troubling incidences, these people would not necessarily have the opportunities to reflect and grow. As proficiency and knowledge are gained, as the person reflects on tumultuous events, he or she transforms into an expert.

Keywords: doctoral learners, attrition, classic grounded theory, success, juggling, novice, expert

Introduction

German people have an interesting expression about the word *if*: Wenn das Wort wenn nicht wäre, wenn mein Vater millionäre. The translation is "If the word 'if' didn't exist, my father would be a millionaire." By that analogy, if doctoral programs were easy, everyone would do them. Yet, to explain why some students or candidates do not succeed, that analogy is not satisfying. Thus, it is important to understand the situation from a deeper perspective given that the attrition rate of doctoral students varies between 40-50% (Terrell, Snyder, Dringus, & Maddrey, 2012); in online programs, the attrition rate is higher--up to nearly 70% (Gardner, 2010; Maul, Berman, & Ames, 2018).

Doing doctoral studies is supposed to be transformative as the work changes a person from a learner to an autonomous scholar (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). Yet, from the aforementioned statistics, anywhere from only 30-60% of the students who enter a doctoral program succeed and it is not entirely clear why. Though research certainly exists on doctoral attrition in numerous fields, what is not known is what doctoral students and candidates believe *they* need to succeed in their programs. It is the objective of this author to explain what doctoral students and candidates need to succeed. Additionally, it will be valuable to understand in a more nuanced manner what some positive and negative elements that help and hinder doctoral learners. With this new knowledge, educators, post-

secondary administrators, and even doctoral students and candidates themselves will be able to understand more clearly why attrition is so high and what could be done to lower those alarming and disappointing statistics.

Methodology

As the research design for this study, the author used classic grounded theory. The objective of this design is to understand the behaviors of participants as they attempt to address their main concern. In the case of this study, the main concern is (presumably) how students and candidates successfully complete their doctoral program.

Following the tenets of classic grounded theory (Glaser, 1965), from a procedural perspective, this author created gerund codes from the raw data, constantly compared codes with each other, and wrote memos to uncover any heretofore undiscovered connections. As codes developed into categories, the categories were constantly compared with other codes and categories and additional memos were created. Memos were constantly compared with each other, then sorted, and the data were conceptualized with the ultimate goal of developing a theory.

Instrument

The objective, in any classic grounded theory study, is to "instill a spill" (Glaser, 2009, p. 22): a way to get participants to talk freely about whatever issues surround their main concern without directing or limiting them (Spradley, 1979). To accomplish this task, it may be important to have, using a qualitative term, a semi-structured interview. However, in classic grounded theory, rather than a list of questions, a single "grand tour question" (Leech, 2002, p. 667) was used. For this study, the grand tour question was: What is it like being a doctoral learner? By allowing participants to answer this question in whatever manner they wish, by only asking for additional clarification, and by remaining open to all unforeseen possibilities, through extensive memo writing, the researcher was able to develop the theory of Becoming an Expert.

Literature Review

Ample research exists as to why some online learners leave their doctoral programs (Ames, Berman, & Casteel, 2018; Maher, Wofford, Roksa, & Feldon, 2017; Sutton, 2014; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Some educational researchers (Fetzner, 2013; Sutton, 2014; Willging & Johnson, 2009) have even proposed various causes (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Burkholder, 2012; Shaw, Chametzky, Burrus, & Walters, 2013) for such attrition. The reasons may be organized into these categories: (a) poor prioritization of time (either due to poor time management or family and private issues) (Burkholder, 2012; Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018); (b) displeasure of the course (either due to the style of the course or professor, or because of a misalignment between what the learner expects versus what the faculty members expect) (Burkholder, 2012; Sverdlik et al., 2018); (c) insufficient academic focus and performance due to inadequate self-efficacy (Sverdlik et al., 2018); or, (d) other issues such as, but not limited to feelings of isolation, inadequate motivation and deficient writing (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Though each of these categories will be addressed in turn,

because the themes are often intertwined one with another, a clear separation is not always possible.

Poor Prioritization of Time

Doing doctoral work requires dedication and an extended commitment. No one would argue this point. The continued desire, though, as Maxham et al. (2016) described, is a marathon; it is not a short dash to the finish line. Such a long race requires excellent time management skills. Some doctoral students and candidates might not be as adept as they should be in this regard. Some learners might not realize, for example, that working for 30 minutes several times each day (Burton, 2016) may be better than a three- or four-hour marathon session on one day of the week.

Displeasure of the Course or Culture of the School

Learning style and teaching method need to be in alignment one with the other for optimal acquisition of knowledge. If, for example, the professor only lectures but the student is a visual learner, a disconnect exists and the student will have a more difficult time learning the necessary information. Similarly, if faculty members follow a certain prevalent cultural behavior (Burkholder, 2012), and the student feels that the behavior is in some way incorrect, a disconnect will exist to impede learning. Thus, the needs of learners—with respect to their learning styles—have to be considered.

Insufficient Academic Focus and Performance due to inadequate Self-efficacy

Especially when a student becomes a candidate and starts working on his or her dissertation, a feeling of overwhelm will take hold. The idea or writing a dissertation is a monumental undertaking that terrifies some candidates; they do not necessarily feel worthy of such an undertaking. The idea of worthiness may stem from feelings of imposture syndrome. When symptoms of imposter syndrome manifest themselves (Green, 2016), the result could be "increased levels of stress, burnout, and decreased job performance" (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017, p. 195). A reduction in performance at work for a doctoral candidate, could be debilitation and paralyzing as he or she would not be able to work on the necessary components of the dissertation.

Other Issues

In this subsection, three elements will be presented: feelings of isolation, inadequate motivation, and deficient writing. Though they are placed here under an "other" category, they are by no means to be minimalized.

Feelings of isolation. Without a doubt, doing an advanced degree—especially if it is done in an online environment—is a lonely experience. At a doctoral level, the feelings of ostracism and isolation take their toll on many learners (Barney, 2018). For this reason, possible, some doctoral candidates do not proceed beyond the All But Dissertation (ABD) stage. Engagement, therefore, is crucial (Ames, Berman, & Casteel, 2018; Chametzky, 2018).

The need for engagement begs the question "what kind of engagement?" Academic cohorts play an important role in the success of students (Barney, 2018; Marshall, Kocko, & Davidson, 2017); without them, doctoral students and candidates have a harder time to succeed.

Engagement doesn't only mean cohorts. If students are connected to their school and feel as if they belong, then following Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, the likelihood is that they will complete their program of study. So, if administrators and educators established social environments for all learners and helped doctoral students feel that they belonged (Hilinka, 2017; Kommers & Pham, 2016; Olive, 2019), the rate of success would theoretically increase. Without social and academic integration, success would not generally be as prevalent.

Inadequate motivation. As Maxham et al. (2016) mentioned, writing a dissertation is a long marathon. Sometimes doctoral candidates lose steam and become unmotivated. The cause of demotivation may stem from many personal or academic factors. Perhaps candidates get to a certain point in their dissertation and no longer feel self-reliant (Sverdlik et al., 2018) in their abilities to accomplish a given task. Perhaps the drive the candidates once had has faded due to disinterest or a change in priorities (Sverdlik et al., 2018). A lack of motivation could potentially also stem from the learning environment. In an online environment, knowledge acquisition is an extremely isolated experience. For someone who needs and thrives on interaction, this environment may cause a decrease in motivation. Regardless of the reason for inadequate motivation, without it, writing a dissertation cannot be easily accomplished.

Deficient writing. Writing is tough. Such an aphoristic statement may seem banal and even perhaps trite, but some candidates might not realize that writing and editing and revising and further proofreading and correcting take a great deal of time and effort. The deficiencies that Johnson and Rulo (2019) mentioned are equally important when writing a dissertation. In a scholarly work such as a dissertation, it is vital that a "lack of clarity, poor organization, weak construction of paragraphs, spelling and syntax errors, and poor document structure" (Johnson & Rulo, 2019, para. 10) not be present at all. To have any of these elements is to diminish the value of the research. Additionally, if a candidate cannot write well and use appropriate vocabulary to present the clear and cogent points, and cannot endure the undesirable elements of distress, potential misunderstanding, and overall frustration (Sverdlik et al., 2018), then he or she will not succeed in completing the dissertation.

Tying the Themes Together

In examining all the themes presented in this literature review, a person is able to make certain valuable observations and connections. These thematic interactions and influences will be illuminated in this section of the literature review.

A number of reasons can explain why a person might have poor time management skills. One possible explanation for poor time management is avoidance. The person avoids the given task perhaps because he or she doesn't like it or, perhaps more accurately, doesn't deem it high enough in importance to accomplish it in a timely manner. While that

answer may seem plausible, the response also seems inadequate as it is not evident why there is dislike or inadequacy. One possible explanation for both issues is inadequate self-efficacy and possible a dislike for the particular task that leads directly to inadequate motivation. If a person does not believe in him- or herself and feels a certain degree of inadequacy—whether justified or not—it is normal human nature for people to procrastinate and avoid doing the task. In this instance, avoidance can masquerade as poor time management. The logical question regarding dislike is why the task is displeasing to the person. An easy answer is not available as each person and reason for not completing a task is different. Yet, it is possible to address dislike, poor time management, and all of the aforementioned issues.

Extremely positive results have been obtained with the Ewing model developed by Ewing, Mathieson, Alexander, and Leafman (2012). In the Doctor of Health Science program at A. T. Still University, with the Ewing model in place, it was shown that success rates increased to 73% (Ewing et al., p. 34). This statistic, higher than what researchers have demonstrated (Gardner, 2010; Maul, Berman, & Ames, 2018; Terrell, Snyder, Dringus, & Maddrey, 2012), is rather remarkable and indeed warrants further investigation.

The model consists of four principles used for student research ventures: (a) a very structured, sequential curriculum is offered; (b) intense assistance is provided; (c) collaborative learning occurs as learners are placed in cohorts; and, (d) a performance-based evaluation of fundamental skills are conducted (Breitenbach, 2019; Ewing et al., 2012). Though this model might not be valuable in all doctoral programs, with its use, it is reasonable to believe that the aforementioned impediments of doctoral students and candidates could be severely limited thereby increasing successful completion rates. Yet, as promising as the Ewing model (Ewing et al., 2012) may be, no extant research exists to explain what doctoral learners (students and candidates) feel they need to succeed in and successfully complete their specific doctoral programs. Only with this valuable information will educators, post-secondary administrators, and even doctoral learners themselves understand more clearly why attrition is so high and what needs to be done to lower those alarming and disappointing statistics.

Becoming an Expert

The theory of Becoming an Expert consists of several broad categories: Hoping, Juggling, Feeling Vulnerable, Restabilizing, and Transforming. From the time a person wants to achieve a goal, these categories come into play at various times during the development and learning process. But for the category of Hoping, the categories are not mutually exclusive of each other.

Hoping

Everyone starts a long-term project with some wide-eyed innocence; hope is evident regardless of the type of project. We all aspire to do, to be, and to achieve something in our lives. Unless we have done something similar, we have or may exhibit a certain naïveté before we are sufficiently enmeshed in the task.

Given the experiential nature of doctoral work, when learners start a program, they are optimistic and hopeful that they will succeed. This belief may be based on their experiences with previous education. But, because very few people have done more than one doctorate, people may not believe any negative elements they might hear; one participant aptly summed up the sentiment: it "won't happen to me." Without having that prior experience, a learner may be under a faulty misapprehension. Additionally, disbelieving could be a defense mechanism to "protect" the person from potential disappointment and vulnerability.

Doctoral learners know the program into which they will be going will be challenging. Yet, at this initial point, they are not fully cognizant of and prepared for the frustrations and challenges that await them because of their inexperience.

Juggling

Doctoral learners are adults who have additional responsibilities outside of school; many of them are in their chosen professions and have families. To add doctoral studies and eventually a dissertation to a potentially already busy life requires careful consideration and planning. Juggling of time and priorities becomes a necessity to ensure that available time exists for the necessary tasks in one's life. Some learners are not "used to the time requirements," as one participant stated, of a doctoral program so sometimes, work and life makes juggling school difficult.

As a learner progresses in a doctoral program, the need for juggling can, and often does intensify. A high degree of flexibility is needed as roadblocks and obstacles exist with "lots of moving pieces," according to one participant—especially during the writing of a dissertation. Without flexibility, juggling cannot successfully take place. If a learner is not sufficiently flexible and able to juggle all of his or her responsibilities, then he or she will need to try to put things "on the back burner" and modify responsibilities and deadlines. As one participant mentioned, "Things happen" and if a student can't be fully dedicated to the task at hand, then he or she may need to "pick up the pieces and move on with a new plan."

Juggling requires two components: being self-motivated and being focused. To juggle all the requirements of life and of a doctoral program, a learner needs to have a degree of self-motivation to be able to prioritize things and possibly set up a study, work, or family schedule so as to compartmentalize all the required tasks in his or her life. Motivation and focus are also important components of destabilization.

Feeling Vulnerable

One of the reasons doctoral work is challenging is the frequency and intensity that learners feel vulnerable. In the beginning, any changes and obstacles are infrequent and minor; learners are able to juggle well. However, as the program progresses, when unexpected elements and changes are more substantial, learners feel increasingly vulnerable. Two broad subcategories of feeling vulnerable are internal and external; both lead to frustration and self-doubt.

A learner may doubt his or her abilities and be disappointed in him- or herself when results are not satisfactory because self-expectations are (perhaps too) high and/or possibly unrealistic. One participant stated that no one "wants to be the weakest link." Another participant commented that it felt that "not getting it right the first time is like failure." These ideas clearly show anxiety and vulnerability.

This feeling of unrealistic expectation may be exacerbated by the gap which exists between doctoral courses and writing the dissertation. The shift from being a student to a candidate might be too steep for some learners. Additionally, possible intimidation may be intensified since the doctoral degree is the pinnacle of education and the person may not be secure enough in his or her abilities to attain that objective.

Feeling vulnerable is also because of external sources which might be related or not to school scan take many forms such as a shift in life events, work, family crises, or the need to revise dissertation chapters. During this time, learners call into question their abilities. With the continual fear of failure present, learner confidence decreases as they are scared. As one participant stated, "I was so nervous and scared that I would bomb."

For school-related obstacles such as a sudden change in expectations, missing files, poor and unprepared professors, incorrect information, or a lack of guidance, learners become frustrated. When these obstacles present themselves, learners feel inadequate; as one participant stated: "The obvious escapes us sometimes." They need people to guide and assist them. Sometimes just "a nugget of clarification really helps," as stated by a participant. Without guidance, learners feel overwhelmed, vulnerable, confused, and frustrated. In fact, this lack of guidance and assistance intensify the feelings of vulnerability and insecurity as learners often second-guess themselves and "soul-search" as to whether doctoral work is for them.

One participant stated that without "an advocate to walk [learners through the various complexities of doctoral work]," doctoral learner success is greatly reduced. The shift from "hypothetical to reality" during the shift from student to candidate is challenging for some learners and exacerbates their vulnerability.

Though doctoral learners may find various elements frustrating, value exists in understanding potentially why those roadblocks exist. While someone might feel "hazed," as one participant commented, since professors went through the challenges and frustrations, these roadblocks are often meant to help doctoral learners get used to figuring things out for themselves as scholar-practitioners would do, and reach higher levels until they are at the oral defense stage. As beneficial as this explanation might seem, knowing when to help the learner and when to tell him or her to figure it out without assistance is challenging.

Doing doctoral work is difficult; it is not supposed to be easy to become an expert in a field. Regardless of the cause or type of challenge and frustration, the learner needs to restore stability in whatever manner possible. Without restabilization, anxiety will increase until a learner is either burned-out or quits.

Restabilizing

During the time of frustration, anxiety, and instability where juggling is not fully possible, the need to restabilize is quite strong. The process of restabilizing can take different forms depending on the learner and the situation. Several types of restabilizing exist.

Be in the moment

It is important for learners to be "in the moment" rather than perseverate on an end goal. One participant commented to "Take one day at a time." Being a doctoral learner means sometimes being myopic rather than hyperopic. Thus, when doctoral work can be overwhelming, learners should be focused and pay attention to "nitty gritty" details in the moment and near future rather than ones in the distant future as they may indeed change as they get closer to the present. Being focused on today can help a learner avoid becoming overwhelmed.

Being focused can happen with good organization and planning. Tasks need to be organized and planned so that they can easily be done in the required time. Planning and focusing also require learners to "follow the guidelines [to] be successful" instead of overthinking and overanalyzing things.

Be motivated

Motivation is needed during doctoral work but sometimes having motivation is challenging when specific deadlines are vague or not present. Having motivating, determination, and "stick-to-it-ness" are also tough when various roadblocks are "dumped on your plate at the same time." These impediments could manifest themselves in different ways. For example, when a professor pushes the learner out of his or her comfort zone, such cognitive stretching should not be viewed as anything but helping the learner grow. Yet, many learners do not view the pushing in this manner. Additionally, motivation is required to depersonalize criticism. As two participants stated, "Don't take things personally. Setbacks will happen." Finally, motivation is required when the doctoral process becomes confusing. According to one participant, "Getting there and learning it is scary" so having motivation, along with trust in the professor and process, can make the entire process a bit easier to manage.

Be engaged

Through interpersonal interactions, learners can potentially overcome struggles. For example, "staying connected to professors is important." When in doubt, it is vital to connect with the professor to ask clarifying questions or request additional assistance. Having patient instructors help learners to overcome whatever struggles are present. Additionally, during doctoral work, the instructor acts as a cheerleader, a barometer, and pushes the learner to exceed previous expectations or reach certain required new levels.

Sometimes learners also need to interact with respected colleagues, and/or family members to get validation, to find a different perspective, to vent, or to obtain clarification on a particular required task. Sometimes, learners need to get and have "social emotional support."

Peers are equally valuable for venting, commiserating, or validating ideas. However, in an online program where true face-to-face interaction does not happen, sometimes peers are misinformed and unintentionally spread incorrect information. Verification of all information received from people outside of the school is vital to keep any frustration or anxiety as reduced as possible.

Finally, some learners need additional outside help such as a proofreader or an editor. Asking for help when needed is vital to restabilize oneself so juggling can once again occur. Disambuity resolves frustration, stress, and anxiety.

Transforming

Transforming is made up of two components: Engaging and Reflecting. It is important for learners to engage with course material and reflect on it to see relevance in their own lives. The equation T(ransformation) = E(ngaging) + R(eflecting) is appropriate to show the interconnectedness of the elements. As is evident in the following figure, the process of transformation is cyclic because engagement and reflection requires learners to "stretch [themselves] professionally and academically [and] move out of one's comfort zone," according to one participant. During doctoral studies, the process of transformation is continual though sometimes imperceptible.

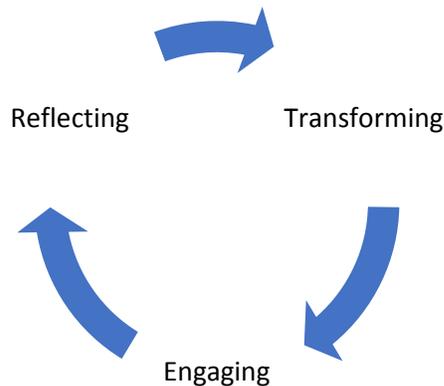Reflecting   Transforming

Engaging

Figure 1. The interconnectedness of transforming, engaging, and reflecting

It is easy to state that reflection is a requirement for doctoral learners; such a statement, though, is almost trite. However, the ways which reflection happen vary depending on the person and circumstance. Additionally, reflection could be backward or forward pointing: Looking back on one's work helps a person see how far he or she has progressed. One participant commented that "I thought one of my skills was writing in the 1st class to now and I thought Oh my god... [that is] something a sophomore in high school would do."

Looking forward is equally possible. When learners see course work relevance in their job environment, a transformation takes place and is enhanced when this relevance is discovered. Such practical relevance is vital in a doctoral program and set the studies apart from other degree bearing programs.

Transforming could also be internal. At some point in time, learners realize that they are in charge of their own learning. This self-discovery, caused by introspection and reflection, can be an unexpectedly pleasant surprise. Sometimes growth comes from experienced self-belief. Doctoral work and writing a dissertation can be daunting. Given that few people have multiple doctorates, a need exists for some "evidence" that a learner can succeed. When a student doubts his or her abilities and then sees good grades after an assignment or successful course completion, the necessary "evidence" is presented that the learner is able to do doctoral work. And with that realization comes growth and transformation. Another element of "evidence" happens when a learner becomes "more analytical outside of classes." At this point, all the possibly imperceptible changes become apparent to the learner. Part of transformation is getting past the feelings of inadequacy and overwhelm.

Recommendations

With the theory of Becoming an Expert, two elements are clear. First, a more nuanced perspective is evident of what being a doctoral learner is like. Next, a clearer understanding is present of what doctoral learners need and, conversely, do not want, in a doctoral program. Based on the interviews conducted, a list of four recommendations—broadly related to several causes presented in the literature review--may now be presented which doctoral learners need to succeed. These recommendations are: (a) the need for accurate and consistent information, (b) proper and adequate guidance, (c) the necessity for strong organizational skills and preparedness, and (d) the need for social interaction. Each idea is discussed in turn.

Learners need accurate and consistent information. To have inconsistent information sends a message to learners of confusion and ambiguity. Given the complexity and stress of doctoral work, additional confusion because of incorrect or inadequate available information is neither desired nor warranted. While some programs may be growing and maturing, any changes or modifications need to be explained to learners with ample time for them to adjust.

Next, the instructor wears many hats in an educational institution: mentor, facilitator, educator, and many others. Within a doctoral program and in doctoral courses, the instructor must be helpful and fully prepared. If there is something that the instructor does not know, he or she must find the answer to tell the learner. What is unacceptable is placing the educational process fully and solely on the shoulders of the learner. The instructor is a mentor to guide the learner when there are questions. Thus, a response like "go find it yourself" is not acceptable when mentoring learners. Similarly, if a learner needs additional support, it is up to the instructor to suggest where that support may be obtained. Tangentially related to the role of the instructor is the need for guidance from an advocate who understands the doctoral progress. Thus, when administrative questions arise from learners, the advocate is able to offer step-by-step assistance. Without such guidance, learners are left to fend for themselves in a confusing environment thereby causing levels of frustration and anxiety to increase.

Third, for a learner to succeed in doctoral work, being highly organized is necessary. On the course level, each learner needs to know the requirements and plan out how long each task will take. On the dissertation level, learners need to schedule time to research and write. Given that multiple reviews occur for each dissertation chapter, a learner should build into the schedule these required additional reviews. Aiming for extensive writing and researching within a short period of time would be desirable as editing and revising can take a great deal of time. Without good and flexible organization, learners cannot succeed. The advocate could and should mention some organizational elements to help learners.

Finally, developing social connections is vital as they help alleviate any frustration that may develop from doctoral work. These connections could be class peers or other learners in the program. With these connections, learners are able to vent and commiserate with one another. Having a sounding board on a doctoral level—whether the program is online or face-to-face—is necessary so frustrations don't become excessive.

If doctoral program and school administrators look at the data regarding attrition rates (Gardner, 2010; Maul, Berman, & Ames, 2018; Terrell, Snyder, Dringus, & Maddrey, 2012) and then implement these recommendations, it would stand to reason that more doctoral learners would be able to Become an Expert rather than become a statistic.

Discussion

It is now valuable to look at Becoming an Expert from a broader perspective. The ultimate objective of doctoral training is to transform a student into a scholar-researcher capable of producing high-quality research. Since the key word in the previous sentence is *transform*, within the context of educational theory, looking briefly at Mezirow's Transformational Theory becomes valuable.

Mezirow devised a list of 10 stages that make up transformative learning (Katz, 2018). The first stage is a disorienting element (Fleming, 2018) which sets in motion the entire process. A disorienting trigger (King, 2009) allows the person to reflect, grow, and reemerge a new (Chametzky, 2013). Without this "emotional disturbance" (Fleming, 2018, p. 3), a transformation could not take place (Katz, 2018). In doctoral work, then, for transformation to take place, some disorienting event is needed.

Also needed is the element of self-reflection ("Transformative learning theory [Mezirow]," 2020). Without critically reflecting (Fleming, 2018) on a disorienting element— and on a doctoral level with the stakes being so high and the multilayered navigating taking place such a task may be difficult—transformation and growth cannot occur. In this light, it might be possible to state that the imbalance that learners feel when they are not successfully juggling is a necessary component to transformation, though many doctoral learners would certainly disagree.

Finally, this transformation is universal. If the 10 stages of Mezirow's theory (Fleming, 2018; "Transformative learning," n.d.) are examined more closely (see Figure 2), it is clear to see that through conceptualization, the 10 stages can be thought of in four broader components: "(a) conflicting considerations, (b) making discoveries, (c) modifying oneself, and (d) becoming anew" (Chametzky, 2013 p. 15). As Chametzky (2013) stated,

"taken together, these four categories could be viewed as a Personal Learning Lifecycle that every living creature follows" (p. 15). In looking at these four stages, then, it is easy to see the universality of transformation and of becoming something.

If this learning universality is accepted, then the idea of Becoming an Expert has a direct connection to Mezirow's theory and is made more relatable since all people experience such a lifecycle and, during our lifetimes, we all aspire to grow and transform into something different from what we currently are.
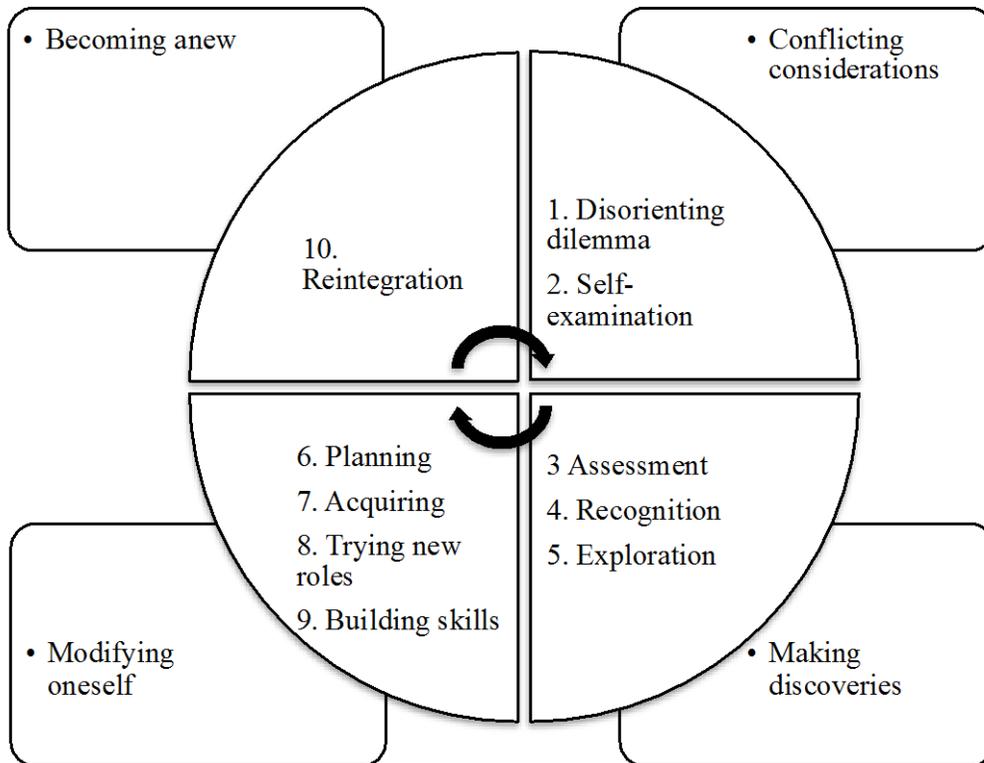

Figure 2. Mezirow's 10 stages with broader categories

Limitations

Two limitations to this study are present. First, to develop the theory of Becoming an Expert, only 11 participants were required for the theory to be developed. In classic grounded theory, through constant comparison of elements (Glaser, 1965), such a sample size is acceptable. Though respectable in classic grounded theory, such a sample size may be a bit sparse in typical qualitative analysis.

Second, one post-secondary school was used so all participants had the same doctoral learning background. While such a limitation is not problematic in classic grounded theory, in qualitative analysis, such a limitation may be concerning as generalizability may be limited. In classic grounded theory, though, with constant comparison and conceptualization, such a concern is not an issue.

Conclusion

The idea of juggling many components—a sort of multilayered navigating—as evidenced in the theory of Becoming an Expert, is complex and non-linear. The continual shifting between juggling and restabilizing is often exhausting for doctoral learners yet the movement is necessary for transformation to take place. One participant described the process as required "a lot of pure grit" which may be exacerbated by the lack of "spoon feeding" thereby underscoring the need to juggle multiple components. Through frustrating, growing happens if learners can navigate the negative elements while successfully juggling. Becoming an Expert is a combination of juggling and continual forward movement to the end goal.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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