

Peer Networks and the Pursuit of a Doctoral Degree

Hailey E. Daehnke, Texas A&M University

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Collaborative learning is a broad term that covers a wide range of teaching and learning methods consisting of group efforts between students or students and teachers. (Smith, B.L. & MacGregor, J.T., 1992). During the past twenty years collaborative learning has become a catch phrase in every level of education, with a variety of teachers using different methods in many different disciplines. Collaborative learning is based on five different assumptions about learning. The first assumption is that learning is an active process (Smith, B.L. & MacGregor, J.T., 1992). One cannot simply hear information, they must actively engage with it. The second assumption is learning depends on rich contexts (Bruffee, 1984). Learning is influenced by activity and context. The third assumption is that learners are extremely diverse. Students come with a wide variety of knowledge, interests, and experiences. Students must learn to listen to others as well as expressing their own points of view. The fourth assumption is that learning is social (Golub, 1988). Students are not only allowed, they are encouraged to talk to each other in order to build knowledge. Feedback that is given with this method helps create new understanding. The final assumption is that learning is both affective and subjective. Connections are built between learners and ideas.

Doctoral degree work is extremely different from other academic work. Students shift from a classroom focus to a more individual research focus (Hawley, 1993). Instead of being fed information from an instructor, Ph.D. students learn to cultivate their own ideas and articulate unique thoughts and ideas. Additionally, students often carry a much higher academic workload than they have had in the past. The very nature of doctoral programs suggests benefits from collaborative learning could be utilized. The active exchange of ideas is critical in doctoral work, and collaborative groups provide one way to encourage this exchange. In addition to the academic pressures of a doctoral program, students often face other challenges. Academic red tape can cause stress and confusion. Isolation from friends can family can cause additional problems, and financial pressures can make the academic process almost impossible (Lovits & Nelson, 2000; Middleton, 2001). The pressures of a doctoral program can be somewhat alleviated by a strong social network. Peer networks can be used in a variety of different ways, including academic support, professional networking tools, social experiences, and a chance for reflection (Hadjiioannou, X., Shelton, N.R., Fu, Danling, F. & Dhanarattigannon, J., 2007).

In an effort to combat the various issues that face doctoral students, Sport Management Ph.D. students in a major Southwestern research focused university came together to form a collaborative peer group, known as the Graduate Sport Society (GSS). The GSS was open to all Ph.D. students in the Sport Management program, though not everyone chose to participate. In all, seven students chose to regularly participating in the peer group. The participants meet weekly to cover a variety of topics. Ultimately, the group served as writing group, a sounding board, and social support network. Participants in the GSS bring a wide range of experiences and interests to the group. The group consists of four males and three females. Two members are international students and the other five are from different areas in the United States.

Participants are in different stages of the Ph.D. process, with several members being in the first semester of course work, others in the last semester of course work, and the rest somewhere in between. This variety of perspectives allows the group to serve as a strong support network for all involved. Goals and procedures were set by the members of the group at various meetings and these rules were followed by all members. Throughout the process, relationships were formed between each of the participants and all saw some sort of benefit. The study is currently in progress. Six members of the group will be interviewed for this study, examining the effect of participation in a peer support group on the doctoral experience of each student. Questions will examine how the group was formed, problems encountered by the group, and how all of the members helped support each other in the pursuit of their doctoral degrees.

This examination of peer group is unique and adds to the literature in several ways. First, other research has been done to examine the benefits of groups that meet for a single purpose, such as comprehensive exams (Abbey, S., Bailey, B., Dubrick, J., Moore, K., Nyhof-Young, J., Pedretti, E. & Saranchuk, R., 1997), groups formed by both professors and students (Hadjiioannou, X. et al, 2007), and groups formed in preparation for research (Brunett, P.C., 1999). However, little research has been done to examine a group formed entirely by graduate students with voluntary membership, as in the GSS. This facet of the group makes it very original. Additionally, the study will examine how the group was formed and how it continues to serve the needs of student participants. This will serve as an example of how other students can create a similar group for themselves.