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*This chapter explores the critical nature of relational learning and boundary crossing in a doctoral program that combines low-residency and community online learning.*

## Crossing Boundaries in Doctoral Education: Relational Learning, Cohort Communities, and Dissertation Committees

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This chapter explores relational boundary crossing in doctoral education as a way to improve student learning and faculty satisfaction. A brief introduction sets the stage by articulating a recognized set of challenges for student learning in the current context of U.S. doctoral education. The chapter then introduces elements of an innovative twenty-first century doctoral study with a focus on a successful interdisciplinary doctoral program in which both authors have worked for over a decade. In particular, the authors explore key aspects of program design, including the nature of relational learning in cohort communities of practitioner-scholars as well as the nature of relational practice among faculty members with a specific focus on the culminating dissertation committees. Evidence demonstrates that a primary focus on student learning that incorporates intentional relational practice has increased student persistence and graduation and enriched faculty work lives.

Both authors have been involved in the design and development of a distinctive geographically dispersed low-residency doctoral program in leadership and change for the past decade. The program includes students from across the United States as well as abroad who meet four times a year at various Antioch campuses for residencies and otherwise pursue their

studies using a variety of technologies to stay connected with their cohort and faculty. This effort has challenged, humbled, and inspired us. We have discovered the complexity of navigating across multiple boundaries of teaching and learning in the paradoxical context of intensive face-to-face quarterly residencies combined with at-a-distance, technologically enabled, interresidency periods.

The authors' roles have differed—one is a full-time faculty member and the other is a program director with some advising and teaching responsibilities. Holloway's background is in counseling psychology, and she has spent many years teaching in traditional doctoral programs and practicing in clinical work while researching supervisory discourse and respectful engagement in the workplace. Her work has been built on relationship development as a vehicle for change. Alexandre's background is as an interdisciplinary social scientist with expertise in media and gender studies. For the past two decades, she has served as an academic administrator with a keen interest in relational leadership.

### **Challenges to Student Success in U.S. Doctoral Education**

Despite its many successes, U.S. doctoral education is replete with disturbing characteristics and outcomes. Findings show that most recipients are inadequately prepared for the settings in which they will work; women and ethnic minorities are underrepresented, attrition often exceeds 50 percent with higher numbers in the humanities and social sciences (slightly lower in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and program time to completion is now well over seven and a half to eight years (Council of Graduate Schools, 2006). Any other system with such disgraceful results would be in need of a major overhaul instead of, as often is the case in doctoral study, declared indicators of quality because those who don't graduate simply don't have the intellectual capacity.

In *Leaving the Ivory Tower*, Lovitts (2001) suggests that it is not students' background characteristics that affect their persistence outcomes but what happens to them after they arrive at the university. She notes the isolation, chilly climate, lack of access to faculty, and peer competition as contributing to students' experiences of inadequacy and distaste for academic life.

We believe that many of these negative characteristics can be addressed effectively by the intentional inclusion of relational practices in the ways students and faculty interact with and empower each other. Lovitts's recommendations for changing the organizational culture and social structure of graduate education to promote student retention, research relevance, and nurturing learning communities support this position. The calls for these types of structural shifts are part of a more generalized call for rethinking the PhD to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, while we see a rise of new forms of interdisciplinary and practice-based doctoral study (Boud and Lee, 2009), many programs replicate the unproductive aspects of traditional doctoral culture and have given scant attention to the changing demographics and needs of doctoral students as adult learners. For example, traditional doctoral programs have not shifted to the twenty-first century student learners who are older, working adults reflecting diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, class, and international cultures (Kasworm and Bowles, 2010). Kasworm and Bowles argue that “remaking” doctoral education to “fit” today’s students requires a focus on self-directed learners, an understanding of the impact of forming and re-forming social and personal identities through transformative learning, and the significance of multiple and diverse communities of practice as an influence on student learning. To focus on high-achieving professional adult self-directed students changes the nature of student-to-student and student-to-faculty relational power structures. Adult students bring life experiences that draw into question traditional notions of expertise. Holders of rank and authority outside the academy have the maturity to question authority relations inside the academy.

So what are characteristics of a doctoral program that can successfully attract and retain “new” doctoral students? How does relational learning recast doctoral faculty work?

### **Antioch’s PhD in Leadership and Change**

Originally founded by noted abolitionist Horace Mann in 1852, Antioch was in the forefront of combining academic study with nonacademic work in the 1920s. Continuing this tradition, in the 1960s, Antioch experimented with interdisciplinary teaching and learning, student-centered education, egalitarianism in classroom and governance, experiential learning, and a focus on teaching rather than on research (Kliwer, 2001).

Confident in its historic distinctiveness, Antioch University inaugurated an interdisciplinary PhD in Leadership and Change in 2002. The program was highly innovative in design and delivery, framed in Antioch’s historic mission valuing the interconnectivity of theory and practice, a deep commitment to social justice, and grounded in well-established research on adult learning. The program is a cohort-based, outcomes-based, geographically dispersed doctoral program designed for experienced professionals who are leading change in their respective fields of practice. A recent ten-year external program review concluded that the program “is serving as a national model to inform the continuing discussion of the nature of doctoral education in the United States and around the world” (Eby and Plater, 2010, p. 4).

With its “blended” learning design, the program holds quarterly residencies attended by all faculty and students, who travel from across the nation and internationally to attend. These residencies raise many

relationally challenging considerations as faculty and students meet not only in classroom settings but also in restaurants and hotels and other non-program situations. As a learning community of over one hundred adult students and a dozen faculty travel away from home and work, appropriate professional behavior and boundaries are based on good judgment and a seasoned sense of self.

Interresidency periods raise a different set of relationally challenging considerations, as the learning community engages in robust technologically enabled forms of communication. In addition to phone, e-mail, and the structured processes of the program's Learning Management System, students and faculty now also incorporate Skype, Adobe Connect, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social media. There is no official downtime; contact is virtually twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and the expectation of almost immediate response time continues to rise. The fact that faculty members work from home offices adds to the difficulty of establishing and retaining one's own private and separate space. Responding to these demands, we have established guidelines for faculty members and students to allow forty-eight hours for e-mail responses and two weeks for feedback on written work. As more students become engaged in social media networking sites, the faculty has discussed issues around being connected to students on such sites. Although it is an individual faculty member's decision, we, as a faculty, have not chosen to join the more personally oriented sites, but many of us have joined professional networking sites that include our current and former students. (For an in-depth consideration of boundaries in the context of social media, see Chapter Two of this sourcebook.)

With an interdisciplinary community of faculty and students, the curriculum is designed to provide a learner-centered structure for both peer and individual study with an emphasis on academic rigor, applied research, experiential learning, and reflective practice. Traditional "courses" have been replaced by structured and sequenced "learning achievements." Grades have been replaced by extensive narrative evaluations. The traditional dissertation has been retained and is discussed later in this chapter.

Each annual cohort of twenty-five to thirty students is a highly diverse group characterized by a mix of professional sectors. Typically each cohort has close to 65 percent women; approximately 50 percent of a cohort is in their fifties; and nearly 40 percent are persons of color. These are today's doctoral students!

Retention is much higher than traditional doctoral programs: nearly 75 percent of entering students earn their PhDs in seven years or less. We believe two factors account for this, factors that are deeply connected to the relational practices of the program. First, learning experiences are structured so that each builds on the others, thus generating a strong sense of momentum based on the student's passion and professional practice.

Second, the program relies on strong personal support among cohort members and with faculty.

The program design, coupled with this extraordinary diversity, promotes a level of collaborative learning that is rare in doctoral education. The embeddedness of relational community building allays the geographical distance and addresses many of the challenges mentioned earlier in this chapter.

### **Creating Communities of Relational Learning Across Difference**

To support student success, we believe it is necessary to create communities of mutually beneficial and respectful learning as opposed to programs based on peer competition and isolation. As noted by Ehrenberg and Kuh (2009) in *Doctoral Education and the Faculty of the Future*, efforts to improve doctoral education should focus on the characteristics of the curriculum, the advising provided to students, clearly articulating objectives and requirements, and integrating faculty and students into a community of scholars.

Taking a holistic approach to rethinking doctoral study means that in addition to redressing curricula and pedagogy, we believe there is something essential about establishing a welcoming community that honors each individual into a culture of high individuality and equal worth. This is at the core of Antioch's program culture. This approach doesn't naively assume that all participants are the same. Clearly, individual students are more or less prepared for intense advanced study, more or less engaged in learning, and the like. There are obviously authority differences and positional power relationships. Faculty must evaluate students' work and the degree to which standards of rigor and competence have been met. Yet, all this said, people within this learning community come together as equals although having different roles and responsibilities.

Much emphasis is placed on learning effectively together and creating a shared community identity. It is not an afterthought. The program intentionally places emphasis on "relational practice," as discussed by Fletcher (2001), in terms of trust, mutuality, and empathy, not characteristics traditionally associated with doctoral study. The program is committed to the underlying belief that each and every community member has the ability and the right to succeed. That message is reiterated in many ways. The norms for respectful discourse—listening, reflecting, valuing—are set forth from the first day forward. Behaviors that reinforce shared knowledge building and peer learning are valued. This is particularly important in a doctoral community that is as highly diverse as ours. In discussing the ways in which the program's learning environment enables difficult topics, such as marginalization and inclusion, to be discussed and mutual learning to be practiced, one student noted, "As a member of a particular cohort and of the larger doctoral community, I feel I must take responsibility for

creating a welcoming and safe environment. Creating a welcoming environment is a shared effort.” Another student noted, “The faculty and students have worked effectively to create a sense of community and reasonable trust, both of which are critical in developing a safe learning space.” This sense of personal trust and safety assumes that community members feel comfortable to self-disclose and share a level of intimacy that requires relational comfort, a common ground that is often hard to find in the deeply divided and polarized culture of the United States.

The program takes seriously welcoming the whole person in other rather unique forms as well. For example, the program invites partners and spouses to all residencies and has created a “partners’ track” (special residency sessions designed for significant others). And graduates are invited back to residencies anytime, as this becomes their lifelong learning community. These decisions ask all members of the community to be open to different “status” of learners and move within the boundaries of their own roles without violating the trust of others. We believe creating an open relational community of mutuality and respectful engagement across differences of role and status greatly enhances students’ self-awareness as leaders and change agents.

### **Faculty: From Self to Team Focused**

Maintaining a learning community that values the sorts of relational practices in faculty–student relations discussed earlier requires significant attention to the structure and quality of faculty–faculty relations. The program has established intentional and strategic ways to build relational bonds among the dozen faculty members. After an initial discussion, we examine how this manifests in the culminating experience of the dissertation and faculty relations on the dissertation committee.

**Faculty with Faculty.** Whereas traditional doctoral faculty members focus on their own research and the all-powerful one-on-one apprenticeship of advanced students, Antioch’s PhD faculty members place primacy on student success, with learners being supported by a proactive interdisciplinary faculty team. In support of that, the program has established intentional structures that value, require, and reward faculty collaboration. For example, we jointly create the residency schedules and engage in extensive team teaching. To the degree possible and appropriate, we rotate responsibility for sessions so that no one “course” belongs to an individual faculty member. Two faculty members evaluate every student assignment, which requires a sense of trust among the faculty members that another is not judging their professionalism or competence. Rather, one faculty member focuses on the student’s demonstration of the required learning goals or the particular assignment and the other focuses on the student’s development over time across many assignments.

There is another important way in which the program creates the conditions for relations of trust, equality, and collaboration. Antioch University does not have tenure, but the PhD program does have a rank process, and all program faculty members hold the same senior rank—full professor—and receive the same salary. This eliminates a caste system that rewards through monetary or other means the contributions of one member as more important than another. It also eliminates some of the pain and difficulty of peers in a small unit making promotion decisions. The annual performance reviews take into account and recognize the faculty members' collaborative orientation and contribution to the team. Faculty members are mutually dependent on each other to achieve our individual and collective purposes, which are student success and program excellence. When faculty members act outside of this norm, the disruption is apparent. For example, when a faculty member assumes the sort of one-on-one apprenticeship or ownership of a student, it causes friction within the faculty body, isolates the student (albeit she or he may not realize that), and causes abnormalities in our program's relational efforts.

Overall, faculty members consider the connectivity and team spirit to be one of the strengths of the program and one of the most satisfying aspects of their work lives. In all surveys of faculty satisfaction completed for program self-studies, faculty members express a high degree of satisfaction with the way they work together in a noncompetitive environment that honors what each contributes. Fostering this sort of faculty team feels like it comes naturally but, in fact, as discussed, the program is intentional in establishing ways in which the relational practice of faculty members is nurtured in this interdisciplinary team.

### **Crossing Relational Boundaries on the Road to the Dissertation**

All of this boundary-crossing relational practice for student success comes to a culmination in the dissertation process, a component of doctoral study that is often fraught with ego-driven tension and discipline-reified conflict that too often damages students.

Despite or perhaps because of the program's innovative nature, the decision was made to require a traditional dissertation. One reason is, frankly, pragmatic, as a PhD program that did not require a dissertation would lack academic credibility. The PhD is by definition a research degree, and its holders are expected to enrich the knowledge base of their disciplines or professions.

The primary focus of what has been written about the supervision and mentorship of the doctoral student examines the centrality of the dissertation chair–adviser and doctoral candidate. Other dissertation committee members typically remain in the shadowed background of the student's journey. Furthermore, it is typically assumed that the doctoral student enters a program with an adviser who will most likely become the chair of

the dissertation; if not, the student will transfer to the prospective chair early in his or her program of study. Yet the singular focus on one individual faculty member is inconsistent with our program model and potentially detrimental to student success.

Based on its study of eighty-four doctoral departments from forty-four universities, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate noted the signature pedagogy of doctoral education—apprenticeship—but argued that it not be done in isolation, for a “healthy and vibrant intellectual community provides the best environment for effective graduate education” and that such a community can be created deliberately. The authors propose a “shift of prepositions: from a system in which students are apprenticed *to* a single faculty mentor to one in which they apprentice *with* several mentors” (Golde, Bueschel, Jones, and Walker, 2006, p. 53). Their reframed mode of apprenticeship has four features:

1. *Intentional pedagogy*. Mentors as expert practitioners engage students in repetitive practice with coaching and feedback and structured support.
2. *Multiple relationships*. Students have formal mentors who guide their development in research and teaching as well as less formal mentoring relationships.
3. *Collective responsibility*. Mentors work collaboratively from a shared vision of student development.
4. *Apprenticeship with* (versus apprenticeship *to*). Mentors seek to develop relationships of mutual respect, based on trust that grows over time through quality interactions. These are reciprocal relationships wherein both sides gain—student gets training, advice, sponsorship, support, feedback; faculty member gets new ideas, infusion of energy, satisfaction.

As is by now apparent, the shift in power differential between apprentice and mentor is radically different from the singular faculty mentor model. In this nested apprenticeship model, students are empowered to choose whose expertise and style best fits their learning needs during different stages along the path to the dissertation. Such shared mentoring requires faculty members to work collaboratively rather than possessively with students in an open and flexible space of distributed relational connections. It is easy for faculty members to experience greater vulnerability and threat without the traditional structure of singular power “over.” However, there are common features between distributed apprenticeship models, creation of thriving intellectual communities, and the growing research on positive relationships. Particularly relevant to intellectual functioning are the relationships between good feelings (that is, positive emotions, moods, and sentiments) and widened scope of attention, broadened behavioral repertoires, and increased intuition and creativity (Fredrickson and



Losada, 2005). Relationships with these characteristics can greatly contribute to a student's successful completion of the dissertation work.

Despite the obvious benefits of distributed apprenticeship, which decreases the hierarchies between faculty and students, there are opportunities for much role confusion when faculty members inadvertently relinquish too much of their positionality and power. Our program has experienced the damage when faculty members cross a relational boundary that conflicts with their primary role as educator and mentor. Consequently, our faculty members discuss openly the complexity of holding to a principle of "power with" the student while simultaneously maintaining the distance needed to evaluate the work (Buck, Mast, Macintyre, and Kafan, 2009). For example, our feedback to students often takes the form of engaging their particular expertise in practice to lead them to the scholarly literature and voice needed in their work. In this way, students join us in improving the work not by merely incorporating our expertise but by strengthening the paper with their own tacit knowledge and practice wisdom. The result is a mutual sharing of expertise, that is, a "power with" relational engagement.

As described earlier, we have deliberately created a process that maximizes meaningful relational connections among students and multiple faculty members throughout their studies up to and including the dissertation. Thus, there are a number of significant relationships that influence the student and his or her scholarship throughout the program. Moving away from an essentially privatized relationship between a supervisor and student to our "distributed" practices of pedagogy and learning within a community of scholarly practice represents the shift that Boud and Lee (2009) applaud in doctoral programs. It is "a shift from the organizing idea of postgraduate research, which attended primarily to the production of research outputs, to the activities and relationships involved in doing doctoral work and producing doctoral graduates" (p. 1). Individual faculty members experience the ebb and flow of involvement with a student over time as other faculty members enter to pick up substantive areas of learning and support. Openly discussing shifts of involvement with students is critical in co-creating a relational context in which explicit expectations around roles and boundaries are clarified up front. Petty jealousies and ownership of one's "own" student have no place in this model.

**Dissertation Committee.** It is from this relational network that the dissertation committee emerges. The four-member committee typically is composed of the three-person internal working group, including the student's adviser, the mentor, and the chair (who may or may not have been the student's adviser); and the fourth member, the external reader. The members' relationships with the student and the chair are varied and much more complex than those among the typical dissertation committee members in traditional settings. Rather than being aligned only with the chair, the student will likely have deep and lasting relationships with all internal

members of the committee. At the opposite end is the external reader who represents the traditional arm's-length member who has no relationship with the student other than reading the dissertation proposal and final report. The dissertation committee is an assemblage of persons who have been an integral part of the student's study of the dissertation topic. One might quickly conclude that such a committee has "too many irons in the fire" and a nightmare of management for the chair and student. The spheres of influence widen considerably when involvement with the student is both historical and substantive. All members of the committee are required to shift and adapt their traditional perception of their role and influence.

Another aspect of difference comes from the interdisciplinary nature of the program and the committee. In more traditional doctoral programs, a chair has the confidence of guiding students through familiar disciplinary terrain. Within a defined field of practice, we are members of a relatively small community of scholars who form networks of knowledge, debate, and influence. Although we may be competitive or disagree with others in our field, we know who they are, their scholarly lineage, and the foundation of their work. Our research is firmly anchored to historical and contemporary research in the field, and this ongoing knowledge of which we are a part allows us to guide our students in gaining access and privilege in the scholarly community. These are assumptions we make that form the foundation of the "expert" role in the mentoring and supervisory relationship. Our knowledge base and connection to a specific academic community is often the primary reason that a student chooses a dissertation chair, and a student's interest in a field of interest plays a role in the chair's decision to work with a student.

These traditional paths for the chair and student are less obvious in Antioch's interdisciplinary program. The chair will have a knowledge and practice in leadership and change, but it may be grounded in a field quite different from the student's area of interest. For example, just within the past year, we have chaired dissertations on organizational crisis, municipal communities of practice, nurse leadership, women social justice activists, social entrepreneurship, and Appalachian women's self-leadership, just to identify six of our more than seventy dissertations. They are all based on foundational knowledge in very different scholarly fields ranging from health care, to business, to cultural anthropology, to sociology. As mature learners and leaders in their respective fields, our students bring a wealth of experiential information and contemporary best practices knowledge to the subject area. Thus, in some ways, we find that the "expert" knowledge and connection to the field of knowledge and scholarship takes on a very different form.

Rather than the chair being the in-residence expert on the subject matter, students seek a mentor outside the program to guide their substantive inquiry into the scholarship of their topic. This content area mentor, once approved by the program, guides the student to ensure that the research

question is relevant and meaningful to the specific scholarly literature in which the study will contribute. At this point, it is clear that there is a shared responsibility in guiding the student through the dissertation study and report around the substantive area of inquiry. The chair must depend on the mentor to guide the student to the specific area of scholarly discourse while simultaneously guiding him or her in the writing, editing, and protocol for the dissertation itself.

It is critically important that the chair remain primary in guiding the overall dissertation, but such guidance is influenced by the input of the content expert mentor. The mentor may be unfamiliar with the local protocols and implicit standards of quality of our program's dissertation. Thus, the chair is negotiating across the boundaries of the relationship with the student and the mentor, the student and self as chair, and the mentor and self as fellow committee member.

In such a morass of relationships (and we have only addressed the mentor committee member at this stage), let us now add a further complication to the network of relationships: the student's adviser. In their first year, students are encouraged to get to know all faculty members in the program so that before the second year, the students can select a faculty adviser. Students make this selection based on their perception of which faculty member will best help them navigate through the program. As they approach candidacy, students choose the dissertation chair, who may or may not have been the student's adviser. The student comes to the chair after careful consultation with the adviser on the best fit for methodology, supervisory style, or related content expertise and interest. The adviser typically serves on the dissertation committee; however, the chair is the primary guide of the student's dissertation work.

This structure for advising has been designed to enhance our collaborative and relational approach to student learning. It is a distributed influence model that in many ways flies in the face of traditional structures where students are "owned" by the "major professor" and are beholden to him or her for progress, recommendations, and, in some cases, even the topic for the research study. We want not only to maximize the opportunity for students to learn from and be guided by those faculty members who are best aligned with their professional and research interests but also to model the importance of collaboration among scholars with different fields of practice and scholarship.

This arrangement is not without its challenges at the time of the dissertation. The chair must carefully orchestrate a process that does not triangulate the student when there are different opinions. Although such differences are part of doing business in traditional committee structures, the long-term relationships students have with each member of the internal committee means differences or conflict among committee members often triangulate the student in a web of conflicting loyalties. Thus, the chair and committee members must have very clear boundaries around their roles on

the committee and in relationship to guiding the student. Committee members must take up differences of opinion with the chair, who then negotiates among committee members. This approach avoids drawing students in and using the weight of prior relationship to sway them. These role boundaries are discussed openly among faculty members. At the beginning of the committee's formation, the chair articulates with the student the roles of each committee member. Even with such precautions, misunderstandings about the execution of the work can easily emerge. Such situations can be resolved without jeopardizing the student's progress only if there is a basis of relational trust, respect, and open communication among committee members. And to date, we have been successful.

As faculty members, we embark on this journey with our students knowing that, in this relationship, there is the potential for our own growth both intellectually and emotionally. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of our program, each student presents the opportunity to learn a new field of practice, a pioneering methodology, or an innovative application of known work. The relationship is not built on the power of our expertise that contributes to the student's interest; rather, it is built on the expertise of guiding relational learning in a way that successfully results in a well-executed and reported original study. As faculty members, we must remain centered and hold the relational tension among the often conflicting roles of ally, advocate, educator, mentor, and gatekeeper. This requires a delicate and firm hand in guiding the student through the intellectual and emotional demands of the dissertation work. A relational approach to this learning and teaching journey focuses on connecting the dissertator to chair and to the subject matter; knowing and knowledge are embedded in relationship (Buck, Mast, Macintyre, and Kaftan, 2009). The interstitial space of the relationship itself is a place where knowledge is mutually imparted and negotiated. As we have discovered in our living within a community of relational practice, it is a place of both risk and opportunity.

## Conclusion

Embedding relational practice into the very fabric of our program's structure has been a challenging adventure. It flies in the face of boundaries relied on in traditional doctoral program structures yet appears to be at the core of addressing twenty-first-century educational models. It requires faculty members to work as a team for the common good of student learning and success; it requires students to engage in peer learning for mutual growth and not solely on individual attainment and competition; and it requires program leaders and faculty members to create different models of delivery and different expectations of student and faculty work, and to reward new ways of mutually engaged teaching and learning. For us, data on student persistence and graduation, and evidence of faculty satisfaction

demonstrate that the challenge has been well worth the risks of navigating new relational structures in doctoral education.

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