

THE FUTURE OF COLLABORATIVE DISSERTATION WRITING IN THE ACADEMY

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## ABSTRACT

Academic research and writing is complex work requiring hands-on experience and step-by-step guidance from experts in the field to achieve the level of competence necessary to produce publishable manuscripts. Considering the limitations of the traditional five-chapter dissertation and the increasing popularity of the multi-manuscript dissertation, a co-authored dissertation should be a current alternative in doctoral programs. By recounting the story of their dissertation journey, the authors hope to encourage future doctoral candidates to consider collaborative writing and continue to break down barriers that prevent the option of a co-authored dissertation.

*Keywords:* collaborative writing, dissertation, practitioner research, doctorate, dissemination

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The five-chapter dissertation has been traditionally the accepted format in which to present original research. According to the digital dissertation repository UMI, however, only 166 out of over one million dissertations published between 1902 and 1987 have been co-authored (Day & Eodice, 2001). Collaborative learning practices like peer writing groups have been identified as “a crucial activity to make the doctoral journey a less fearful and more joyful and constructive experience” (Wegener, Meier, & Ingerslev, 2016), yet the practice of individual research resulting in an “extensive monograph” (Hakkarainen et al., 2014) has been the model of the social sciences.

### **Challenges to Completing a Doctoral Program**

The journey to earn a Ph.D. is a daunting endeavor; one that few people undertake and even fewer complete. According to 2013 U.S. Census data, approximately 31% of the population holds a bachelor’s degree, almost 12% hold a master’s degree or higher, and a mere 1.68 percent have earned a Ph.D. (United States Census Bureau, 2013). The typical Ph.D. program consists of a minimum of 90 credits that includes coursework and dissertation hours and must be completed within ten years. The attrition rate for students in Ph.D. programs is dismal. A study of doctoral students at 29 universities in the United States and Canada found that only 40-50% of Ph.D. candidates completed their program within the requisite ten years, despite rigorous selection processes and high achievement levels among students (Sowel, Zhang, Bell, & Kirby, 2010). Completion rates were higher in mathematics and the natural sciences; however, attrition rates were highest in social sciences and humanities (Sowel et al., 2010). Reasons for attrition in Ph.D. programs are numerous and include issues with time management, exhaustion, burnout, loss of interest in research, balancing personal and school commitments, conflicts with

supervisors and/or advisors, cost of graduate education, problems with writing the dissertation, and a sense of isolation (Carter, 2004; Farkas, 2016; Morrison, 2014). In particular, the time between the end of formal coursework and the completion of the required dissertation is a very challenging period for graduate students, and an increasing number of Ph.D. students drop out of programs after completing their coursework and attaining the informal status of “ABD” (all but dissertation) (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). In the book *The Dissertation Journey* (2010), Roberts acknowledged that the solitary nature of the dissertation process is in part responsible for the 40-50% attrition rate and dedicates a chapter to the value of dissertation support groups.

### **History of the Dissertation**

At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, German scholars merged research and teaching in universities, creating the first doctoral degrees (McClelland, 1980). As these studies developed, the final projects for doctors of philosophy evolved from oral lectures to published dissertations by the mid-eighteenth century (Breimer, Janssen, & Damen, 2005; McClelland, 1980). Roughly a century later, universities in the United States, in an effort to duplicate the German educational system, adopted the tradition of the doctoral dissertation (Duke & Beck, 1999). As a result, the first American doctor of philosophy was awarded by Yale University in 1861 (Wolfe & Kidd, 1971). It was not until the 20th century that countries other than Germany and the United States started regularly requiring doctoral students to complete dissertations (Willis, Inman, & Valenti, 2010).

When the dissertation first originated, the main purposes were to train young scholars in an authentic experience of proper research methodology and to contribute original findings to research (Isaac, Quinlan, & Walker, 1992). These purposes, or traditions, still hold true today. Dissertations are monographs that constitute elements of scientific communication, but their

primary role is to demonstrate that the candidate of an academic title is able to drive and communicate independent and original research (Nassi-Calo, 2016). However, the reality is that far more dissertations remain unpublished than published.

In an attempt to overcome the limitations of the traditional dissertation, some programs in higher education have approved alternative dissertation formats (Archbald, 2010; Lee, 2010). At most universities, the alternative dissertation is often referred to as the manuscript format, and it is the primary format for an alternative approach. There are advantages to the manuscript format that resolves the issues described earlier with dissemination and authenticity.

### **Collaborative Writing**

Collaboration, the act of “working jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor” (“Collaborate,” n.d.) is an essential skill across professional and academic fields. Collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking have been identified as necessary “learning and innovation skills [to prepare] students for increasingly complex life and work environments in today’s world” (P21, 2016). Results of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey found that the top four attributes employers look for are evidence of leadership skills, ability to work in a team, written communication skills, and problem-solving skills (NACE, 2015).

### **Collaborative Writing on the Rise**

This emphasis on the interpersonal skills of collaboration and teamwork is highlighted by the increasing quantity of collaboratively written research articles appearing over the past several decades throughout industry, government, and academia. Across a variety of disciplines in academia in the US and internationally, the proportion of co-authored articles has increased with some journals reporting upwards of 70% co-authored research (Day & Eodice, 2001;

Hakkarainen et al., 2014). A survey of Scandinavian university publications reported a 20% increase in the proportion of staff who co-published from 1979 to 2000 (Kyvik, 2003). Similar increases in multiple-authored journal articles have been reported in the fields of economics and finance, (Barnett, Ault, & Kaserman, 1988), library and information science (Hart, 2000), management (Acedo, Barroso, Casanueva, & Galán, 2006), and in the social sciences (Whicker, Kronenfeld, & Strickland, 1993).

### **Benefits and Challenges of Collaborative Writing**

The authors' rationale for selecting this alternative approach was solidified while participating in coursework together. At this point in time, the advisor was involved in developing accreditation standards for a newly formed national accrediting body and proposed the idea of researching the impact on teacher preparation programs at the local and national levels. Since all the members of the research team were heavily invested in the local teacher preparation partnership, it was a topic that aligned with interests and expertise. The co-authors proposed a dissertation that would describe local and national perspectives on clinical partnerships practice in PK-12 teacher preparation, while also modeling the partnership process throughout the dissertation writing process. Creating a collaborative writing partnership to write about clinical partnerships was a compelling and original concept.

The collaborative writing process had the potential to improve the quality of work due to the team generating better ideas through the sharing of different perspectives from experts in multiple domains (Bayer & Smart, 1991; Laband & Tollison, 2000; Noël & Robert, 2004). The improved quality of the final product increases the probability of acceptance by research journals (Bayer & Smart, 1991; Hart, 2000; Laband & Tollison, 2000, Presser, 1980). Writing as a team allows for brainstorming, positive feedback, and division of labor which increases member

motivation to finish and revise the document in a timely fashion. Additionally, teams benefit from the support of members who all have a stake in the final outcome (Fox & Faver, 1984; Noël & Robert, 2004).

Of course, collaborative writing comes with its share of challenges as well. Working on a team requires its members to be flexible, respectful, responsible, trustworthy, and willing to compromise, knowing that “the process by which collaboration occurs has the potential to create difficulties that range from confusion and misunderstandings, to significantly damaging relationships” (Zutshi, McDonald, & Kalejs, 2012). In a survey conducted by Noël and Robert (2004), some respondents reported that the collaborative writing process made the task more challenging and time-consuming due to difficulties aligning writing styles, following a schedule, and managing multiple editions of a document, as well as managing conflict among team members and communication struggles. Zutshi et al. (2012) also identified attribution of authorship as a significant challenge in the collaborative writing process, specifically relating “to such issues as order of authorship, working with students, individual workloads and credit, opportunism and plagiarism, honorary authorship, and ghost authorship” (p. 34).

### **Collaborative Writing for Doctoral Candidates**

In the academy, as well as the private and public business sectors, collaborative writing has a particularly positive impact on doctoral students for whom one of their primary academic objectives is to learn “the craft of writing, knowledge production and publication” (Wegner & Tanggaard, 2013, p. 5). Academic research and writing is complex work requiring hands-on experience and step-by-step guidance from experts in the field to achieve the level of competence necessary to produce publishable manuscripts. Much of the research on collaborative writing in doctoral programs has focused on candidates co-authoring articles with

supervisors in an apprenticeship model. In this context, benefits to both student and supervisor are numerous.

In their book, *(First Person)<sup>2</sup>: A Study of Co-Authoring in the Academy*, which examines the process of academic co-authoring through a series of interviews of 10 successful co-author teams representing a range of disciplines, experiences, and expertise, Day and Eodice (2001) described their failed attempt to gain permission to co-author a dissertation as impetus for writing the book when administrators at their university believed a jointly authored dissertation could not be considered unless the individual contributions of each student was clearly identified.

### **Our Collaborative Dissertation Journey**

As doctoral candidates, we did not initially seek to collaborate and co-author a dissertation; however, we were advantaged with a unique set of commonalities, circumstances, and opportunities that paved the way for successful collaboration experiences throughout our Ph. D. program. It was those experiences that culminated in our decision to co-author a multi-article dissertation.

### **Stages of Collaborative Writing**

**Brainstorming and outlining processes.** Depending on the writing task, each author took on varying and interchangeable roles: sometimes the writer, other times the reviewer or editor. We each provided leadership, encouragement, and motivation when necessary, and our like-minded work ethic and compatible personalities allowed us to negotiate, compromise, and provide constructive feedback to each other.

We spent significant time engaged in the pre-writing activities of brainstorming and outlining. Normally, we communicated face-to-face during these stages and met almost every week. We organized times and locations for our meetings, brainstormed our initial ideas, and

then one article at a time, created sections, headings, and bullet points for each section. At this stage of collaboration, we rarely drafted; rather, we took notes, sometimes on paper, sometimes electronically, jotted down big ideas, and shared references. We always left each meeting with a to-do list of tasks and deadlines for completion. The tasks included organizing focus groups, analyzing data, completing the necessary graduate school requirements like Institutional Review Board requests and School of Education forms from our institution, communicating with committee members, researching specific topics, and writing drafts of different sections of the articles. To keep ourselves on track for looming deadlines like article completion and the dissertation defense, we created timelines with benchmarks for completion of smaller tasks.

**Drafting processes.** Drafting, or the formal process of writing, can take on many forms while co-writing. When the authors started their work together, Microsoft Word documents were used for initial drafts and to track changes. Comments within the document were utilized as a way to share thinking and ideas. However, as we gained more experience with this mode of writing, we realized quickly that it was not the best use of our time because we were working on two separate documents which needed to be combined eventually. Parallel writing and reactive writing became more effective when we began using Google Docs as our platform to write and share thinking because we could simultaneously work on the articles.

**Reviewing and revising processes.** During the reviewing stages, authors met after to discuss road-blocks in certain sections or with specific ideas. The meetings always had a pre-established purpose or focus, but often the collaboration and discussions during these meetings would extend past our initial purpose for the meeting and would solidify different, or better, directions to head with our writing. The ability to hold these meetings with another individual who was deeply involved with the writing, and who understood what the literature said about the

topic, was paramount. After these meetings, we each went away with a better perspective, a clearer focus, and another set of writing tasks for our individual writings. This would not have been possible had we been working in isolation.

**The role of the Advisor.** The advisor's role in this collaboration was much the same as with a single authored dissertation. Multiple meetings occurred during the writing stage where revisions and suggested edits were discussed. The advisor assumed a writing conference approach and meetings were conducted with all team members present. Advising sessions concluded with delegation of responsibilities and the discussion of future shared timelines.

**Product Outcomes.** The dissertation committee judged each author individually and they shared their individual process and contribution, then both were able to present together about the final shared product. While not without challenges from traditional university requirements, this final presentation satisfied the committee and led to a successful outcome.

### **Conclusion**

Although we gained a great deal of content knowledge in our doctoral program and strengthened our understanding of the complexities of conducting research, we did not find the product of a traditional dissertation format conducive to authentic experience or dissemination of original research. More collaborative and team-oriented research and writing opportunities for doctoral students, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, could help to mitigate some of the factors, such as isolation and problems with writing, associated with Ph.D. candidate attrition.

Interestingly, 20 years after Day and Eodice (2001) were denied permission to present a single co-authored collaborative dissertation, we experienced similar barriers. Even with those challenges our experience as collaborative writers of a multi-article doctoral dissertation has

been remarkably positive. Dissertations can take many forms, but it is time to have co-written dissertations as a viable option in doctoral programs.

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