

Idea to Manuscript: Considering Emotional Wellbeing when Mentoring Doctoral Writing

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Mentoring doctoral students in academic writing is a complex process that involves more than technical instruction; it requires emotional engagement. Doctoral candidates face immense pressure to produce scholarly writing that meets institutional and publication standards. Culled from a larger study of over 50 mentees, the current study explored how intentional, emotionally responsive mentoring can support doctoral students through the writing and publishing process. Drawing on data from questionnaire responses and grounded in a robust literature base, we examined how emotional wellbeing intersects with writing productivity. Key mentoring strategies—such as regular check-ins, collaborative writing routines, and affirmation of student identity—are discussed. The paper highlighted practical implications for faculty mentors seeking to support confident, capable academic writers. Our findings suggest that emotionally responsive mentoring improves both student wellbeing and encourages increased scholarly output.

Keywords: Doctoral writing, mentoring, emotional wellbeing, academic productivity, reflective practice

Introduction

A corpus of work (Curry, 2011; DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012; Garcia Henderson, 2015) highlights the relational aspect of mentoring scholars. The complexity of mentoring doctoral students undergirds the intricacies of this work. Doctoral students are not only emerging scholars; they are whole individuals navigating intellectual growth alongside emotional vulnerability. Writing at the doctoral level is a personal and professional undertaking, often fraught with anxiety, imposter syndrome, and institutional pressure (Huerta et al., 2017; Silvia, 2018; Sulentic Dowell et al., 2022). As students transition from coursework to dissertation and publication, they rely heavily on their mentors—not just for guidance on structure and content, but for emotional support that validates their voice and affirms their academic identity. Informed mentoring that balances intellectual rigor with emotional responsiveness can transform a student's writing experience.

This article explores how structured, empathetic mentoring supports doctoral students in developing academic confidence and producing publishable writing. Mentoring doctoral students' writing demands significant commitment and effort. Such a responsibility and obligation demand rigor. Successful doctoral mentors possess skill sets centered on planning, two-way communication, mindfulness of wellbeing, and cross-collaboration in addition to providing demonstrations of scholarship and opportunities for success.

Literature Review

A growing body of literature emphasizes that academic writing is both cognitive and emotional. Doctoral students encounter stress, self-doubt, and uncertainty, especially during dissertation and publication phases (Casanave & Li, 2015; Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Traditional models of graduate education often assume that students will develop writing proficiency independently, overlooking the need for pedagogical and emotional support (Turner & Edwards, 2006; Silvia, 2018). Mentoring emerges as a crucial intervention, offering tailored strategies to build writing habits, resilience, and scholarly identity (Huerta et al., 2017; Richards, 2014).

Sulentic Dowell et al. (2020; 2021) examined the effectiveness of mentor training in teacher education and identified five consistent mentoring challenges: matching and selection, emotional support, communication, time, and conflict. These same challenges apply to doctoral mentoring, where mentors must recognize the writer's emotional landscape while offering strategic academic guidance. Sulentic Dowell et al. (2022) emphasize that productive academic writing habits emerge not just from skill-building, but from deliberate routines, emotional resilience, and communal writing structures – elements that are often absent in traditional doctoral training. Emotional support is not ancillary—it is central to productive writing relationships. Recent work suggests that consistent engagement, affirming feedback, and co-construction of goals result in greater student productivity and wellbeing

(Huerta et al., 2017; Silvia, 2018; Sulentic Dowell et al., 2022).

Methods

For this study, an exploratory design as described by Maxwell (2008) was selected. This design and ensuing methods allowed the research team to provide deeper insight into the real-world writing stressors faced by doctoral candidates. As a team, we were interested in how our mentoring practices considered the emotional wellbeing of our students as they faced writing and publishing tasks. In particular, we were interested in exploring the 'hows' and 'whys' of participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior as doctoral candidates who had successfully defended their comprehensive exams and were in the proposal phase, the dissertation stage, and/or publishing from dissertation studies.

Participants and Setting

Culled from a larger study of over 50 participants, the present study included six doctoral students who were in various stages of dissertation writing or preparing manuscripts for publication. The six doctoral students we selected to interview, were in graduate programs in two distinct units within a college - School of Education and School of Leadership and Human Resource Development, located at a large public university in the southern area of the United States. All participants had passed their general exams, and thus, were considered doctoral candidates. Two participants were at the proposal stage; two successfully defended their dissertation proposals and were at the data collection or writing stage of the dissertation process, and two had successfully graduated with their PhDs (2022; 2024 respectively). We selected these six as they agreed to be interviewed. Demographic information was self-reported. Of the six participants, five identified as female and one as male. Four identified as White, one as Hispanic (Puerto Rican), and one did not specify ethnicity. Participants had varied professional backgrounds, including K-12 education, higher education, and leadership development. All participants had ongoing experience balancing doctoral studies with work and personal responsibilities, offering a rich context for exploring wellbeing and writing productivity.

Data Sources

This paper is based on an investigation using open-ended questionnaire responses from mentoring an array of doctoral candidates. Questionnaires were distributed electronically. These responses were analyzed according to the process described by Saldaña (2021) with an aim to identify themes that reflect both the emotional and academic challenges faced by doctoral writers. Students responded to reflective prompts such as:

- *What strategies or support systems helped you manage the emotional stress during the writing and/or publication process?*
- *Did you experience any check-ins, monitoring, or work sessions? How did they affect your wellbeing and productivity?*
- *What mentoring actions felt most helpful in preparing your work for publication?*
- *What helped most in adapting your dissertation into publishable content?*
- *What environments, routines, or interactions improved your writing outcomes?*

Analysis

Responses were analyzed as per Saldaña (2021). As a research team, these six participants' responses were coded together, sitting side-by-side by reading and assigning descriptive words and phrases as phase 1 coding. A codebook was established and maintained in order to avoid duplicating codes and to achieve consistency while coding. Once codes were assigned, the research team reviewed all codes as phase 2 coding, merging and collapsing similar codes to the point of saturation (Saldaña (2021) as well as to increase trustworthiness. The research team then clustered codes that were connected and shared relationships into code concepts. Code concepts were then examined and discussed; as a team we developed themes which were assigned to the code concepts. The research team achieved trustworthiness in several ways. This included prolonged access to the study data, and shared reviewing of coding. Table 1 includes themes, code categories, codes, and sample quotes illustrating codes.

Validity and Research Ethics

Maintaining ethical research practices was important to the integrity of the study as well as the research team and the affiliated university. The following were methods of ensuring the most ethical research practices were attained. It was the obligation of the research team to regard the participants' willingness to participate. Internal review board (IRB) approval was obtained.

was properly obtained. As researchers with deep personal connections with the participants, it was important to obtain consent without creating a sense of obligation to participate.

Results

Across responses, students consistently cited regular check-ins, clearly established timelines, and emotionally attuned feedback as essential to their progress. Mentoring activities included structured writing routines, progress check-ins, real-time editing sessions, and motivational goal. Informed consent was explained prior to the start of the study, and informed consent documentation setting. Many participants expressed that they had previously viewed writing as isolating and overwhelming, but participation in collaborative

writing groups and scheduled work sessions helped normalize the process. Students noted that being seen and heard by their mentors—in both academic and personal dimensions—was motivating. Those who received affirmation alongside critique developed greater confidence in their writing and a clearer scholarly voice. These participants reported feeling emotionally cared for by their major professor, and thus, that despite the rigor of doctoral work, and the intensity of expectations, their wellbeing was considered while they engaged in this demanding work.

Discussion

This reflective analysis supports the assertion that mentoring doctoral students as a major professor must be holistic. Effective mentors do more than critique drafts—they coach, encourage, and validate. Drawing from the mentoring literature in teacher education (Sulentic Dowell et al., 2020), it becomes clear that building strong mentoring relationships requires time, structure, and intentionality. The emotional stress students reported mirrors findings by Huerta et al. (2017) on the mental toll of academic writing. Yet students who reported regular feedback and structured mentoring routines felt better supported. This suggests that institutions should invest in training faculty mentors not just as content experts, but as academic coaches who understand the emotional dimensions of the doctoral writing journey.

Future research should be conducted that specifically investigates finite components of mentoring writing to extend this body of research that focuses on mentoring doctoral students' writing. Also, studies could be conducted that explore the kinds of writing support doctoral students receive from other faculty as well as peer-to-peer mentoring. Formal faculty mentoring programs that are geared toward new faculty could also be studied to investigate how and what kinds of writing mentoring institutions promote. Such studies could potentially add to the mentoring body of research.

Conclusion

Writing is both an intellectual and emotional process. Doctoral students need mentors who can support their academic development while fostering resilience and confidence, building emotional stamina for the work, time, and effort involved in producing a dissertation. The findings presented here reinforce that emotionally responsive mentoring improves student wellbeing and academic output. As more doctoral programs move toward publication-based dissertations, mentoring models must evolve to meet these demands. Integrating productivity models like those proposed by Sulentic Dowell et al. (2022) into doctoral mentoring can help normalize writing as a process, rather than a solitary or perfectionist task. Faculty mentors who understand the emotional stakes of writing—and who provide consistent,

individualized support—are best positioned to guide students from idea to manuscript.

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Appendix

Table 1.
Participant Demographics and Dissertation Status

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Program Affiliation	Dissertation Status	Graduation Year	Professional Background
P1	Female	White	School of Education	Proposal Stage	N/A	K-12 Education
P2	Female	White	School of Leadership and Human Resource Development	Proposal Stage	N/A	Higher Education
P3	Female	Puerto Rican (Hispanic)	School of Education	Post-Proposal (Data Collection/Writing)	N/A	Leadership Development
P4	Male	White	School of Leadership and Human Resource Development	Post-Proposal (Data Collection/Writing)	N/A	K-12 Education
P5	Female	White	School of Education	Graduated	2022	Higher Education
P6	Female	Not Specified	School of Leadership and Human Resource Development	Graduated	2024	Leadership Development

Table 2.*Themes, code categories, codes and sample quotes from doctoral student writing reflections*

Theme	Code Categories	Code	Sample Quote	
Supportive Strategies	Support Systems	Family Support	My husband was an incredible source of encouragement... My parents also provided support, helping by driving my children to events...	
		Advisor/Mentor Check-ins	Weekly check-ins with advisor 2 have been helpful... I wanted to ensure I had completed what we had discussed...	
		Writing Groups/ Work Sessions	The few times I participated in writing retreats... I felt noticeably more confident... accomplished more in shorter periods...	
	Mentorship and Belonging	Peer and Cohort Interaction	Other doc students (some from shared coursework, some introduced by advisor)... all of the above had a positive impact on my wellbeing.	
		Encouragement and Belonging	They created space for me to voice my doubts... reminded me... that I do belong in this space...	
		Tactical Support	Tactical Support	She sends me strategies for drafting a manuscript or links to journals...
			Modeling and Examples	Providing examples/models from previous students' work, practical tools such as reconciliation charts...
			Peer Modeling and Anticipated Help	I am thankful to have friends navigating this process now and I will rely on them...
		Positive Emotional Routines	Wellbeing Strategies	Mindfulness and Physical Activity
Emotional Release and Self-Compassion	There were moments when the emotional weight became overwhelming, and I allowed myself to cry as a release.			
Environmental Influences	Dedicated Writing Spaces		I had access to a quiet and comfortable office space on campus, which became a sanctuary for uninterrupted writing...	
Barriers & Emotional Drains	Productivity Strategies	Planning and Goal Setting	I have managed the emotional stress... by planning out each day... using the Pomodoro method...	
		Pomodoro or Time-Blocking Techniques	I join writing groups... using the Pomodoro method... focus on tasks for small increments of time...	
		Monotasking	I used strategies like monotasking and time blocking...	
		Task Visibility and Continuity	Leaving my work out and visible... deciding what I will do next when I 'finish' a writing session...	
	Challenges to Publication	Perceived Barriers	I do not think my dissertation or proposal is publishable... but the beauty of this process is the quality of learning...	