Overview: Restorative Relationships in the Dissertation Space: Co-creating Safety with Doctoral Students

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This project focuses on co-creating safety in the dissertation process with doctoral students. Safety is fundamental to learning, and yet the dissertation process is riddled with stress for many students and dissertation chairs. Too often, we focus on the instrumental aspects of research and writing, ignoring the stress that stems from the enormity of the task, fears related to failure, stereotype threat, and conflicts between completing the dissertation and job and family obligations, to name a few. Given that ongoing critique of students' work is central to the process, the conditions are ripe for mounting stress. This stress runs counter to students' abilities to engage in the demanding work before them. For some, sitting down to work on their dissertation leads to what we often call "writer's block," but may be the brain's response to stress, activating the limbic system and shutting down the prefrontal cortex.

In the doctoral program in Teaching and Learning at National Louis University, we currently have guidelines for chairs and students to help them get through the mechanics of the dissertation process. However, we have not addressed the role stress can play nor strategies for addressing that stress within the context of the chair and student relationship. We want to incorporate a trauma-informed focus on stress, strategies to alleviate it, and principles of restorative relationships into the dissertation guidelines.

The first step of implementing our intervention is to create an analysis of the dissertation process based on trauma-informed principles. This will provide faculty and students with a non-judgmental framework to name, discuss, and focus on strategies to make the process safer. Mays (2022) suggests that we need to "begin by asking yourself what makes you feel safe when you are most vulnerable…Then, you can ask your students what safety means to them and how you can help them feel safe in your course." (p. 40). Once we provide students and faculty with principles of trauma-informed practice, we'll provide multiple opportunities for them to address what safety means to them within the context of dissertation work. Next, we'll collect their reflections as data and analyze this data together with students to provide insights into how stress and safety play out in the dissertation process. Last, this data will inform the co-construction of a trauma-informed dissertation guide.

Given that our focus is on the relationship between the student and chair, we'll draw on principles of restorative relationships, particularly non-abandonment and connecting conversations (Razer, M. & Friedman, V.J. 2017). This will be embedded into the dissertation guide so that student and faculty needs for safety will be intentionally addressed throughout the process. We'll implement this guide and continue to collect data from students and chairs and track our dissertation completion data. We'll review this data annually and use it to revise and refine the dissertation guide.

Our expected outcome is an increase in dissertation completions while nurturing restorative relationships. The co-created dissertation guide will help "Foster trust and increase predictability which, in turn, help mitigate the impact of ongoing uncertainty." It will provide "a clear roadmap for the short, the medium, and the long term for how to succeed." (Mays, 2022, p. 41) As an ongoing form of participant action research, we will continue to collect data on students' and faculty's experiences with the dissertation process and review it annually in order to make revisions based on feedback.

Razer, M., & Friedman, V. J. (2017). From Exclusion to Excellence : Building Restorative Relationships to Create Inclusive Schools (1st ed. 2017.). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-488-6

Imad, M. (2022). Our brains, emotions, and learning: Eight principles of trauma-informed teaching. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies: A guide for responding to crisis and inequality in higher education* (pp. 35-47). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92705-9_3