

## CONCEPTUAL STUDY

# Moving Past Disconnected Hurdles: Empowering Graduate Students to Affect Positive Change Through the Thesis and Dissertation Experience

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### Abstract

This article argues for the need to significantly adjust the process and focus of the educational thesis and dissertation to better match the preparation and needs of students who are practitioners in order to help these students become stronger and better educators and leaders. To that end, the article presents innovative approaches to improve experiences for graduate students who are developing, conducting and completing master's degree theses and doctoral dissertations in the field of education.

The vast majority of students who pursue master's or doctoral degrees in education do not intend to become researchers or university faculty. Rather, most of these students are looking to improve their skills as teachers and educational leaders, and will likely never conduct a major research effort beyond the thesis or dissertation. While these students have a great deal of practical experience in their field, most of them have had little or no exposure to graduate level research, scholarly literature or academic writing. Recognizing that research skills, including data collection and analysis, and academic writing, are essential skills for all graduate students, including those in educational programs, these skills alone are inadequate in preparing educators for the realities they face as they work to conduct multi-tiered and multi-faceted research that will affect positive change and contribute to the field to improve overall student success. For many of these students the thesis and dissertation, while a significant requirement for the degree, are viewed as major "hurdles" that are too often disconnected from the realities and complexities of the classroom and administrative office.

Appropriate theoretical and conceptual frameworks are used to examine how the educational thesis and dissertation process can be improved to better serve the needs of educational practitioners. This includes the use of Role Acquisition Theory to examine and help facilitate the intrinsic change process in graduate students in education during the thesis and dissertation process. Transformative Learning Framework is used to better understand and advance developmental changes and scaffolding that are necessary to examine problematic frames of reference, openly reflect, and to emotionally change from the experience. The Loss/Momentum Framework is

used to better understand and advance developmental changes and scaffolding that are necessary to examine problematic frames of reference, openly reflect, and to emotionally change from the experience. The Loss/Momentum Framework is used in two separate ways: first, to scrutinize specific institutional barriers and supports that exist in graduate and doctoral programs in education as well as throughout the university that influence the process of completing the thesis and dissertation. Second, it is used to identify and examine individual characteristics, skills, and attributes of these students that serve as either barriers or assets to completing a meaningful thesis or dissertation.

Practical recommendations for improving the educational thesis and dissertation process are provided, and mentoring and strategic coaching approaches discussed.

**Keywords:** *Educational Dissertation; Educational Thesis; Advising Professional Educators in Graduate School; Role Acquisition; Transformative Learning through the Dissertation/Thesis Process*

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## Introduction

Over the past decade and half, there has been a flurry of articles focused on improving the educational doctoral dissertation, and to a lesser extent, discussion on the need to improve the thesis for students seeking master's degrees in education (Archbald, 2008; Biddle, 2015; Cassuto, 2013; Perry & Imig, 2008; Roberts, 2017; Shulman, Gold, Bueschel & Garabedian, 2006; Storey, Caskey, Hesbol, Marshall, Maughan & Dolan, 2015; UCEA, n.d.). While there is consensus that both the thesis and dissertation in education leadership (T/D) need to be focused on helping graduate students develop 21st century leadership skills through what has become commonly known as "capstone project" theses and "problems of practice" dissertations, the reality is the T/D still rely heavily on conventional approaches to research design and often focus more on the scholarly interests of advisors than the leadership development needs of students. In doing so, these research projects end up concentrating on problems and areas in education in traditional ways and thus yielding research projects that have little to do with preparing students for the complex challenges they will face as they move into higher levels of administration, and confront growing complexities of the public school and community college classroom environment.

While completing the thesis and dissertation helps students meet credentialing needs of obtaining a master's and doctoral degree in education, it may not serve the students well in the areas of leadership development. The mastery of research skills, including data collection and analysis and academic writing, are essential but woefully inadequate to be successful as effective teachers and educational leaders. For many of these students, the process of completing the thesis and dissertation, while a significant requirement for the degree, are viewed as major "hurdles" that are too often disconnected from the realities and complexities of the classroom and administrative office. Simply put, the commonplace approach to developing and completing the thesis and dissertation does not serve these students well. Most of these individuals will not use their dissertation or thesis as a platform to pursue a career in academia, nor will they likely take on another large research project as they did with their

thesis or dissertation. For these individuals, the thesis and dissertation, once accepted by the university, will most likely occupy some space on a shelf or take up a few megabits in a university library database. Too often educational theses and dissertations are viewed as “something to get out of the way” with little purpose other than satisfying a degree requirement. These challenges can be attributed to a number of things, including:

- A. The requirements for the educational master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation support (at least default toward) the traditional T/D process and traditional outcomes.
- B. Many of the professors who serve as dissertation/thesis advisors come from university research backgrounds with little direct field experience in the area of educational leadership. Oftentimes, epistemological frames of references regarding the value of the educational thesis and dissertation and the overarching purpose of scholarly research do not always match up between those whose careers have been primarily as university faculty members and those who are educational practitioners.
- C. Most institutions provide little or no ongoing training or guidance for faculty on how to be an effective T/D advisor.
- D. The process of guiding students through the T/D process is rarely viewed and approached systematically and developmentally, with a focus on building leaders for the 21st century. The default process focuses on completing the final report at the expense of developing and transforming the learner. The commonplace process does not focus on transforming the student and fails to proactively anticipate and mitigate barriers that are in the way of the student.

The requirements and focus for the traditional dissertation and thesis in educational doctorate and master’s degree programs are not likely to go away any time soon. As noted by Archbald (2008), there are “powerful structures and values holding in place the traditional research dissertation... a genre in doctoral education [that] is fixed by centuries of tradition,” (p. 704-705). Nor will there be a major shift in the preparation and priorities of those who make up the bulk of dissertation and thesis advisors. With provincial and closed hiring practices in colleges of education and throughout graduate programs, along with the lack of financial incentives and requirement of a long and vulnerable path to tenure and full professorship, those who are leaders in the public school and community colleges are not likely going to be either welcomed or motivated to move into the university faculty ranks.

Comments on the lack of utility of the traditional education dissertation/thesis along with calls for significant changes in this part of the graduate experience will certainly continue. However, with graduate education being viewed as “the Detroit of high learning,” (Taylor, 2009) with a glacial pace of change, insular environment and entrenched interests, faculty who serve as advisors for T/D are likely to perpetuate the long standing practice of having students conduct dissertation and thesis research that will do little to prepare these students for the complex realities of educational leadership.

The literature on improving the educational doctorate and educational master's degree focuses mainly on ways to improve the final product/outcome of the T/D. What is missing is a discussion about how to make the journey of "doing" the dissertation and thesis a meaningful experience, and the kinds of support, mentoring and guidance students need to help them move toward becoming the next generation of educational leaders. Rather than spending effort attempting to improve the end product of the T/D, time would be better spent on working to improve the process involved in developing and completing the T/D. In doing so, colleges of education and graduate schools could begin by:

1. Addressing the training needs for those who serve as dissertation and thesis advisors.
2. Improving the dissertation and thesis process by purposefully addressing the student's needs through each stage of development and removing institutional barriers that often impede progress toward completing the dissertation and thesis.

In this article, we discuss innovative approaches to improve experiences for graduate students who are working on master's degree theses and doctoral dissertations in the field of education. We focus on the need to significantly adjust the approach of leading students through the process of designing, conducting and completing the educational thesis and dissertation to better match the preparation and needs of students who are practitioners in order to help these students become stronger and better educators and leaders. While there has been some emphasis in the scholarly literature on the transitional needs and socializing for doctoral students, the focus is on the process of becoming independent researchers with the intent of entering into the professorial ranks at the university (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2005; Rosser, 2004).

This article is intended for faculty who serve as thesis and dissertation advisors for students who are educational practitioners/professionals (primarily PreK-12 and community college teachers and administrators) and are pursuing master's and doctoral degrees in the field of education. The article may also be helpful for students who are pursuing a doctorate or master's degree in educational leadership to help them anticipate the stages they will go through and the challenges they may face in order to proactively seek out assistance.

Theoretical frameworks and lenses are used to examine how the educational thesis and dissertation process can be better understood and improved in order to more effectively serve the needs of educational practitioners. More specifically, Role Acquisition Theory (Thornton & Nardi, 1975) and Loss/Momentum Framework (RP Group, 2012) are used to provide a linear/progressive model of stages (phases) students go through and what influences exist at each stage as they work toward the end goal of completing the T/D. The Transformative Learning Framework (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 2000) is used to better understand the developmental changes and scaffolding that are necessary for students to effectively examine problematic frames of reference, openly reflect, and to emotionally change from the T/D experience.

Practical recommendations for improving the educational T/D process are provided, including mentoring and strategic coaching as well as new and seasoned perspectives from the field. Finally, all analysis will be reconnected back into theoretical frameworks that are firmly grounded in research that stands at the forefront of education today.

### **Students Who Are Pursuing Master's Degrees And Doctoral Degrees In Education**

The vast majority of students pursuing and completing doctorate degrees or master's degrees in education are teachers, student service professionals and educational administrators who want to use the degree to move up on the pay schedule, increase their opportunities for advancement, for personal satisfaction, and to improve their effectiveness as educators and leaders. While these students often have a great deal of practical experience in their field, most of them have had little or no exposure to graduate level research, scholarly literature or academic writing. Recognizing that research skills, including data collection and analysis, and academic writing, are essential skills for all graduate students, these skills alone are inadequate in preparing educators for the realities they face as they work to affect positive change and improve overall student success in their institutions.

The University Council for Educational Administration (n.d.) identified and compared several key differences between students who are pursuing master's (M.Ed.) and doctoral degrees in education (Ed.D.) with those students who are pursuing Ph.D. degrees. As noted, there are several major differences in primary career intent and knowledge base-related educational issues. In addition, there are significant differences between educational practitioners' and university-based scholars' view of the relative importance of pursuing scholarly research as related to career intent/goal, the primary purpose of research, and how research is conducted (p. 1-2).

Building on the work of UCEA (n.d.), Table 1 below compares critical differences between how T/D students (those who are educational practitioners) and T/D advisors (those who are university research-oriented faculty) view and value scholarly research. The table also illustrates the significant differences that exist between the professional worlds of students and advisors.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of T/D Student and T/D Advisor Profiles and Characteristics*

	<b>T/D Student</b>	<b>T/D Advisor</b>
<b>Features of the Professional Work Environment</b>	<p>Most students pursuing a doctorate or master’s degree in education work in a fast paced, “just in time” educational setting associated with large teaching and/or administrative workloads. Emphasis is on teaching, classroom management, resource management, educational program development and delivery, community relations and, as needed, attending to students’ needs beyond the classroom. They work with a wide diversity of students with constant interaction with students and others. Pressures of the professional work environment leave little time to develop and pursue scholarly interests.</p>	<p>Teaching is only a part of T/D advisors’ obligations with limited classroom contact hour requirements. T/D advisors may have limited interaction with students and others which allows for some of their work obligation to be completed from home or other off-campus location. Advisors have pressure to conduct research and publish as part of their work obligations. Advisors may also have a number of administrative tasks associated with the traditional university obligation of “service.” Rigorously pursuing scholarly interests is a major part of the professional work environment with continuous pressures to publish, consult, and present at academic conferences.</p>
<b>Career Aspirations</b>	<p>Primary career aspirations include directly improving student learning and success through strengthening teaching and administrative support for the teaching/learning process. Students at the master’s level may be pursuing entry-level administrative or lead teacher positions, and other opportunities to have greater influence on decisions within the campus or school district environment. At the doctoral level, students are likely to be pursuing multi-step administrative career paths from division/program leadership and/or building administrator all the way to superintendent or community college president.</p>	<p>Primary career aspirations can include pursuing tenure status, and professorship related promotions from assistant, associate to full professor. Developing and pursuing a scholarly research agenda takes precedence. A strong body of scholarly work can help T/D advisors establish an identity within university and discipline research communities, and enhance the possibility of advancing to more prestigious universities over the course of the T/D advisor’s career.</p>

	<b>T/D Student</b>	<b>T/D Advisor</b>
<b>Rewards and Recognition within the Work Environment</b>	<p>Successful teaching and effective administrative practices, including improving student success rates, stakeholder satisfaction, and resource efficiency.</p> <p>Opportunities to be assigned greater administrative responsibilities, including project leadership and promotions.</p> <p>Peer recognition at the local, regional and national level for excellence in student success and effective educational program leadership.</p> <p>Scholarly research and publishing are not generally valued or rewarded in this environment.</p>	<p>Rewards and recognition for T/D advisors often include promotions based around scholarly research and publication, service to the university, recognition within a particular discipline community, and to a much lesser extent, successful teaching. Acknowledgement for publications and other scholarly pursuits, including peer recognition of scholarly work, is important as is the development of new and novel theories and conceptual frameworks that are viewed as advancing greater understanding of particular aspects within a field of expertise. Credit and recognition for service to the university and academic field, as well as pursuing and directing grant-funded research projects that bring recognition to the institution is valued. Acknowledgement can also be given for scholarly work that was conducted by or with students.</p>
<b>Preparation for and Purposes of Conducting Scholarly Research</b>	<p>Little or no experience with scholarly literature and scholarly writing.</p> <p>Research is viewed as a way to gather important data for decision-making and addressing specific and practical problems that are within the scope of the student. Research and evaluation/assessment are viewed as one in the same and primarily atheoretical. Many students have concerns about their ability to conduct research, which can create fear, anxiety and anticipation about being able to adequately complete the large research study in a timely fashion.</p>	<p>T/D advisors are highly skilled and accomplished in established research methodologies.</p> <p>Scholarly research pursuits are for the purpose of contributing to the general knowledge base.</p> <p>Focus is on applying appropriate theories and conceptual frameworks related to educational issues, and generalizing findings for the purpose of deepening the understanding of particular phenomena related to education.</p>

	<b>T/D Student</b>	<b>T/D Advisor</b>
<p><b><i>Primary Experiences and Knowledge Sources That Inform Understanding About Critical Educational Issues</i></b></p>	<p>With real life sustained experience in the field, there is a strong emphasis on insider knowledge and a practitioner/pragmatic orientation to addressing critical issues facing education. Personal experience is valued over generalized research findings. Solutions to problems and challenges in education are viewed through an atheoretical lens and best understood through personal experience and the experiences of other educational practitioners rather than through generalized research, scholarly literature, or university-based experts.</p>	<p>May have little or no recent experience in the field as a classroom teacher or other direct provider of educational services; and may lack sustained and progressive leadership experience in education.</p> <p>Knowledge about critical issues in education comes from scholarly literature, as well as direct research and observation and generalized “big picture” perspectives. Often the understanding of problems and challenges in education is viewed through an a priori or predictive theoretical framework that guides what data are collected, how the data are analyzed, and how conclusions and understandings are formed.</p> <p>The T/D advisor who has limited or no direct experience working in a public school or community college setting as an instructor and administrator may not fully understand and appreciate the complex working environments of T/D students.</p>



## Viewing the Graduate Student Thesis/Dissertation Experience Through Three Interrelated Frameworks and Lenses

Role Acquisition Theory (Thornton & Mardi, 1975) is used to examine the intrinsic changes in graduate students in education as they begin, process through and complete the T/D. Second, it is used to identify and examine individual characteristics, abilities, attributes and disposition of these students that serve as either barriers or assets to completing a meaningful thesis or dissertation. Attention is focused on the stages of role development including: initiation/orientation, formalization, informalization, and completion/exit/transition.

The Loss/Momentum Framework (RP Group, 2012) is used to scrutinize specific institutional barriers and support that exist in graduate and doctoral programs in education that influence the process of completing the thesis and dissertation. The Loss/Momentum Framework phases focus on the important and predictable interface and exchange with the institution (including the advisor) that students experience at each major part of progression toward completing the T/D. These phases include connection with and entry into the T/D process. Progress part one is where students start working on the research proposal, data collection plans and competing the conceptual aspects of the T/D. Progress part two focuses on the actual data collection, analysis and drafting the report. The completion phase includes finalizing the report and preparing for and completing the defense process. The transition/exit is the last phase and focuses on completing all graduation paperwork, obtaining all necessary approvals, filing the T/D with the appropriate library process; all within the prescribed timeframe.

The final lens is through Transformative Learning, which is defined as “the processes by which people examine problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change,” (Cranton, 2016, p. 27). These experiences are keys to fostering social justice, equity, and change in the educational system. Only through collaborative dialogue and critical reflection, in the setting of problem-posed learning, can one come to put meaning to his or her words through this organic process. An advisor guiding a graduate student through a culminating thesis or dissertation experience must engage the individual in learning experiences throughout that are carefully articulated and planned to foster self-reflection regarding one’s habits of mind or kinds of knowledge.

Both Role Acquisition Theory (RAT) and Loss/Moment Framework (LMF) focus on a linear progression students make from beginning to completion, and are used to examine the importance of the socialization process students go through as they move from being novice researchers to becoming experts as a result of the T/D process. The RAT view can help advisors better understand the changing mindset, self-perception and sense-making students go through. In a related way, the LMF helps advisors pinpoint specific challenges may likely face as well as the specific areas of support students need at each stage of the process. Figure 1 illustrates the specific stages as associated with RAT and LMF.

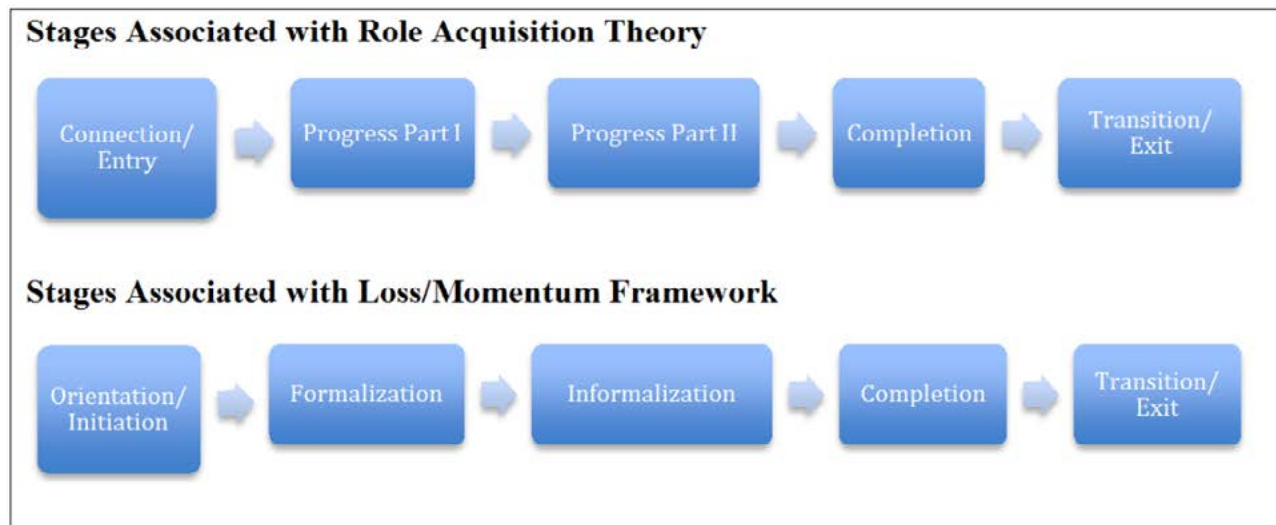


Figure 1. Stages Associated with the Role Acquisition Theory and Loss/Momentum Framework

### Initiation: Anticipation, Connection, Orientation, and Entry into the T/D Process

The student has completed program coursework including research methodology instruction and has a basic foundation in which to support the development of a T/D research project. The student is likely to understand and be comfortable in one's role as someone who is capable of being successful in graduate courses, however, may not be comfortable in the role as a researcher.

While there is a sense of growing excitement and urgency around the opportunity to make a contribution and affect change through a thesis or dissertation experience, there is often a sense of loss of where to begin as well as feelings of anxiety regarding the vast ground to cover throughout the research process. As a result, a student can feel intimidated even though basic foundation courses have been completed in order to set the stage for success regarding the T/D development. During this initial stage, the student may feel bouts of role confusion perceiving that one is ready for the task. However, the student also recognizes that he or she cannot do this alone, is easily overwhelmed, and becomes heavily reliant on guidance from a skilled advisor. Confidence waivers as the T/D process begins and the advisor must be ready to support and encourage the student on multiple levels. The advisor, who often serves as a professor within the program, is well aware of the institutional requirements for the T/D experience and conveys these expectations throughout the student's foundational course experiences. The advisor is working in a role to ensure that all the student's prerequisites are met prior to the onset of the T/D experience in conjunction with a program fostering a supportive climate that allows a student to navigate fluidly through the graduate experience.

During this initial phase of the journey, the student learns how to conduct and read graduate level writing and research as well as understand roles, expectations, and workload through the foundational courses as well as during the onset of the T/D process. Theoretical knowledge is multi-faceted in nature and applied to concepts of policy, practice, history, and one's work experiences throughout the program. Technical knowledge or instrumental learning is accumulating during this time which allows the graduate student to manipulate and control one's environment through principles and skills. Current perceptions and fact-based knowledge is aggregated and evaluated for validity and worth. The student is also "buying-in" to the graduate level role and expectations, building leadership skills to contribute to data-based decision-making processes, and perceiving the T/D process as a culminating experience to contribute to one's work environment and/or the field. A student in educational leadership graduate programs most often plan to take theoretical understanding and evaluation of research and shape it in the form of action research to address an area of need or challenge within one's setting.

Additionally, it is important to note that the student is arriving at the T/D experience with a wealth of theoretical discussions and experiences, graduate level reading on relevant topics in the field, and a selection of papers or research documents to possibly contribute to this culminating experience. Skillsets are developing and fluid. During this initial phase, the student learns how to conduct and read graduate level writing and research as well as understand roles, expectations, and workload throughout the foundational courses and during the onset of the T/D process. The student is ready to apply frameworks and experiences throughout the program to the T/D process.

### **Formalization: Learning the Rules and Expectations, Beginning the Process of Conceptualizing and Designing the Research Project**

The next stage of the journey focuses on learning the rules and expectations of the T/D experience, including correct research protocols and complying with program as well as university regulations that govern the experience. The student is figuring out firsthand how to navigate through the myriad of resources and services related to the T/D process, such as library resources to conduct extensive literature reviews, Institutional Review Board protocols, and how to access university resources including online survey tools or SPSS software. This stage can be characterized by periods of frustration and a sense of being overwhelmed by the many formal, informal, and overlapping systems and norms in place for graduate programs as well as individual approaches and uneven expectations of advisors.

The T/D advisor shares the overarching process, prepares the student for the individual stages thesis/dissertation endeavor, and assigns them to complete a series of tasks related to research and writing. The advisor engages the student in sharing ideas, goals, and honing the research question. Additionally, the student and advisor examine an array of research designs together to best answer the research question, review relevant frameworks to anchor the study for analysis and context, and discuss prospective sample populations for the study. The advisor

becomes instrumental in supporting the student in writing the proposal, making recommendations for a T/D committee that is a good fit, and serving as a mentor/advocate during the proposal presentation and acceptance process.

During this time, the student begins to define one's self as a "graduate level researcher and writer." This process begins to evolve and it is realized that the dynamic will not always be linear and that knowledge will become communicative in nature. This time is focused on the deep understanding and meaning to one's pursuit. A student will take one's new information from current research conducted during the T/D process and integrate it with prior learning from the program and one's constructs of the world. This analytical process will further define understanding about the topic, promote reflection on various conclusions that have been attained on the topic thus far, and propel the student to integrate new learning into one's own "already well-developed symbolic frame of reference, an active process involving thought, feelings, and disposition" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). The student will continue to engage in the Content-Process-Premise questioning approach (Cranton, 2016) that promotes self-reflection and fosters deep learning experiences that demonstrate understanding of the whole (See Table 2). This reflection will continue to gain momentum as the student moves further into the study.

In relation to the T/D experience, the student comes to terms with why it is necessary to perform at such a high level while meeting rigorous demands and expectations. Time management and study skills often strengthen during this phase and content reading for in-depth understanding and writing a literature review are pursued. It becomes a time where the student often thrives on group consensus and shared interpretation (Cranton, 2016).

Throughout this time, the graduate student is seeking regular input and advice from the advisor. When Socratic Dialogue techniques and others are applied by the advisor, he or she then takes on the role of a guide or facilitator that promotes student autonomy and critical thinking. The student continues to encounter challenges that must be worked through and when one hits roadblocks or dead ends, then strategically selected advice is provided by the advisor to reorient and get the student back on track. The grad student builds independence during this experience as well as sees the need to persevere along this long road.

Additionally, personal transformation begins to take shape and interaction with groups begin to evolve. Family relations and support may strain during this interval as a graduate student typically works full-time, has a family, and other major commitments. Balance and support from key members in the student's life are paramount. There can be a pivotal moment during this phase or set of moments when a grad student must get one's academic goals placed in order of importance with the rest of their lives and make it work to find success. If a student is unsuccessful with this, the individual may then delay the T/D process way beyond anticipation, get detoured in life, become discouraged, or give up. This is where peers, especially those who have formerly completed the T/D process, can serve as mentors and role models to propel the student towards completion. Furthermore, there is often a change regarding a student completing the T/D process in the work setting. The student is often internalizing oneself as a leader and feels motivated to share with individuals in the workplace,

including employers, the research purpose, goals, and attempt to seek approval and support. The student may also become excited about the prospective change that his/her study can bring to the work community. Cranton (2016) noted that “leadership training, interpersonal skills, teamwork, conflict resolution, communication skills, and the new emphasis on emotional intelligence illustrate the importance of communicative learning in work place settings” (p. 10). As a result, people in the graduate student’s workplace may begin perceiving the individual in more of a leadership capacity.

If an advisor does not carve out adequate time to work with the student, and place proper supports or serve as a sincere mentor during this critical time, discouragement, frustration, and broken attachments may result. The graduate student needs someone to trust throughout this arduous journey. If this does not happen, jaded perceptions may result toward the advisor, program administration, as well as the journey as a whole. Advisors must build off the prior knowledge and experiences a student brings to the table. Part of the advisor’s role includes supporting the student in channeling interests and passions, which are often action research-based in nature and related to their educational work environment, into a solid research design. As a result, it is paramount that the advisor be a good personality fit for the graduate student as well as have the expertise related to the area of study in order to foster a successful journey through common challenges and difficulties. During this time, the advisor must also discuss the process of change and growth that the student is experiencing throughout this stage. It is encouraged that the advisor and student reflect together and discuss the development of one’s cognitive, social, and interpersonal dimensions as well as self-directed behaviors that are necessary to achieve the steps throughout the process. It becomes important to evaluate what is working for that individual and what is still needed to further empower the student and set the stage for success.

### **Informalization: Developing and Owning Routine and Process, Conducting the Study, Completing the Analysis and Beginning to Draft the T/D**

As the student enters into a more informal stage of this journey and becomes increasing aware of how to access services and navigate through the norms and processes related to the T/D process, the student gains confidence and realizes the enormous responsibility for completing the thesis or dissertation. As a result, the student does not depend as heavily on the advisor to navigate the T/D process. Related processes and experiences become predictable and socialization patterns are established during this stage. The student has adapted to the T/D process and advisor expectations, and is beginning to understand what must be done to be successful, what is optional, and what is required. The student also becomes keenly aware of inconsistencies in expectations, quality of work, and levels of engagement with different advisors, and how these experiences compare to others who are also in the T/D process. It is at this point of the student’s journey where some may drift toward complacency and look for the paths of least resistance to get through the T/D process. Therefore, advisors must provide a consistent message about high expectations and the need to be actively involved in all aspects of the T/D process.

Additionally, learning and reflection experiences become deeper as the student engages in analyzing data in relation to the research questions to understand the impact of the phenomena on the sample population as well as determining the scope of generalizations that can be drawn. From this process, the student will use data to reflect and formulate recommendations for current policy and practice to improve the environment and experiences within the environment.

### **Completion: Finalizing and Finishing the T/D**

Program and university expectations are made clear for all stakeholders regarding the completion of the T/D experience. Protocols, processes, and timelines are shared in addition to rubrics that clearly outline oral defense expectations. During this completion phase, the student reverts back to heavy reliance upon the advisor to support the oral defense preparation and presentation along with the other final steps in the completion process, which can be extensive. The advisor does everything possible to prepare the student for the oral defense as well as to quell anxiety. Expectations are uniformly maintained and the T/D committee's role is to make sure that rigor and quality research standards have been adhered to throughout the process. As a result, numerous revisions may be requested by the T/D committee in order to produce the best product possible. If the committee is not pleased with the research project or disagrees among one another, the student's confidence may be greatly shaken after such a grand endeavor. If program deadlines or time restrictions press too close, massive stress may also result. Advisor support is paramount and he or she must stand at the side of the graduate student in front of the T/D committee and actively support the student's research endeavors.

Once the oral defense is completed successfully, leadership confidence and research confidence result. This process affirms oneself as a proficient graduate student who has successfully finished the final stage of the program. It celebrates the research endeavor with the community and opens discussion on one's research endeavor with the academic community's feedback. These experiences are keys to fostering social justice, equity, and change in the educational system. Only through collaborative dialogue and critical reflection, in the setting of problem-posed learning, can one come to put meaning to his or her words through this organic process (Mezirow, 2000).

Furthermore, emancipatory knowledge is gained in which the student undergoes growth, personal development, and freedom. Personal change often results as one's perception of self, knowledge and understanding within one's field, or an evolving understanding that limiting beliefs can no longer fit a new worldview (Cranton, 2016). This can result from the findings and conclusions of one's study. The student reflects on the validity of one's assumptions and whether or not those assumptions should be revised. Empowerment on multiple levels arises with demonstrated proficiency in: (1) research reading and writing skills, (2) APA formatting and referencing skills, and (3) successfully analyzing data in relation to the research question to understand the impact of the phenomena on the sample population as well as making recommendations.

From this process, a presentation of results can be transferred to one's work setting. The individual demonstrates data-based decision-making in action through a presentation of one's research findings. As a result, the perceptions of those in the student's professional community reshape as they begin seeing potential for the student to advance in leadership (stepping up from the current role) as a result of this contribution and shared expertise. Individuals within the work community may also begin making inquiries or asking questions related to the research topic and findings, and seek advice and information. Furthermore, the new graduate may be asked to present to others and represent the institution as a whole, and to publish the results of the study.

### **Exiting: Transitioning to a New Role**

Completing and exiting this process enables the student to become more independent and to begin applying what was learned directly into the classroom or other work settings. There is an emerging openness to new ideas as well as the desire to help others through one's field of study. The student is acting in a different way and has developed a new, more profound self-image as a scholar/practitioner. The student has now contributed new knowledge to the field, and is engaging in self-reflection, self-determination, and personal growth. This also results in new self-confidence and empowerment as titles change. Community recognition abounds and promotion within one's work setting may be reachable. Momentum is renewed and at an all-time high moving forward with community recognition in both the academic and work circles.

Graduate programs in education and individual advisors actively assist the student through this last and important transitional stage by providing assistance with career and transition options, and by helping the student to understand what to expect in other aspects of life beyond the graduate program. The advisor and other key individuals remain available after the student exits the program in order to provide additional guidance and support. Furthermore, the institution provides social events and other group support activities for program alumni to assist with professional networking.

### **Transformative Learning**

Graduate level education has the power to be taught in a way as to develop and emancipate an individual. Instructors can engage in deliberate actions to disconnect students from status quo thinking and reformat them to develop new characteristics, attributes, behaviors, and perspectives that become new habits of mind (Cranton, 2016). Additionally, students become critical thinkers and skilled practitioners or researchers in their field who lead and contribute to the positive development of society. This transformative learning approach sets the stage to empower graduate students to understand the meaning of their research experience, particularly through the thesis or dissertation process. This process can then serve as the vehicle for developing awareness and a way to foster change as a developing leader in the field of education. Cranton (2016) affirmed a content-process-premise questioning approach that promotes self-reflection and fosters deep learning experiences that demonstrate understanding of the whole as illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2***Critical Reflection and Knowledge Levels Associated with Transformative Learning*

<b>Reflection</b>	<b>Knowledge</b>		
	<b>Instrumental</b>	<b>Communicative</b>	<b>Emancipatory</b>
<b>Content</b>	<i>Where are the facts?</i>	<i>What do others say about the issue?</i>	<i>What are my assumptions?</i>
<b>Process</b>	<i>How do I know this is true?</i>	<i>How do I integrate other points of view?</i>	<i>How do I know my assumptions are valid?</i>
<b>Premise</b>	<i>Why is this knowledge important to me?</i>	<i>Why should I believe in this conclusion?</i>	<i>Why should I revise or note my perspective?</i>

*Table from Cranton, 2016, p.28*

This can range from reflection regarding one's perception of self, knowledge and understanding within one's field, or an evolving understanding that limiting beliefs can no longer fit a new worldview (Cranton, 2016). Methods can also include but are not limited to "critical incidents, metaphor analysis, concept mapping, consciousness raising, life histories, repertory grids, and participation in social action" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). Additionally, he noted that new information is only a resource and must be incorporated into an "already well-developed symbolic frame of reference, an active process involving thought, feelings, and disposition" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). Transformative learning thus becomes a process of effecting change in a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This transformative learning approach sets the stage to empower graduate students to understand the meaning of their research experience, particularly through the thesis or dissertation process. This process can then serve as the vehicle for developing awareness and a way to foster change as a developing leader in the field of education.

Graduate students have "acquired a coherent body of experience-associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses-frames of references that define their life world" (Mezirow, 1997 p. 5). How do these students



learn and process information that is encountered throughout the research endeavor which culminates in a thesis or dissertation product? There are four processes of learning which include: (1) elaborating on a point of view, (2) establishing new points of view, (3) transforming our point of view, and (4) becoming aware and critically reflective of our generalized bias in the way we view things, including groups other than our own (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). Students move through stages as they seek three types of knowledge which result from learning: (1) technical knowledge or instrumental learning which allows people to manipulate and control their environment through principles and skills, (2) practical or communicative knowledge which allows people to understand and interact through language, and (3) emancipatory knowledge in which people are seeking self-knowledge, growth, personal development, and freedom (Cranton, 2016). Additionally, Cranton noted that,

Emancipatory learning occurs in informal and formal educational settings, including community development groups, self-help groups, professional development programs, literacy education, union education, and political and environmental movements, to name a few. Perhaps most important, emancipatory learning can occur in any setting where learning occurs. A person acquiring a technical skill can gain new self-confidence and begin to see his or her place in the world in a new light. (2016, p. 10-11)

As applied to the thesis and dissertation process, graduate students have experienced cognitive (i.e., approaches to learning and understanding), social, and psychological changes.

This is in alignment with the transformational learning framework where students move through stages as they seek three types of knowledge which result from learning.

*Technical knowledge* in relation to the graduate level experience occurs when students learn how to conduct and read graduate-level writing and research as well as understand roles, expectations, and workload. "Empirical or natural scientific methodologies produce technically useful knowledge, the knowledge necessary for industry and production in modern society" (Cranton, 2016, p. 9). This includes the technical skills that are needed to be a highly qualified and successful practitioner in one's field. Students often feel challenged during this period and question whether this is a goal in their lives that can be achieved.

*Practical or communicative knowledge* is constructivist-based and focuses on the deep understanding and meaning to one's pursuit. In relation to the graduate level experience, students come to terms with why they need to perform at such a high level while meeting rigorous demands and expectations. Time management and study skills often strengthen during this phase and content reading for understanding is pursued. It becomes a time where students often thrive on group consensus and shared interpretation (Cranton, 2016). The same author also noted, "leadership training, interpersonal skills, teamwork, conflict resolution, communication skills, and the new emphasis on emotional intelligence illustrate the importance of communicative learning in work place settings" (2016, p. 12).

Finally, *emancipatory learning* allows graduate level students to do something with their learning such as an applied project or thesis. There is an emerging openness to ideas as well as the desire to help others through one's field of study. Students are acting in a different way because they see themselves in a different way from when they started the program experience. They are now contributing to their field, engaging in self-reflection, self-determination, and personal growth. Habermas stated,

The goal of adult education is to help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaningful perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience. (1984, p. 224-225)

Graduate level education has the power to be taught in a way as to develop and emancipate an individual. Instructors can engage in deliberate actions to disconnect students from status quo thinking and reformat them to develop new characteristics, attributes, behaviors, and perspectives that become new habits of mind (Cran-ton, 2016). Additionally, students become critical thinkers and skilled practitioners or researchers in their field who contribute to the positive leadership and development of society.

## Recommendations for Practice

This section provides recommendations to help both advisors and students not only make it through the T/D process, but also be able to make the most out of their experience.

### ***For Individual Advisors and Students***

1. Even the best student hits a wall. The advisor needs to anticipate at what point this will happen and have plans to help the student through, which at the time may seem like an insurmountable barrier to the student. It is important to advise the student that when he or she is overwhelmed by exhaustion, confusion or frustration, it is time to take a break from the T/D process for a least a full day. As the calendar is developed for completing the T/D process, down-time and break-time should be factored in.
2. The advisor needs to lay out the "big picture" regarding what is necessary to complete the T/D, and at the same time emphasize the step-by-step process. The student will benefit from having the advisor work jointly to develop a detailed calendar with each step clearly outlined, including deadlines and benchmarks. This will help ensure that the student is staying on track, and will serve as a continuous reminder that the student needs to work on the T/D incrementally, and on a regularly scheduled basis rather than trying to complete the process by planning large chunks of time. Too often when a student plans on approaching the T/D by scheduling large amounts of time in conjunction with other things, life gets in the way and the student is unable to use the scheduled time as intended. Advisors should encourage the student, when possible, to schedule the same time each day to work on the T/D to establish routine. For the student with family and/or other fixed obligations, dedicating daily T/D work either in the early morning or late evening time blocks may be useful. This planning should be done at the front end of the process and monitored throughout.
3. Both the student and the advisor need to regularly and frequently revisit the research framework. This can

help the student keep from deviating from the research framework and unnecessarily expanding the scope of the research project. This can also provide an opportunity for both the advisor and the student to discuss and make timely adjustments to the research project rather than being forced to react late in the process when they discover that parts of the research project are not working as planned.

4. The advisor needs to personally provide writing and research support, and not rely solely on sending the student to writing centers or one-time workshops on writing a dissertation or thesis. While these one-time workshops can provide useful information, the need for intentional and ongoing writing and research support by the advisor is critical to the student's success.
5. Both the students and the advisor need to come to a common understanding as to what constitutes "quality" writing and research in the context of the T/D process.
6. Early in the relationship between the advisor and the student the advisor should make every effort to spend at least one full day shadowing the student at his/her work site. This should give the advisor a good perspective and understanding of the student's work environment.
7. As appropriate throughout the T/D process, the advisor should engage the student in discussions about leadership lessons that are emerging from the student's research. This can help the student to contextualize the leadership lessons within a particular work setting.

### ***For Departments and Programs***

1. Consistent processes and approaches are needed throughout the department with all advisors regarding timelines, content expectations, overall structure of the T/D, and standard of quality of research and writing. A person or group of individuals should be tasked with monitoring and maintaining quality control over the T/D development process and outcome.
2. There needs to be ongoing professional development and assistance for T/D advisors including regularly scheduled forums for advisors to discuss the dissertation/thesis process with open and candid discussions regarding what is working well and what challenges they are facing.
3. The department should develop and maintain a readily available database of relevant and timely dissertation/thesis-related support materials and documents. (See Appendix A for a partial list of suggested materials and documents that could be included in the database.)

### **Recommendations for Future Exploration**

This article relied primarily on the experiences and observations of the authors and is intended to provide a better understanding of the complex and transformative journey a graduate student undertakes as one begins, progresses through and completes an educational master's degree thesis or an educational doctoral dissertation. Moreover, the paper examined transformation of the student as a result of this experience. The article focused on students who are educational practitioners and who are enrolled in graduate programs in education for the purpose of improving their effectiveness as teachers, student services professionals and educational leaders.

The article did not take into consideration the actual content outcome, subject matter focus of the thesis or dissertation or any particular research methodology. As a next step, it is recommended that an empirical research study be conducted which would include in-depth interviews and surveys with students regarding their experiences with T/D process as well as interviewing and surveying T/D advisors about their experiences and observations. We believe that the three theoretical frameworks and lenses used to guide the discussion in this article could also be used to guide an empirical study.

Thesis and dissertation advising is more than helping students complete a major research project. It is also about establishing ongoing collegial and mentor/mentee relationships. By recognizing the transformational and developmental stages students go through during the T/D process, both advisors and students can anticipate and be prepared to address the predictable challenges at each stage. Clearly, in order to successfully and productively negotiate the T/D process, it must be viewed and continually approached as shared responsibility and shared commitment between the advisor and the student.

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## Appendix

### *Partial List of Materials and Documents for a Dissertation/Thesis Support Database*

In building and adding to a department dissertation/thesis support data it is important that all advisors review and come to consensus on what is placed into the database, and that what goes into the database represents an appropriate text sample, outline or support document. Having all advisors and students work from a common database will help to establish and maintain a reliable level of quality and rigor within dissertations and theses. Below is a partial list of recommended documents and support materials for this database.

- All required institutional forms related to the dissertation or thesis including IRB processes, department/institution approval forms for the dissertation, and forms for submitting the completed dissertation for publication through the university library.
- Institutional document templates, and required guidelines for preparing and completing the dissertation.
- Basic outlines for each chapter of the dissertation and thesis, including separate outlines for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. Examples of well-written chapters or parts of chapters may also be helpful.
- Selected articles and chapters on several aspects of writing a dissertation or thesis including:
  - Elements of a T/D proposal
  - Writing a literature review
  - Insider research and controlling for insider bias
  - Various articles and chapters on specific research methodology
- Samples of standard verbiage (text) used in dissertation/theses that students can adapt to their particular study including sample text for:
  - Justifying the study
  - Transitioning from chapter to chapter
  - Ethical considerations and protection of participants involved in the study
  - Trustworthiness, transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability (qualitative and mixed methods studies)
  - Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) granting permission to conduct research at a particular institution or location
  - Controlling for insider bias
  - Population and/or sample selection (quantitative or mixed methods studies); Participant selection (qualitative or mixed methods studies)
  - Letter of invitation to participate in a study

- Sample forms and worksheets including:
  - Pre-proposal worksheet
  - Proposal worksheet
  - Protocols for conducting expert reviewer and pilot testing of survey and/or interview questions
  - Research design graphics and sample figures
  
- Links to APA formatting websites as well as a collection of the most common APA formatting issues that students deal with when writing a dissertation or thesis.