CHANGES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE: ATTAINING A PhD WHILE MAINTAINING AN ACTIVE LIFE

JOSEPH B. BAUGH
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA SOUTH
jbaugh@email.arizona.edu

ANNE S. HALLCOM
CAPELLA UNIVERSITY
anne.saber@beckman.com

MARILYN E. HARRIS
CAPELLA UNIVERSITY
harri1me@cmich.edu

External pressures have risen astronomically during the economic meltdown worldwide. Correspondingly, internal challenges and external pressures that doctoral learners experience along with their mentors and committee members in attaining a PhD while attempting to maintain an active and well-balanced life have also risen. This paper attempts to identify the changes that make a difference, supported by the authors' experiences, including several Academy of Management doctoral consortiums and professional development workshops, mentoring and committee work, and one-onone consulting with doctoral learners regarding the development and implementation of an effective data collection and analysis model and writing the final report. A mixed methodology survey provided empirical evidence to uncover emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual developments that recent PhD graduates and current doctoral learners have experienced.

Based on Lewin's (1951) seminal work in field theory, a useful tool commonly named by organizational researchers as force-field analysis has been applied in many venues to define and describe organizational dynamics. Of particular interest to this study, Cronshaw and McCulloch (2008) extended force field analysis to add a third force to Lewin's original driving and restraining forces. Cronshaw and McCulloch described these three forces as facilitating, constraining, and blocking field conditions (Table 1, p. 92). Although the doctoral journey is considered a singular process rather than an organizational dynamic, the data from this study revealed clear patterns that are modeled well by these three field conditions.

The data showed that getting a fast start on the journey may be the most significant force for attaining a PhD while maintaining an active life, which exemplifies a facilitating condition. Several other factors were cited by participants as contributing to a slow start demonstrating constraining and blocking conditions, which created stress flowing throughout and obstructing the journey. These field conditions and how they impact the doctoral journey are explored in this paper through the expressed experiences of the study participants.

METHODOLOGY

The data collection process for this study implemented a mixed methodology Internet survey that was administered to a purposeful sampling of two primary study groups. These groups included current doctoral learners and PhDs who were selected from both online and traditional learning institutions. The survey generated a 55% response rate from the sampling, which consisted of 40 individuals. The quantitative data obtained from the survey was used to establish a demographic background for the study. The primary focus for the survey rested on open-ended qualitative questions that closely examined the lived experiences (Denzin, 2001) of the two study groups as they moved through various phases of the doctoral journey while maintaining an active life outside of academia. In the interest of protecting anonymity for the study participants, none of the quotes used in this paper to describe these experiences are attributed to individual respondents.

The qualitative data analysis used Atlas.ti® as the QDAS platform. The individual survey results were downloaded from the Internet survey site as .csv files and collated into a flat text file which organized the responses by question. This file was imported into Atlas.ti as a single primary document. The data were necessarily reduced through encoding, which began with a provisional start list (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of codes drawn from the survey questions (See Table 1). The data were then further analyzed through a series of encoding passes to identify emerging themes and patterns.

Table 1: Provisional Start List of Codes

Demographics	purpose	emotional	mental	spiritual
Methodology	support	stress	contributions	challenges
Newlearning	career	progress	ownership	preparation
researchquestion	literature	mentor	committee	milestones
problemstatement	physical	goals	coursework	application
collection	analysis	writing	resources	changes

FINDINGS

Demographic data were gathered to ground the study and place it within the participants' context. Eighty-one percent of the participants were over 40 years of age, although the ages of half of the respondents fell within the 51 to 60 range. The respondents were evenly divided by gender, while 55% of the participants had completed the doctoral journey with the remainder still in progress. The average time for current PhDs to complete their studies - including the dissertation - was 4.4 years, with the longest time at seven years and the shortest at three years. Those learners still in pursuit of the degree have expended an average of four years to date and are at various stages of the journey.

Data codes were mapped to facilitating, constraining, and blocking field conditions using a Venn diagram, which allowed the authors to determine where some data codes overlapped two or three field conditions. As these field conditions are discussed, various quotations from the participants are used to explicate the assignment of data codes to field conditions. Due to space constraints, only some of the issues in each condition are discussed in this paper. As can be seen in Figure 1, most of the findings related to facilitating field conditions or overlapped between facilitating and the negative field conditions.
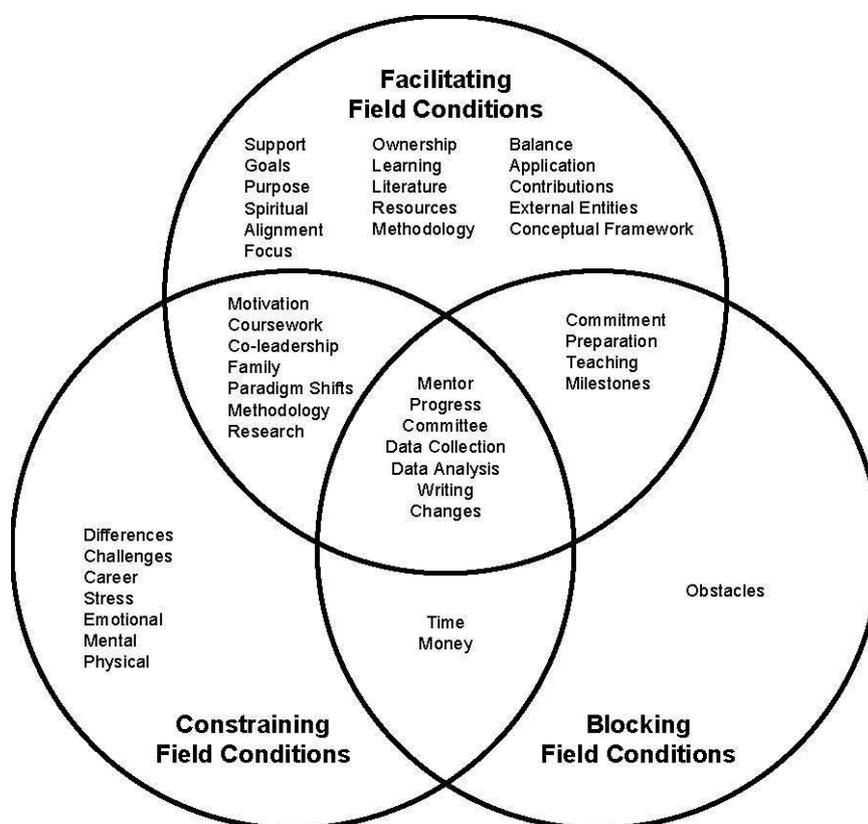

Figure 1: Mapping data codes to field conditions. © 2010 Baugh, Hallcom, & Harris

FACILITATING CONDITIONS

As the participants reflected on their individual journeys, there were many positive factors that aided and abetted success along the way. The data reveal that "getting a running start on the journey" may be the greatest concern of new as well as advanced doctoral learners pursuing a PhD degree. This issue only became apparent to some participants after the fact as one related that things he would do differently included, "get started a lot sooner, better commitment and using a defined time-line." Having clearly defined purposes and goals can facilitate the start and ensure steady progress.

Participants reported that initial purposes centered on personal desires for achieving the degree, a commitment to lifelong learning, a desire to enhance careers, and improving teaching opportunities. The desire to teach ranged from gaining postretirement teaching positions to seeking tenured positions immediately after graduation. Many of the degreed respondents reported attaining these goals and reaching some level of intrinsic satisfaction as a result of the transformative nature of the dissertation. One participant related this as "I am teaching for three different institutions, I research, write, and present to international audiences, so I am satisfied that I have achieved the goals I set." Another echoed these sentiments, "I finished. I learned. I'm called Dr. I'm Dr. I'm helping others through their journey. I'm being offered teaching roles. I'm setting up my 'retirement' as planned."

Support from a variety of sources was identified as a strong facilitating factor. In particular, peer groups and mentee conference calls were cited in several instances as being very significant for success. The general consensus on these peer groups was that they offered perspectives on the journey that could not be obtained from other sources. One of the authors initiated regular conference calls for her mentee group and the other authors participate in these calls to support learners still making their way along the journey. This activity has proved fruitful for many mentees and has expedited the process by creating presentation opportunities that are associated with firm timelines. "Connecting with other mentees was critical, hearing their sagas, experiences, reading their work, learning from them and talking with them was the 'life preserver' during this phase." Other respondents related the necessary support that came from friends:

> I procrastinated starting the literature review process for one year by taking on teaching and research projects. A friend forced me to accompany her day after day to the library one summer until I picked up my pencil and started the literature review.

Ownership of the process was defined as a key facilitating condition. Most graduates considered a feeling of ownership to be crucial to a successful completion of the degree. "I felt like I owned it from the start and still own it after graduation. I am still mining data from my study for various projects." Ownership also played a strong role in satisfaction and a feeling of well-being after

the degree is earned, "I did the work, I interviewed the participants, I learned from their story, I have grown intellectually, spiritually and emotionally from this experience – I am a better person." Respondents who are still on the journey also recognized the importance of ownership, "I will own it because I will make most of the decisions." One respondent who is closer to the end of her journey related:

> This topic is near and dear to my heart. My background and research experience make this dissertation uniquely mine. I questioned the validity of my study at first, but the longer I spent analyzing the data, the better outcomes I developed. I have stumbled onto so many interesting findings that need further study. It should be fun.

Co-leadership of the dissertation is a complementary function of ownership of the process; however, responses were mixed on this topic. Thirty percent of the respondents were not sure about what co-leadership entailed and either indicated that or assumed that the mentor was the de-facto leader of the process, "She's the boss, if that's not the case, I don't finish." Some respondents felt that there was a co-leadership process in play, "we discussed looking at this as a partnership rather than viewing it as a learner/teacher relationship." Others were very clear that he or she led the process and viewed the mentor's role as more of a facilitator than a co-leader, "I felt that I was in charge of the whole process from the beginning. Her role was more guidance than leadership."

Alignment of process and purpose with goals was considered important for success in various segments of the journey. This ranged from mentor selection, "I selected an instructor I was comfortable with and who seemed aligned with my perspectives on life and my primary topics" to later stages, "Purpose and comprehensives were well aligned." "I tried to align the comprehensives with my My learner question was definitely aligned with my purpose. I was also able to answer two of the other three questions from an aligned perspective. Even the research question was useful to develop my methodology for the proposal, which I later refined in the study. Goals were also described as strong motivators for completing the journey. Some respondents reported the motivation of extrinsic goals, "I am teaching at a graduate school and they are considering me for online teaching as well as brick & mortar teaching. Goal met." Another related intrinsic goals, "As a new widow, I needed a project and direction. This provided all of that." Some motivators were spiritual in nature, "I have experienced better performance, whether it is mental, emotion, or physical, if I begin with a prayer. Subsequently, I begin to organize my thoughts on what I need to accomplish in the long term, this week, and today," Other motivators were more mundane, "I had several glasses of beer on many days over the entire period."

On the other hand, motivation was also described as fluctuating throughout the degree pursuit. In this respect, motivation can be considered as a constraining condition, "Continues to be an issue as I work

through the dissertation. Motivation becomes a real problem that has to constantly be worked. Often think about why I decided to do this." While facilitating conditions predominated, perhaps due to the nature of the sampling, numerous constraining and blocking conditions were also raised. These conditions are significant for understanding what not to do, how to avoid them, and how to recover when they do appear.

CONSTRAINING AND BLOCKING CONDITIONS

It appears that information related to attaining a PhD while maintaining an active lifestyle is not well communicated by learning institutions to the right people at the right time. Participants stated that valuable time is wasted by the time required to learn to write in a new style and make the transition from passive learner to active researcher. It takes longer than necessary to gain a focus on the purpose and the problem, much less "figure out the right methodology" for the study. Furthermore, the slow start costs time and money, which adds additional stress and burdens to the journey, "I didn't do it well. I found myself so emotionally drained that it took two semesters to really get going."

When survey participants answered questions related to their perceived slow starts, many responses expressed that preliminary coursework was not very useful in preparing for the dissertation, "I was really challenged when I took courses in which I had very little interest. I had to remind myself why I decided to pursue a PhD to keep me motivated in those courses that were not considered my favorites." Coursework also did not portend any required changes in approach to the dissertation. "Developing a literature review in the courses was TOTALLY different than in the dissertation phase. Very different expectations. Courseroom instructors were lazy in challenging and teaching techniques for the learner's growth."

Many early doctoral learners came into their programs as passive learners and felt coursework did not indicate that personal transformative change may be required to develop and complete the dissertation. "If I had to start over again, I would take more This is a very time consuming process. I think the coursework should better prepare us for the dissertation phase. More emphasis should be on research and data collection and analysis. Analysis software should also be discussed somewhere in the program so you don't go in blind on that. Instead of choosing to attend colloquia when one wants, I think they should be structured into the dissertation process so that you go at the proper time to get the most of them. There definitely needs to be a post proposal colloquium.

Respondents who benefited from the coursework seemed to already have a firm purpose and a sense of direction in mind for their dissertations, "almost all of my discretionary research in the courses was targeted toward my ultimate dissertation topic. In that regard, I was able to compile approximately 70% of the citations and references that I used in my literature review." Another participant who also

knew her dissertation topic related, "Coursework gave a basis for the literature review but really did nothing to prepare for the proposal and dissertation writing phases." Other respondents felt they were never informed about all the steps, parts, and pieces required for successful completion and still others cited "ineffective leadership of the process."

As shown in Figure 1, the mentor appears at the intersection of all three field conditions. Some participants described excellent relationships with the mentor while the experience was dismal for others. The respondents' perceptions of individual mentor efficacy varied significantly from being challenging and effective to being ineffective and becoming another challenge or obstacle to the process. One respondent related that, "My mentor earned my respect during coursework. She was the one that beat me like a rented mule. I actually was challenged. She was my instructor, not my friend. She made me learn no matter how painful the experience." Another stated, "Sometimes I think she resented my independence and deliberately stalled on reviewing some of my deliverables." A clear pattern emerged that the selection of an appropriate mentor with compatible goals and expectations can be a critical factor for early success in attaining the PhD while maintaining an active life:

> I selected the first mentor as he had an insurance and risk management background. He was a putz, every time I emailed him his standard comment was I'll get back to you. I fired him after months of 'I'll get back to you.' My second choice was a past professor in the doctoral program. This individual has worked out very nicely. So my idea of getting a candidate with a risk management and finance background didn't work. Getting someone who honored time lines and responded in a timely manner was the key.

Mentor availability and responsiveness were common themes throughout the data. These themes ran the gamut of responses from "My mentor is always available when needed" to "The mentor was often unavailable or delayed in getting back to me per her own timelines." "You spend most of your time waiting for a response to what you have written. I would make corrections within a day or two but would wait for two weeks to get comments on what was resubmitted." Thus, most obstructive issues with mentors typically related to temporal and financial constraints:

> The first mentor wasn't interested in me or my dissertation. I finally realized I either needed to quit school or get a new mentor. The first mentor kept telling me he'd get back to me, the last straw was seven months later when he announced he'd be out of the country for 12 weeks and that I should consider a new hypothesis...I'd had the same hypothesis for seven months. Where was he? That experience cost me over $8,000. That is a lot of money for someone to pay during a recessionary period.

Mentor issues may be resolved by a better selection process, but other obstacles were described in

several data categories. In general, obstacles were related to time, "It would have been beneficial to work with an advisor very early on to find a clear direction and minimize wasted efforts." "I had a life-altering physical and emotional situation occur that set me back a bit, but later I was able to recommit and move forward." While commitment to the goal was described as a facilitating condition, work/life commitments were classified as challenges, "It was difficult in managing work and family commitments. Time progressed with lack of sleep as work obligations required long hours."

DISCUSSION

Although ample information exists about different aspects of doctoral research, tools, and techniques (e.g., Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009; Cooper & Schindler, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994), nothing was found in the literature that addressed an overall holistic approach to the journey or a requisite paradigmatic shift in thinking and learning processes that leads to transformative change as espoused by the authors (Harris, Hallcom & Baugh, 2009). It also appears that the information that is available may not be adequately communicated by learning institutions to doctoral learners or used in a timely manner to support a rapid start to the journey.

Participants complained about the time and effort to make the transition from passive learner to active researcher. When survey participants answered questions related to their perceived slow starts, it became evident that preliminary coursework was not very useful in preparing for the dissertation and never portended any change in approach. The coursework also did not indicate that personal transformative change may be required to develop the dissertation.

The data show that factors which slow the start of the journey, as well as those aspects that impede satisfactory progress, may be anticipated and addressed ahead of time. One respondent described this concept succinctly when asked what she would do differently:

> I would dedicate more time and attention to the whole PhD process and not allow other distractions to set me back. Easier said than done, I suppose, but now that I am finished, it is easier to concentrate on my desired research. I also feel that my mentor set me back with stalling tactics as she was overcommitted, so I would choose a different mentor if I had to do it again.

Selecting the right mentor who is interested in the study and compatible with the learner is crucial for making satisfactory progress. By spending time in advance with the mentor to identify and define feasible milestones and acceptable progress targets for both parties, the overall goal may be achieved in a more timely fashion. Identifying applicable tools that may be implemented for the learner's – as well as the mentor's – advantage is equally crucial. It is also critical for the learner to understand that

personal transformative change is a primary component for success. The doctoral learner must understand the reasoning behind transformative change and willingly embrace both the need for change and the actual change itself. The learner must also understand what that transformative change means in terms of letting go of past thinking and learning processes to focus on new relevant learning processes. It is clear that concrete and specific knowledge and skills may be developed up front and prior to the beginning of the doctoral program, if so desired. This development can not only provide a richer and more successful start to the journey, but it can also increase the chances of success as it sets the stage for progressively more transformative change.

Leveraging the facilitating conditions and overcoming the constraining and blocking conditions to make satisfactory progress requires the doctoral candidate to make transformative changes in his or her approach to the journey as the candidate moves from the status quo of passive learner to a new state as an active researcher and writer. The findings of the study identified three areas of significance that may enhance and improve the pursuit of a PhD while maintaining an active life. Following the systems thinking of Gharajedaghi (2006) on paradigm shifts, alignment, and learning as well as change concepts described by Harris, Becker, Hallcom, and Ponshock (2008), the authors distilled these necessary transformative changes down into three distinct phases.

Although these phases are distinct and have different attributes that are described independently, they must be aligned with goals and purposes of the study and they can occur either in concurrent phases or in iterative phases. This three part transformation model can be defined as a) the transformation from passive learner to active researcher or Learning to Be; b) effectively starting the journey, which may also be called Learning to Learn; and c) understanding and applying appropriate data collection and data analysis tools and techniques to support the learner's goals or Learning to Do.

Learning to Be doctoral implies developing a better understanding of the purpose and intent of individual rationales for attaining the PhD. This understanding should occur as early as possible in the journey as it can help clarify the needs and expectations of learners who embark on the doctoral journey. Learning to Be can also create a perspective of ownership and reinforce co-leadership of the process that can motivate and encourage the learner to move past constraining and blocking conditions when they appear.

Learning to Learn in a doctoral manner is the second phase of the transformation from passive learner to active researcher. The doctoral learner should use his or her coursework to begin active research practices to develop necessary research skills. This phase can lead to an earlier understanding of how coursework can support the ultimate goal and may lead to a more appropriate and effective choice of study methodologies, tools, and techniques.

Finally, Learning to Do enforces visibility on the goal, focus on feasible milestones, and how to make suitable progress along the journey. When a doctoral learner moves into the dissertation phase knowing what to do and how to do it, a quicker start can occur and the overall journey can be shortened, thereby reducing the time on task and the expenses incurred along the way. Taken together, these three phases can induce a transformative change in the doctoral candidate which can lead to a more successful and timely achievement of the ultimate goal.

LIMITATIONS

A key limitation to this study rests in the use of a purposeful sampling of current PhDs and doctoral candidates. Although the doctoral candidates have been on task for an average of four years, there were no self-described ABDs (doctoral candidates who have totally abandoned the journey) contained within this latter group. It might have been useful to have run the survey with a group of ABDs, who are no longer interested in finishing the journey, to compare their experiences with those who have completed the degree and those who are still actively pursuing the degree but who have not yet completed their dissertations. In addition, neither the mentor, the granting institution, nor the society (where the PhD comes from and returns to) were surveyed.

This study considered only one side of the doctoral equation, that of the learner. This singular perspective calls for additional research to present a well-rounded view of all the purposeful parts involved in attaining a PhD while maintaining an active life. At the time of writing this paper, the authors had begun working on a book related to this topic. Complementary surveys were developed to measure the doctoral journey from mentor and institutional perspectives, although time and space constraints prohibited a fuller exploration of these viewpoints in this paper. The additional research may add a valuable counterpoint to the expressed experiences of the current study group.

CONCLUSION

This study examined key elements that contributed to the learner attaining a PhD while maintaining an active life. The data were gathered through an Internet survey and analyzed for common themes and patterns. Once the analysis was underway, it became apparent that the needs of the systemic elements in context (the individuals, the organization, and the society) could best be demonstrated through a force field analysis identifying the interests of the purposeful parts in terms of facilitating, constraining, and blocking forces. The overarching need for alignment of the purposeful parts also became apparent.

The authors found that many factors facilitated early success, while still others constrained or blocked success. In several cases, some elements fell into two or three of the field conditions further suggesting

the need for deeper understanding and alignment of the purposeful parts. The primary conclusion drawn from the data in this study is that doctoral aspirants (as one purposeful part) should anticipate the need for a transformative change (as individuals) from passive learner to active researcher and should start this paradigmatic change in the organization and in the society as soon as possible by Learning to Be, Learning to Learn, and Learning to Do.

The authors view this paper as a meaningful start. However, they realize further research is necessary to more fully develop the perspectives of the mentor and the organization, as well as the larger society (as other purposeful parts) to gain balance in a holistic perspective on the doctoral journeys undertaken. Studies are currently underway to complete the additional research indicated as a result of this preliminary work.

REFERENCES

Arbnor, I., & Bjerke, B. (2009). *Methodology for creating business knowledge* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Cooper, D. R., & Schindler, P. S. (2008). *Business research methods* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.

Cronshaw, S. F., & McCulloch, A. N. A. (2008, Winter). Reinstating the Lewinian vision: From force field analysis to organizational field assessment. *Organization Development Journal, 26*(4), 89-103.

Denzin, N. K. (2001). *Interpretive interactionism* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (2000). *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gharajedaghi, J. (2006). *Systems thinking: Managing chaos and complexity:* (2nd ed.). Burlington MA: Elsevier.

Harris, M. E., Becker, G. F., Hallcom, A. S., & Ponschock, R. L. (2008). *Mastering a New Paradigm in Management Consulting* (2nd ed.). Createspace.

Harris, M. E., Hallcom, A. S., & Baugh, J. B. (2009). *Making a Difference in Successfully Completing a Holistic Doctoral Journey.* Professional Development Workshop, Management Consulting Doctoral Consortium & Colloquium, Academy of Management Annual Conference, Chicago IL, August 2009.

Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social sciences: Selected theoretical papers.* D. Cartwright, Ed*.,* New York: Harper & Brothers.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newberry Park, CA: Sage.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social sciences: Selected theoretical papers.* D. Cartwright, Ed*.,* New York: Harper & Brothers.