

Applying a Solution-Focused Model for Doctoral Student Motivation

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Abstract

Adults who choose to enter a doctoral degree programme in the United States generally progress well during content classes. In online courses, as in a physical classroom setting, students will form support groups, meet due dates for class activities, and submit assignments. Once finished with the content course phase of a doctoral programme, students enter the independent dissertation research and writing stage. Classmate support disappears, much time and money has now been spent in school, and determining how to write a 150 to 250 page doctoral dissertation becomes a serious undertaking. Motivation decreases while frustration increases. For this SF project, doctoral students were involved in a coaching project intended to help them regain the excitement and inspiration experienced earlier in the doctoral programme. A telephone call with each student was held at the start of a research course, guiding each through a series of SF questions based on the SIMPLE model. In-class follow up was conducted at the end of the course. Students expressed greater motivation and enthusiasm about progress, with less frustration presented in class and personal emails than in previous research classes.

Introduction

Most students choosing to enrol in doctoral programmes in the United States are working adults who hold organisational leadership positions, spend more than the normal expected hours per week in the office, and participate in many professional and personal activities. Hours spent on school tasks are usually added at night and at weekends into a student's schedule, potentially decreasing time for family and

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social connections. Life situations such as health problems, economic changes, or emotional shifts occur during academic programmes, taking time and effort to manage. Researching topic literature and writing sections of a dissertation are time consuming and doctoral school work may end up low on the list of things to do.

As a Professor and Doctoral Faculty Chair, I work with many students who find themselves in various demanding situations that curtail academic progress. Schools generally provide student support options such as how-to tutorials or workshops, and faculty members receive training on how to facilitate student advancement. Books are written to help these adults better understand the academic process (Cone & Foster, 2006; Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013). Over the progression of a degree programme, students make decisions to a) leave the programme, b) continue paying tuition with hope that somehow progress will happen, or c) discover a breakthrough that helps them move forward successfully. Finding ways to inspire this breakthrough is an ongoing faculty pursuit.

Faculty Chairs who work with dissertation phase students take on the roles of guide, editor, teacher, coach, and cheerleader. Over the years in these different roles, I have used various techniques to motivate students through this dissertation phase. Progress happens, but effective progress only occurs when individuals find their own motivational paths. Upon entering the independent research and writing phase of the programme, some students quickly discover a personal breakthrough and move efficiently toward graduation. However, most students experience delays, not easily finding a breakthrough that helps to move forward successfully.

A somewhat successful method has been the use of SMART goals – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-based. The process helped students set tasks to work on, but I found that, even with explanation, specific skills training seemed to be needed to write effective goals. Time is not available for this type of training in classes, nor do most students want to spend extra effort learning how to create goals properly instead of researching and writing the disserta-

tion. I asked myself how I could change from being *the professor who lectures* to functioning as a *coach who facilitates individual growth and progress*.

I began a personal journey to explore alternatives for fostering motivation. I attended training in positive psychology and, during a class session, explored a reference made about SF coaching. I found that most information originated from the SF brief therapy work developed by de Shazer and Berg (1995) at the Brief Family Therapy Center, Wisconsin, and also was derived from previous work by Bateson, Erickson, Weakland, and others (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). Research has been conducted primarily on therapy situations, with increasing attention to coaching and workplace applications (Macdonald, 2011). Little information was found involving academic use. However, the SF process seemed viable for use in online and classroom environments with doctoral students to expand motivation and increase progress.

Coaching for a Solutions Focus

In preparation for working with a group of students enrolled in an asynchronous, online doctoral programme held in the fall of 2012, I developed an SF coaching guide (see Appendix A) to use when talking with each student by telephone. During each semester, I hold a combination of conference calls and personal calls to establish current status and answer questions. To introduce SF during the fall semester, I asked each person to schedule an hour conference with me during the first three weeks of the course. Using the SIMPLE model (Jackson & McKergow, 2007) as a basis for questions, I talked with each student by telephone for at least one hour.

1. Focus on solutions instead of problems

Students generally wanted to talk about what problems they have with finding articles or writing sections properly. To focus on solutions instead of problems, I started the conversation by asking what goal was expected from being a part of the doctoral programme. Responses included interests in teaching

and consulting: *“Following the receipt of my Doctorate degree, I hope to make a positive difference in the business community and in the lives of those pursuing a business degree. I plan to teach college and establish my own consulting business . . . Utilising my experience, education, and connections I feel that I can contribute to the academic and business community in a positive manner.”* Students also wished to meet a personal goal or be a model for family: *“When I finally graduate, I will take some time to celebrate this achievement with my friends and family. There is no particular job that I am after with this degree, but I do have a goal to finish in order to set the bar for the rest of my family (children, grandchildren, and great-nieces that are nearby). Many in my family never graduated high school, and I am here to continue breaking that cycle and to show them it can be done if they want it enough”.*

2. Inbetween, not inside

I followed this brief goal discussion with the Miracle Question to generate personal reflection about graduation. In their visions, students identified that they felt *happy, elated, relaxed, freer, and proud* to have earned the degree and title of Doctor. Families and co-workers were mentioned as those who would notice changes in *skills, knowledge, and a swagger in the step*, addressing the SF aspect of action “inbetween”. A key recognition was that, although each worked individually on the dissertation, receiving the degree was a result of tremendous support by those people surrounding the student.

The scale of 1-10 was presented to ask where each student thought he/she was currently in meeting the graduation goal just envisioned. Student responses ranged from the numbers 3 to 8. No additional questioning was held about number given, although a couple of students volunteered information about why they chose that number. One student said: *“I’m about a 7 and think I have a good foundation – I just need to edit and organise better”.*

3. Make use of what's there

The scale was immediately followed with a question about what had helped each student advance to this point in the programme. The focus was on strengths, the aspect of the SIMPLE model's "make use of what's there" (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). Determination, dedication, and discipline were the primary factors talked about by the students. I used the phrases "and ..." or "what else ..." with silence to encourage thinking time. Student comments included: a) *"I think just sheer perseverance. I've had a few people ask me if I'm giving up since I've been on this journey so long, and I absolutely am not! I will get there, one day at a time"*; b) *"I am very determined. As I progress in this process I see the big picture. I understand that the Doctoral journey is preparing me to make a difference in the business community and in so many lives I aspire to touch positively throughout the world"*; and c) *"I keep a positive attitude even when it feels like I am not making progress. And my key strength is determination."* Several were surprised with a realisation of how much they thought they had accomplished so far, that no one had ever asked about this before, and mentioned that they were encouraged to go forward due to the recognition of success.

4. Possibilities

The next two sections of the guide dealt with formal assignments due in later weeks. Students normally choose two to three document sections to work on during each research course session. In each conversation, we focused on the sections chosen to complete for the formal graded assignments. Students were first asked which section would be worked on for the assignment due in week 6, along with what scale number represented where they were in meeting completion of that specific text. Responses ranged from the number 3 to 8. The key discussion was around what possible small steps could be taken to move points on the scale. Responses ranged from discussing specific tasks like *"I am already scheduling (beginning this Saturday) the morning to the library"* and

“Outline my literature review headings for logical flow” to more general tasks like *“Use the library to find articles to help me better understand method and design processes”* and *“Learn how to code my data”*.

5. Language

This set of questions was repeated to discuss the week 8 assignment. Scale numbers now ranged from 1 to 7, indicating this section was less developed or perhaps more complex to write. I provided almost no suggestions during this time, relying on the students to develop their own ideas. I reflected their words back to them throughout the conversation, keeping language simple, and asking the phrase ‘what else’ to encourage additional thoughts and clarification. We also revisited the strengths noted earlier in the telephone call to summarise how those could be used to maximise successful step(s) completion. Overall, students were excited at the end of these two short discussions to a) see the future and realise how far they had already advanced, and b) generate personal motivational steps to help move more quickly forward.

6. Every case is different

The SF process is a flexible every-case-is-different approach to foster change, not a prescribed model to standardise with all. Although a form was used to guide discussion about specific formal assignments due for the research class, conversations were tailored to students so they could each discuss what was important to them. The change intended for students was an increased focus on small steps that would provide them with a better sense of accomplishment and for me, as the facilitator, observation of improved progress.

The final question asked at the close of the one-hour telephone conversation was about how this discussion process had worked for the student. Comments included: a) *“This is very helpful and I’m fortunate to have you as my Chair”*; b) *“You’ve really helped me get clear about what to do”*; c) *“I feel excited ... I’m ready to move into reviews”*; and d) *“This conversation is excellent – makes things make sense”*.

Follow-up activities

An important success factor I included in this conversation activity, held in the first weeks of the course, was to follow up with discussion at the end of the 8-week long class to see how each student felt they had progressed. Discussion Questions, posted weekly in online classrooms and responded to by students in text messages, are similar to those asked by an instructor in a physical classroom to generate comments and discussion. The scale was again referenced, using the following questions posted online for the Week 7 Discussion Question.

- Based on our scale of 1-10 (high) that we discussed at the start of this class, what number do you think you are now currently at for Proposal completion in week 8?
- How far did you raise that number during this session?
- What small step do you need to accomplish **THIS WEEK** in order to move even more points up the scale by the end of week 8? Think carefully – this goal is a specific way to ‘stay on the path’ and help you complete more of your document!

Generally, students wrote that they used their small steps to raise their numbers by $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 point, and they reported much more detail about the steps they had recently taken than when previously commenting on status using a SMART goals process. I observed that two students moved forward much more substantially in text completion, five students were very pleased with their completion of section work, and two reported completing only some additional work as life situations had interfered, but they were now excited to continue in the next research class.

After a two-week holiday break, the next research course began and, except for one student who did not enrol for this next session, all students were in attendance. For the posted Week 1 Discussion Question, each was asked to again reflect on current status. The questions asked in the online classroom thread were:

1. What number from 1 – 10 (high) are you currently at with your Proposal research/writing?
2. What small step(s) are you going to take during this session to move up at least one number on this scale?
3. What is the key strength (attitude or skill) you bring to this process at this time to create success for yourself?

Several students reported continuing to work on their Proposals during their holiday, normally a time when very little research or writing is accomplished. The focus on *the future* and *small steps to take* seemed to be successful in helping them retain the enthusiasm to write, and so to feel they had accomplished more work than usually finished. Since most were enrolled in their fifth or more research class and each course was two months in length, time was moving by rapidly for programme completion. One student finished enough text that, with a couple of edit sessions, he entered into the formal review cycle to gain approvals for the study proposal document. Three others, who had been progressing slowly during enrolled research courses in 2012, completed more text in the class and during the holiday break than in their past several courses. Although not specifically asked about in the Discussion Question, a breakthrough appears to have occurred for several students, as noted: “*As I progress in this process, I now see the big picture. I understand that the Doctoral journey is preparing me to make a difference in the business community and in so many lives I aspire to touch positively throughout the world*”; and “*I’m seeing the PhD letters after my name!*” I functioned much more as a guide and supporter, not as a lecturer, and students seemed to become more independent and self-motivated.

Conclusion

As a result of this SF project, attention to discussing small steps seems to have improved student time management and completion of document sections. Several commented in class on the small steps they set for themselves and identified a

number of extra helpful activities that had not been previously suggested or discussed.

My goal has been to continue using the SF process to maintain enthusiasm as students move toward graduation. Faculty training has been proposed to explain the SF process—the miracle question, attention to strengths, and a focus on what is wanted instead of what is wrong—and how SF may be applied to the online classroom to foster improved motivation (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; McKergow & Korman, 2009).

I introduced the SF project at the start of a research course and students then posted follow up comments during the final weeks of the course. They indicated that the SF discussions helped them establish more meaning for research decisions and progress—an example: “*I loved this class and found it very helpful. I learned several things that will guide me through the process ... I feel that the best information this class provided was clarity. I now better understand what I need to do and when I need to get it done!*” My hope is to continue making research class and independent dissertation work much more interesting and valuable for students, to primarily function as a guide and coach rather than lecturer, and to foster individual student motivation that results in a timely and successful journey to graduation.

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Appendix A

Solution-Focused Telephone Coaching Guide

Student Coaching Session with: _____

Date: _____

Ask Student to take notes to post a summary. Instructor takes notes during the telephone call to complete the following items.

What is the goal you want from being in this programme?
This is a picture of the *perfect future*.

Suppose you go to bed tonight and sleep as usual, but during the night a time shift happens. You wake up and *graduation* has happened – you are Dr. xxx. What will tell you the miracle has happened? How will you feel? What will others notice? What else? == >

On a scale of 1–10, where are you now for meeting this future perfect goal? You are currently in the Proposal stage.
== >

What got you to this point for being in this programme and developing your current work? What else? (strengths XXX)
== >

Now let's focus on this class session for weeks 6 & 8 and what can be done to move you toward your goal. (*Note: students select 2–3 elements of the paper to work on during each research class.*)

You chose sections Cxxx to work on in week 1, and you submitted Cx for week 2. What is the goal(s) you want to have happen for the week 6 assignment? == >

On a scale of 1–10, where are you in meeting this now?
== >

What small step will you take so you can move up 1 or more points on the scale to actually meet this goal for week 6? How will others support you in this? == >

You chose sections Cxxx to work on in week 1, and you chose Cx to work on for week 6. What is the goal(s) you want to have happen for the week 8 assignment? == >

On a scale of 1-10, where are you in meeting this now?
== >

What small step will you take so you can move up even 1 point on the scale so that you can actually meet this goal for week 8? How will others support you in this? == >

How will you use your strength(s) of XXX to help you meet selected steps? What else might you do? What else? . . .

NOW – please post a brief summary of this conversation to class or email to me so we can track your success!

Other questions or comments: