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Article

Principles and Practices of Transformative Online Doctoral Mentoring—A Mentor's Perspective

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Abstract: An effective mentor is critical to the success of an online doctoral student. Researchers have found that online doctoral students prefer frequent interactions with their mentor, while faculty prefer mentees to be autonomous. Transformative online doctoral mentoring (ODM) requires the development of a strong collaborative working relationship between the mentee and mentor, who serves as the link between the student and academia, as well as their guide and working partner throughout the dissertation process. In this paper, I argue that the ultimate objective of ODM, the establishment of such a relation-ship between mentor and mentee, increases the likelihood of student success. I support this contention with a set of principles and practices grounded in relevant models and methods of human development, participative leadership, and collaborative change management that provide insights into the what, why, and how of transformative ODM.

Keywords: Online Education, Online Doctoral Mentoring, Transformative Online Doctoral Mentoring, Ecology of Human Development, Participative Leadership, Collaborative Change Management

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1. Introduction

This ancient wisdom captures the goal of ODM at its most fundamental level. The essential role of a teacher or mentor is to kindle the flame of knowledge in the student and keep it alive and growing. To do that arguably requires exhibiting behaviors that instill by example, and develop by shared experiences, values such as the love of learning, authenticity, honesty, courtesy, caring, empathy, inclusiveness, equity, and service to others. This view is supported by common sense and research (Pollard & Kumar, 2021 [1]; Stadtlander, 2021 [2]; Stadtlander et al., 2022) [3]. In this paper I discuss the what, why, and how of such an approach to ODM.

2. Why Collaboration is Critical to Transformative ODM

Research shows that doctoral students want to work closely with their mentor, while faculty prefer that students work on their own with minimum faculty supervision (Stadtlander et al., 2022) [3]. Stadtlander et al. (2022) [3] found that students want a close relationship that makes them feel valued because the mentor listens to them, provides feedback, encourages them, and shows that "their thoughts matter" (p. 427). Stadtlander (2021) [2] also identified being supportive and creating a positive working relationship as essential to ODM. Pollard and Kumar (2021) [1] emphasized the essential nature of the ODM relationship when they asserted, "Within these online mentoring relationships, the faculty member becomes the link to an otherwise absent yet critical experience of academia for the online student, making it imperative to create and foster an effective

relationship based on identified strategies and best practices for online mentoring" (p. 267).

While a cooperative relationship between mentor and mentee is necessary, is it enough to maximize the odds of student success? I argue that it is not, and that the goal of ODM should be to develop a collaborative mentor–mentee relationship of the type discussed in this paper.

White (2024) [4] explained the difference between collaboration and cooperation as follows:

Collaboration involves deep engagement and usually a shared vision or goal, where participants actively work together, often bringing diverse skills and perspectives to create something new or solve complex problems. Cooperation, on the other hand, is more about participants doing their part towards a common goal, often without the need for integrated planning or deep interaction.

Mentors who prefer that students work autonomously (i.e., without the need for deep interaction) clearly prefer cooperation. Mentors who work together extensively with their mentees in the achievement of a shared goal (e.g., an excellent dissertation that meets or exceeds their university's standards) clearly prefer collaboration. Other approaches to ODM, such as creating a supportive relationship without deep interaction, fall somewhere in between.

Two analogies that capture the essence of a cooperative versus a collaborative mentor–mentee relationship are running a marathon versus climbing a mountain. In the former, the mentor/coach prepares the mentee for a test of endurance (not unlike completing a dissertation) that the student will perform alone, which is cooperation. In the latter, the mentor/guide walks with the mentee every step of the journey, which is collaboration. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the difference in practice between collaboration and cooperation is the difference between lightning and lightning bug.

In the next section, we examine the principles that underlie transformative ODM.

3. Principles of Transformative ODM

The overarching goal of the ODM is to facilitate the transformation of the mentee from a student to a scholar. In this section, I discuss the models that constitute the conceptual framework for transformative ODM—the ecology of human development, the participative leadership model, and the collaborative change management model.

3.1. Ecology of Human Development Principles

Lewin (1951) [5] argued that human behavior is a function of the interaction between a person (P) and their environment (E):

$$\text{Behavior} = f(\text{P}, \text{E})$$

Having a strong desire to acquire a skill is necessary, but not sufficient, to its development. Favorable environmental factors must also be at play. A person might want to learn to play the violin, but without the money to pay for lessons, they would not be able to develop that skill.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) [6] took Lewin's simple and elegant model one step further. He too saw environment in which a person lives as a critical element in human development. However, he differentiated the environment into a superstructure, which he termed the ecological environment: "The ecological environment is . . . a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, [6] p. 3), which comprise the microsystem at its core, surrounded by the mesosystem, macrosystem, and exosystem.

$$\text{Development} = f(\text{P, E1, E2, E3, E4})$$

Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) [6] model to ODM results in separate human development models for cooperation versus collaboration.

In the cooperative approach to ODM, the first, inner-most level (E1, the microsystem) is the mentee; the second level (E2, the mesosystem) consists of the academic resources available to the mentee; the third level (E3, the exosystem) includes the mentor who supports the mentee in their effort to understand the dissertation process and use the academic resources available to them effectively, along with their support system of family, friends, and colleagues; and the final level (E4, the macrosystem) includes those people in the university and external resources that are available to the mentee, but do not directly influence them on a regular basis.

In the collaborative approach to ODM, the inner-most level (E1, the microsystem) is the mentee; the second level (E2, the mesosystem) consists of the mentor who works directly with the mentee through every step of the dissertation process toward the achievement of shared goals; the third level (E3, the exosystem) consists of the academic resources available to the mentee, along with their support system of family, friends, and colleagues; and the final level (E4, the macrosystem) includes those people in the university and external resources that are available to the mentee, but do not directly influence them on a regular basis.

In summary, the transformative online doctoral mentor works in collaboration with the mentee at the second level (E2) as a guide and working partner in a common cause throughout the dissertation process, while the cooperative online doctoral mentor works at the third level (E3) as a coach, providing positive support and direction on how to achieve the end goal (i.e., the doctorate).

3.2. Principles of Participative Leadership

James MacGregor Burns, the Pulitzer Prize winning author, described the alternative to traditional leadership, which he called transforming leadership. Burns (1978, [7] pp. 1–3) argued that there was a "crisis of leadership" because people did not understand the essence of leadership; namely, that it is less about individualism, elitism, and heroism than it is about human development and the pursuit of a "collective purpose." Bradford and Cohen (1984) [8] gave practical meaning to the theory of transforming leadership. According to Bradford and Cohen, a manager must do three things to be a leader: (a) work with his followers to create a common or shared vision of the future, (b) share responsibility for achieving this vision with those followers, and (c) develop the followers' capability to perform at their best. This simple and elegant three-step process is the participative leadership model.

3.3. Principles of Collaborative Change Management

Kurt Lewin's (1958) [9] change model is a planned process for organizational change by engaging employees actively in the change effort. Lewin's model, also known as the UMR model, consists of unfreezing the current state (U), moving to the desired new state (M), and refreezing to optimize the new state (R) so that becomes accepted practice (Levasseur, 2025) [10]. Following these stages enables leaders and their followers to make transformative changes by overcoming, in a collaborative manner, people's natural resistance to embrace change. Rather than forcing people to change, Lewin's model, correctly applied, enables participative leaders to engage, inspire, and motivate them to participate in the change process to achieve a common goal or vision of the future (Levasseur, 2001) [11]. The key to applying this approach to planned change effectively in the modern era of rapid, often unpredictable change is to envision Lewin's model not as

just three stages (U => M => R), but as a continuous, iterative process consisting of multiple recurring UMR change processes separated by unique time intervals determined by the next need to make a substantive change in accepted practice (Levasseur, 2025) [10].

4. Practices of Transformative ODM

Transformative ODM is a set of human development, participative leadership, and change management principles enabled by the use of collaborative processes. In this section, I (a) discuss ways to apply each of the three core principles of transformative ODM and why they work, (b) provide specific, practical guidelines for each step of the dissertation process; and (c) share words of wisdom for facilitating the development of mentees as scholar-practitioners learned from transformative teachers and mentors.

4.1. Best Practices Based on the Conceptual Framework

4.1.1. Ecology of Human Development

Brofenbrenner's (1979) [7] framework is a systemic approach to human development. The metamessage of the ecology of human development framework for transformative ODM is to look beyond simplistic solutions when guiding a mentee. For example, if a mentee does not follow your advice, it may be for a number of reasons related to the mentee's personality (P), such as stubbornness, but it may also be due to environmental (E) factors, such as not understanding your instructions or how to implement them; personal, family, or work issues; or preoccupation with a macrosystem issue like losing their job. Hence, a transformative ODM best practice based on Brofenbrenner's (1979) [7] ecology of human development model is to think holistically when dealing with mentees.

4.1.2. Participative Leadership

Participative leadership is shared leadership in action. It necessitates working collaboratively. Imagine a scale with authoritarian leadership on one end and participative leadership on the other. As stated earlier, authoritarian mentors prefer that students work on their own with minimum faculty supervision, while participative mentors understand the necessity of working closely with their mentees in a collaborative way (shared leadership). In practice, this means that anyone who aspires to be a transformative online doctoral mentor needs to learn how to share leadership without losing control of the mentoring process. The practices of collaborative change management illustrate how to do this effectively.

4.1.3. Collaborative Change Management

Trying to distill a rich set of change management practices into a few key guidelines that do not oversimplify them is challenging. Nevertheless, in this section I describe several fundamental concepts of change management that would-be transformative online doctoral mentors need to put into practice (see Levasseur (2010) [12].):

People Support What They Help to Create. This pearl of change management wisdom succinctly captures the essence of the change process—namely, that the best way to overcome resistance to change is to involve people affected by it in the change process as early as possible. For transformative ODM, this means engaging the mentee on Day 1 in the collaborative process of identifying a common vision of the ideal outcome of their efforts and agreeing to share responsibility for achieving this shared vision by actively working together throughout the dissertation process.

Two-Way Communication Is Essential. Although not sufficient in and of itself to ensure the effective implementation of a change effort, regular, honest, two-way communication is, nonetheless, essential to transformative ODM. Mentees, like mentors,

do not like surprises. At the outset, effective two-way communication engages both the mentor and mentee in a meaningful dialogue about the vision for the change effort and its personal implications. This type of meaningful exchange, initiated by the mentor on Day 1, sends a clear message that the mentee's ideas and feelings are important, thus fostering the level of collaborative engagement required to achieve the shared objective of conducting high-quality research and writing a high-quality dissertation.

Collaboration Is the Key. The fundamental principle that distinguishes effective change efforts from less successful ones is collaboration. If you believe in the power of collaboration (aka teamwork, participation, collective effort, etc.) to harness the inherent power of people, then you understand why implementation must begin on Day 1, why people support what they help to create, why two-way communication is essential to effective change, and why commitment to a common cause is something that engaged, empowered mentees desire.

Lewin's Model Shows the Way. Although the three fundamental change management concepts described above have the power to improve the effectiveness of any mentor-mentee relationship, they work best when they are used as elements of a change process or model. The most simple and elegant of these is Kurt Lewin's three-step change model—unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Gold 1999 [13], Levasseur 2001 [11]). In my experience as a former facilitator of planned, systemic, organizational change and a 20 year transformative online doctoral mentor, the best way to initiate, facilitate, and ensure success is (a) to unfreeze by engaging mentees early and actively in a collaborative dialogue about the change effort; (b) to initiate and sustain movement by continuing the high level of two-way communication, joint action planning, and shared implementation effort throughout the dissertation process; and (c) to refreeze at a much higher level of academic competence upon completion of the dissertation.

4.2. Transformative ODM Applied to the Dissertation Research Process

4.2.1. The Dissertation Research Process

When viewed from a systemic perspective, the dissertation research process is sequential, iterative, and coherent (Levasseur, 2011) [14]. A transformative online doctoral mentor must explain the steps in dissertation research process and ensure their mentee applies them correctly.

Sequential. One of the characteristics of systems we are all familiar with is the fact that the parts of a system interconnect. As a result, a change in one part of the system affects the other parts of the system to varying degrees. This is true of the dissertation process. The 10 steps in the dissertation research process are listed and described in Table 1.

Table 1. The Dissertation Research Process

#	Step	Description
1	Problem	Define the broad problem and its significance.
2	Grounding Literature	Ground the study in the existing literature.
3	Purpose	Specify the research focus.
4	Research Questions	Describe the research questions.*
5	Research Method	Select the general research approach.
6	Research Design	Describe the specific research design elements.
7	Proposal	Create the detailed research plan.
8	Research	Conduct the study.
9	Dissertation	Present the findings.
10	Publication	Publish the findings.

[1] *Note. *For a quantitative study, describe the research questions and hypotheses.*

The dissertation research process is *sequential* in the sense that each step depends upon the preceding steps. It all begins with the determination of a research problem stated in the current, peer-reviewed literature on the subject. The search for the grounding literature focuses on what other scholars have recently published on the solution to that research problem. The purpose statement describes a study with the potential to extend the theoretical boundaries of knowledge by extending the research identified in the grounding literature. The research questions derive from the purpose of the study. The research method follows directly from the research questions. The research design actualizes the research method. The proposal ties all the preceding steps into a detailed research plan. The research study implements the research plan. And, finally, the presentation and publication of the findings make the results of the study available to other scholars inside and outside of the university.

Iterative. The dissertation research process is also *iterative* (i.e., trial and error) in the sense that circumstances uncovered when working on a given process step may necessitate the revision of one or more preceding steps, which in turn may necessitate the revision of subsequent steps. For example, a careful literature search might lead to the conclusion that other scholars had studied a problem extensively and that, therefore, the answers to that problem exist in the literature, necessitating a switch to another dissertation topic. Or, the discovery of a problem in the design phase, such as the unavailability of sufficiently high quality existing data for one or more essential variables in a quantitative study, might necessitate a switch to a new research method (e.g., from existing data analysis to survey research).

Coherent. Finally, the dissertation research process is *coherent* in the sense that when applied properly it results in alignment among all the elements of the process—the problem statement, grounding literature, purpose statement, research questions (and hypotheses for a quantitative study), research method, research design, proposal, research, dissertation, and publication.

4.2.2. The IRB Process

Although technically separate from the dissertation process, Institutional Review Board (IRB) review of the proposed dissertation research to ensure that it meets the ethical standards for the protection of human research subjects specified in The Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979 [15]) is necessary to obtain approval to conduct the research. Transformative ODM in this context involves making mentees aware of the time that the IRB process may take, dependent on the nature of the study, and providing the assistance they need to secure IRB approval.

4.2.3. AI and Academic Integrity

In this era of unprecedented technological incursion into areas once considered the province of people, I would be remiss if I did not mention the pitfalls of online dissertation mentors allowing mentees to use Generative AI software to assist them in writing their dissertation documents. As explained in Levasseur (2025) [14], this type of AI simulates (i.e., mimics) human thought but it does not operate like the human mind. Rather, Generative AI software manipulates words based on their probability of occurrence to create documents that seem to have been written by a human being. This is known as "hallucination." The following quotation clearly elucidates what happens when someone (e.g., a mentee) uses Generative AI, like ChatGPT, to write a paper or a section of a paper:

GPT-generated comments are a simulation. They are fake and not genuinely communicative. I'm sure everyone has heard of the problem of AI "hallucination," where it invents material that is untrue or inaccurate, but it is important to recognize that from the point of view of AI, everything is a hallucination. It has no capacity for separating the real from the fake, the true from the false. That it may occasionally or even frequently hit on good advice should not matter, because there is no genuine intent at meaning or communication behind the generation of syntax (Warner, 2024 [16]).

4.3. Transformative Words of Wisdom from Great Teachers and Mentors

In this final section, I describe some of the words of wisdom I have learned from great teachers, mentors, and personal experience over the years that guide my work as a transformative online doctoral mentor. Imagine me relating each in the appropriate circumstances, directly or as a story, to help a mentee understand my motivation for making a suggestion or how to implement a suggestion I have made.

4.3.1. What is the PhD?

Derived from the Greek words for love (philos) and wisdom (sophia), philosophy literally means the love of wisdom. The PhD, or Doctor of Philosophy, is the capstone degree that represents a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge through academic research. The goal of academic research is to extend the theoretical boundaries of knowledge in a field of study.

4.3.2. The Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal of the transformative online doctoral mentor working collaboratively with a mentee is twofold, to help them earn their degree and to teach them how to do research so they can pursue knowledge through academic research on their own after graduation. I use the example of an apprentice working with a medieval craftsman to learn how to do something they have acquired the theoretical knowledge to do (by completing the required courses in a field of study) but have never done before. Knowing how to use the tools of the trade does not mean that you know how to build a house by yourself the first time. Someone, your mentor, has to show you how. After that, you can build them yourself.

4.3.3. Leave Your Ego at the Door

Doctoral learning is hard. It involves intense effort sustained for a very long time. One of the first lessons a mentee must learn is to listen to and follow the instructions of the mentor. To facilitate this, the transformative online doctoral mentor must earn the mentee's trust. To do this, early on in the dissertation process I tell each mentee the story of how I started my PhD journey on the same day as someone who seemed to know what, why, and how they were going to complete the process in a timely manner. From their point of view, they were in charge of the dissertation process. Several years later, when I was attending my graduation ceremony, I asked this person how they were doing. Sadly, they had made very little progress, which they attributed to their stubbornness. The moral of the story is that stubbornness leads to All-But-Dissertation (ABD) status, or at best long delays in the dissertation process. Collaboration on the other hand leads to a timely and high-quality dissertation and the doctorate.

4.3.4. Quality Work

For many mentees, and surprisingly many mentors, doing quality work is essentially about the content of the dissertation documents (e.g., prospectus, proposal, IRB Application, dissertation); whereas, the writing is secondary in the sense that fixing form

and style mistakes can be left to the end of the dissertation process for someone else to do. When I was working on my master's thesis, which involved a quantitative study of multivariate marketing models using multiple regression analysis, I learned the fallacy of this notion.

As happens, the results of a collaborative effort with my mentor, a distinguished professor known as the father of marketing science, to develop these models were the discovery that none of the models were valid (i.e., statistically significant). When he asked me to meet with him at his home off campus, I imagined it was to inform me that I had failed the thesis requirement, which would mean not getting my degree. What transpired at that meeting therefore came as a great surprise and relief.

First, he informed me that the null results of my regression analyses was not a problem, as the purpose of academic research is to determine what works and what does not work and provide that information to other researchers. Second, he stated that his concerns did not relate to the style of my writing, which he acknowledge was excellent. So what was the problem? For the next several uninterrupted hours, he reviewed with me each line of my thesis with the goal of improving the clarity, precision, and concision of the document. "Say what you mean. Mean what you say" was our mantra, and it worked. I left his home with the indelible knowledge that the quality of an academic document, like that of a business document, was a function of two equal components—the quality of the content *and* the quality of the writing.

4.3.5. A Marathon, Not a Sprint

Like a marathon, the dissertation process takes a long time to complete. So, mentees who are determined to earn their doctorate in an unrealistically short period of time, even allowing for the quality of the student, need to learn the steps in the process, the time it typically takes to complete each step, and the potential problems that can arise and significantly lengthen the time to complete any given step. Furthermore, these mentees need to be reminded that they do not control the review processes built into the overall dissertation process to ensure the quality and conformance of the finished dissertation to university standards.

4.3.6. The More You Know

Father P filled in for the principal of my high school when he took a leave of absence. A brilliant mathematician and teacher, as we were to discover, he chose to teach Algebra I at a most fortuitous time for me in my development as a life-long learner. On the first day of class, he stood before the 15 or so students in the class, which consisted of good, medium, and bad students from an academic standpoint, and said, "You are all going to learn algebra." For those just waiting to turn 16 and drop out of school, this seemed to be wishful thinking. To our collective amazement and delight, he designed and executed a class with such humility, clarity, humanity, conviction, and humor that all of us learned algebra.

On the last day of class, Father P left us all with a final, powerful message. He drew the three concentric circles on the black board and filled in the innermost circle. He then explained to us what these circles represented. The inner circle is what you have learned about algebra in this class. The next circle represents what you will learn about in Algebra II. The third circle is what will be left for you to learn about algebra in later life. The moral, he said, is that "the more you know, the more you know there is to know." As a result of his great teaching, Father P inspired me to be a life-long learner and share my knowledge with others as a teacher and ultimately a transformative online doctoral mentor.

This is a story about many things, but particularly that wisdom is more than knowledge. Wisdom is the pursuit of life-long learning with humility.

5. Conclusion

This is article is about the need for online doctoral mentors to view their role as a collaboration with each of their mentees, rather than supportive gurus who provide directions and expect mentees to be autonomous. Transformative ODM requires the development of a strong working relationship between the mentee and mentor, who serves as the link between the student and academia, as well as their guide and working partner throughout the dissertation process. In this paper, I argued that the ultimate objective of ODM should be the establishment of a strong collaborative relationship to increase the likelihood of student success. I supported this contention with a set of principles and practices grounded in relevant models and methods of human development, participative leadership, and collaborative change management that provide insights into the what, why, and how of transformative ODM.

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