

BOOK REVIEW:**An Online Doctorate for Researching Professionals****Ina Ghita**

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Kumar, S., & Dawson, K. (2018). *An Online Doctorate for Researching Professionals: Program Design, Implementation, and Evaluation*. Athabasca University Press.

As the demand for online postgraduate education is continuously rising, authors Swapna Kumar and Kara Dawson challenge the assumption that online professional doctoral programs are less rigorous than traditional ones and offer a model for post-graduate digital education in which scholarly thinking is embedded in the research and practice of the professional.

The authors note that online doctoral programs are often perceived as being inferior in comparison to other traditional doctoral programs, that they are a form of “PHD-lite” and propose a new model for educational professionals who want to perform high quality academic research at their place of work. The proposed model addresses issues of curriculum design, the development of scholarly thinking, dissertation supervision in an online environment, and community building. The authors, professors at the College of Education, University of Florida, describe their model, the theoretical foundations it was based on, the design decisions they have made, as well as suggestions for implementation and strategies for ensuring and evaluating the quality of the program.

In this volume, Kumar and Dawson make a distinction between two types of doctoral students: those who want to follow towards academia and become faculty members and professional practitioners who want to perform research at their place of work or within their institution. The model described in this volume is dedicated to professional students and it is designed around the idea that scholarly thinking can be embedded in the research and practice of the professional, and that researchers who want to advance their knowledge in theory can stay embedded in their practice.

The book uses the case study of the University of Florida EdD in Educational Technology, graduated at the time of writing by fifty-six students, grouped in four cohorts, since 2008. The program, which has a duration of three years, includes asynchronous and synchronous online interactions, as well as yearly on-campus meetings. Students are guided through two years of online coursework, followed by a third year to write and defend their dissertation.

While they tend to be successful and persistent, tend to be problem solvers (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003) and independent learners (R. Martens, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2007; R. L. Martens, Gulikers, & Bastiaens, 2004), who habitually employ critical thinking skills (Holder, 2007), digital learners have needs that are not essential for face to face learners, regarding feelings of isolation and self-direction (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004). Digital learners tend to be insecure about succeeding, and have other demands that conflict with learning, such as scheduling issues, money and long-term commitment challenges and constraints that places them at a higher risk of dropping out, compared with learners in traditional learning environments (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002). In essence, digital distance learners have multiple roles and commitments that they fulfill in parallel with their academic work and tend to continuously assess the value of their academic endeavor, which has a strong impact on their motivation to complete their studies. The authors recognize that digital learners have specific needs and they address them accordingly: from information literacy instruction to enculturation in the academic environment and multiple avenues for support and mediation. Considering that direct relevance of the content affects student motivation and their probability to graduate, the model asks students to explore and choose to focus on a problem they had found in practice, for their doctoral work. Among other similar exercises, students were also asked to write a fictional autobiography, according to which they planned their scholarly activities. A visual representation of what they have learned in their first year was used as a start for a conceptual framework.

One of the factors that often reported in educational research as influencing student motivation in digital learning is a feeling of community and connectedness, which is another key aspect of the authors' model. The authors go to great lengths to create opportunities for social interaction and faculty presence, from one to one mentoring, to peer review, working in interest-based groups and on-campus meetings. Pursuing a PHD can be a very solitary experience, even where students are physically surrounded by peers and instructors. Creating a framework that systematically creates opportunities for meaningful interactions and further encouraging students to create communities of practice, situating building a community before the stage of dissertation writing, in the timeline of the program, is a strong point of the author's proposed model.

Another strong point towards the authors' case of ensuring quality is their effort towards systematizing the way in which scholarly thinking is built: from academic reading and writing, reflection and discussion, to information-literacy embedded into the curriculum, designing instruction in cohorts and their effort to transform the identity of the students from practitioner to research practitioner. I found it innovative that the authors integrated an embedded librarian into the program; traditional students often have access to similar resources on campus for support and counseling, yet these resources are often overlooked in online programs.

The authors' work is very timely and relevant to the current post-secondary educational landscape, in which, in order to differentiate themselves on the job market, professionals perceive the need of gaining advanced professional skills comparable with doctoral education (Robinson, Morgan, & Reed, 2016). Other researchers corroborate Kumar and Dawson's point of view, that rigorously designed online programs can be an efficient and cost-effective alternative to traditional, on-campus learning (Shaha, Glassett, Copas, & Ellsworth, 2015), and that they can be as efficient and even outperform traditional classroom programs (Bernard et al., 2004).

The authors assess quality of the program through self-reported focused research such as surveys, faculty interviews, student focus groups, course evaluations, and believe it is

important to approach quality from a holistic program perspective. It would have been useful to see more research on the quality of learning and academic work itself to further support the authors' argument that online doctoral programs are as rigorous and high quality as traditional programs.

That being said, the aim of the book was to present a model for online professional doctorates designed to prepare researching professionals in a way that bridged theory, research and practice and I believe the constant attention and effort in improving the program and the effort in sharing the learnings in this book are very useful to researchers in post-secondary digital learning, faculty members who teach online, as well as institutions wanting to start or improve their digital education offer.

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