How do doctoral students publish during their busy candidature?

What this research was about and why it is important

Doctoral students are under increasing pressure to publish during their candidature. However, we still know little about how they manage to do so amid competing demands from their doctoral studies. This study examined how four nursing doctoral students at a Chinese university sought to fulfill their university’s publication requirements while juggling multiple demands from their busy doctoral studies. The study found that to expedite their scholarly publishing efforts, the students published on data from their master’s study, professional work, and course assignments, and/or published on data from their seniors’ research while leaving their own research for their juniors. The findings of this study contributed to our understanding of doctoral publication and provided implications for facilitating doctoral students' scholarly publishing endeavors.

What the researchers did

- Data collection for this study started right before the four students' enrolment into the doctoral program and ended near the completion of their doctoral studies.
- The researcher conducted multiple in-depth interviews with the doctoral students and their supervisor about the doctoral students’ scholarly publishing experiences and practices.
- Students’ manuscript and thesis drafts, course assignments, and related artifacts (e.g., comments on manuscript and thesis drafts, instructions for course assignments) were collected.
- Text-based interviews were conducted with the students about, among other issues, the histories of their texts and connections among their various texts.
- The researcher also collected institutional policy documents on doctoral education and publication.
- The researcher first conducted a thematic analysis of the data, which was followed by an activity systems analysis that focused on identifying connections and interactions between the doctoral students' scholarly publishing and other activities.

What the researchers found

- The doctoral students crossed boundaries between publishing and other activities (i.e., integrated their publishing activities with their master's study, professional work, and coursework activities) to fulfill the university's publication requirements.
- They also refashioned the scholarly publishing activity by publishing their seniors' research and leaving their own research for their juniors.
- While effective in facilitating timely publication and on-time graduation, the boundary crossing strategy required changes to other activities and the refashioning strategy tended to hinder the doctoral students’ development into autonomous researchers.
- The study revealed the fluid and permeable textual and contextual boundaries for the doctoral students’ scholarly publishing activities.
- It also pointed to the role of disciplinary culture in shaping the doctoral students' scholarly publishing experiences and practices.

Things to consider

- The study underscores the importance of doctoral students' prior experiences, motives, and aspirations in their scholarly publishing endeavors. Attempts to facilitate doctoral students’ scholarly publishing efforts should take these factors into consideration.
- Boundary crossing has the potential to foster doctoral students’ scholarly publishing efforts, but it's challenging to cross boundaries successfully. There is thus a need to provide support for doctoral students' boundary crossing between scholarly publishing and other activities.
- The study also shows that institutional policies intended to motivate doctoral students to publish during their candidature may have unintended repercussions for their scholarly publishing experiences and practices, suggesting that these policies should be critically reviewed.


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