



ESL MiniConference

Dissertation Defense Lifelong Quest for Doctorate Completed

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Dr. Robert Scott

Two weeks ago, I successfully defended my doctoral dissertation, and so I have finally achieved what became the most ambitious academic goal of my life. I am a Doctor of Education in Special Education.

It is a long road to such a destination. After taking all the required coursework, there is a Preliminary Exam, which means 12 hours of writing about topics related to your research interests.

After passing the preliminary exam, a student becomes a "candidate" for the doctorate, and must maintain at least one credit hour of enrollment continuously through every semester until arriving at the formal defense of the dissertation.

Those semesters go on and on sometimes, and there are many doctoral candidates who finally give up and drop their pursuit of the degree. A dissertation requires a great deal of research and thought. In my case, I basically spent about 7 months at the beginning of the process writing what became chapter 2, the review of the literature.

At that point, I found a job opportunity which gave me a chance to apply some of the concepts I had been learning about and give some careful thought to the development of my research proposal. During this period of time, I focused on pulling from my review of the literature some of the categories and concepts that would shape my research study.

The proposal consists of chapter 1, explaining the need for the study, and chapter 3, explaining the methodology to be followed in conducting the

study. In my case, the study was a survey administered to special education teachers in Kansas regarding their experience on IEP teams working on transition planning for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

It is crucial in developing a successful dissertation project to have an advisor who can guide you and who gives you frank, practical feedback and instructions. My advisor was very demanding at all stages of the process, and the cumulative effect of these multiple drafts and continual upgrades was that by the time I got to the proposal stage, the document was very solid and the defense of my proposal was actually a very useful meeting with my committee members, who all contributed ideas that helped me develop a much better survey and, in the long run, complete a solid study that will hopefully make a positive difference in the field of multicultural transition.

Running my survey and collecting and analyzing the data were actually enjoyable activities, and it was also exciting to realize how close I was getting to finishing my project and achieving the doctorate. I got a second wind and a third wind during this phase of writing the dissertation. Again, my advisor gave useful feedback and guidance, and it took additional weeks to prepare additional drafts of chapter 4, the data analysis, to make it crystal clear for any reader who may need data.

Chapter 5 is the discussion chapter, and this is where you get to make recommendations based on the data. I really got into this section, and it turned out longer than many discussion chapters I have read from other dissertations. I was especially motivated by the fact that my study was concerned with transition practices with CLD students in my home state of Kansas.

Doctoral studies and a dissertation do not occur in a vacuum. My youngest son was born the year that I was accepted into the doctoral program in Special Education at Kansas State University. This summer he turned eight. His older brother and sisters also have undergone major growth and passed important life landmarks during the time it took me to complete my doctorate. All three older kids finished their undergraduate degrees; my older daughter also earned a master's in TESOL and my older son graduated from law school. The most important accomplishment in the family during these past eight years is not my doctorate, but rather the birth of my first grand-child, a little girl named Amirah, who turns 17 months old this month.

Family and friends provide immeasurable support during a project like the doctorate I decided to undertake at my "advanced age." My wife has been patient, encouraging, and hard-working during this entire process.

Now it is my turn to pitch in and do my part to complement all the important work she has done in the early childhood education of our third-grader. Also, I now have the opportunity to support her as she moves in the direction of her academic goal, a graduate degree in Spanish literature, and her career goal of teaching Spanish at the college level.

Long-time friends and close family have survived my constant e-mail blasts over the past several years, sharing with them every stage and each draft of the dissertation.

All of these relationships have been intertwined with my professional goals and personal journey over the past eight years (and longer). Today it must be a great relief to all of them that their inboxes are no longer subject to the incessant deluge of my updates.

I felt a surge of emotion when my advisor told me it was time to contact the committee members and set up a date for the defense. On the day of the event, things went very well, but it was still an immense relief and I was overcome with emotion when my advisor opened the door and invited me back into the room where all were awaiting me to shake my hand and greet me with the words, "Congratulations, Dr. Scott!"

In the year 1987, I returned from three years teaching ESL in Ecuador in order to start studying towards a doctorate in linguistics. A year later, I had only made a little progress towards that goal when I opted instead to travel to Japan as part of the American branch-campus movement there. In 1992, I returned to the United States with the intention of completing a doctorate in educational administration, but had to give that up due to financial straits and family obligations. More than a decade later, my career interests had shifted again, and I was determined to start from scratch on a doctorate in Special Education with an emphasis on multicultural transition.

Nearly a quarter of a century after my initial decision to pursue a doctorate, I have achieved this personal and career goal. I look forward to the next phase of my life and I hope to be able to make a significant contribution as an advocate for educational equity and access for multicultural learners.

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