

International Doctoral Student Experience: Compassion, Connection, Commitment, and Creativity

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ABSTRACT

International doctoral students live with more uncertainty than most academic populations. In this essay, I attempt to provide a framework for living an international doctoral life by reflecting on my academic studies and personal living practices, drawing on van Lier's (2008) notion of learner agency. Living a rhythm of life through compassion, connection, commitment, and creativity could holistically benefit the academic studies and wellbeing of international doctoral students.

Keywords: doctoral students, learner agency, international students

I THOUGHT I COULD THRIVE, BUT I BARELY SURVIVED

I enrolled in a PhD program in the Faculty of Education at a western Canadian university in 2015. Despite some delays caused by the pandemic in my research process, I managed to complete my degree by the end of August 2021. Before studying in Canada as an international student, I was an English instructor in a Sino-U.S. cooperative college in China for almost 8 years. Being familiar with the campus environment, but I still felt challenged as an international student in a western country. Like many mature and devoted graduate students who have to navigate childcare, a part-time job, and family chores, I also faced the similar situation of navigating family responsibilities and my academic studies.

In retrospect, I found two primary challenges in the long journey of my academic studies: one was figuring out what I am truly passionate about. Although locating a research topic could be difficult for anyone at the doctoral level, it was particularly challenging for me to discover what

I love to do and how to do it with sustained efforts. Another issue that I confronted was how to communicate in a scholarly way efficiently. For a long time, I struggled with communicating my ideas clearly with my supervisor and negotiating the differences in our interactions. I also felt struck by the misunderstandings or conflicts and how to ask for help appropriately. For example, when my supervisor declined my request to meet once a month, I only chose to passively accept it and tried to manage everything on my own rather than seeking ways to communicate my concern.

Gradually, I realized the need to take initiative and to be responsible for my academic studies. In addition, I learned not to take things personally when things did not occur as I expected. While composing my dissertation, I positioned myself as a novice researcher and completed the first draft with two kids at home during the pandemic year 2020. Meanwhile, I also managed to compose some research manuscripts aiming for publication. Nevertheless, the lockdown time unexpectedly served me: I began to reflect on how to live an academic life as an international doctoral student while navigating my academic life on a daily basis. I was attracted by an ecological perspective since it does not focus on linear relations of reason and effect, but attends to the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments. Personally, I found resonance of van Lier's (2008) notion of learner agency in the process of negotiating with uncertainties and challenges in my doctoral studies.

ENACTMENT OF LEARNER AGENCY

Learner agency is an important notion to holistically understand how learning agents interact with their surrounding environment. According to van Lier (2008), learner agency is the capacity to act "mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors" (p. 171). Additionally, van Lier proposed three core features of learner agency: (a) initiative or self-regulation, (b) contextual interdependence, and (c) an awareness of the responsibility for one's actions vis-à-vis the environment. Inspired by van Lier's ideas, Dufva (2013) further placed the dynamic and interactive relations between agents and their environment at the central stage. According to Dufva, such a learning process is called "appropriation," which emphasizes the sociocultural feature of the learning process as participatory and communicative (p. 10).

The notion of learner agency can be applied to understand international students' experiences. Generally, studying abroad provides both opportunity and challenges for international students. Previous studies have

shown that international students exhibit learner agency in response to their academic challenges (Anderson, 2017; Haggerty, 2019; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). For instance, Haggerty's (2019) empirical studies showed most international English as an Additional Language (EAL) participants succeeded in their first-year academic program despite their initial confusion and frustration toward the unfamiliar design features of academic courses. Similarly, Anderson (2017) emphasized international graduates strategically seeking both internal and external resources to achieve their academic goals. In navigating my doctoral studies and personal life in a Canadian university, I have experienced transformational changes through an enactment of learner agency. Given the limited learning affordances due to campus lockdown during the pandemic, especially, I have learned to explore new opportunities for keeping momentum and persisting in my learning. By bringing agency in my learning process, I empower myself to interact with the supportive resources around me. From an ecological perspective, this reflection summarizes four critical factors: compassion, connection, commitment, and creativity, which featured the rhythm of my doctoral experiences. These four aspects reflect how my learner agency was enacted and strengthened by drawing both internal and external resources from the context of studying abroad.

INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENT'S ACADEMIC LIFE

Compassion

Compassion is a gateway and inner sources for me to build a sense of learner agency. In navigating my doctoral studies and life, I gradually recognize the importance of compassion and began to cultivate it, both to others and to myself. Compassion literally means "to suffer together." Psychologist Dr. Christine Neff (2013) has categorized three components of self-compassion: being kind to yourself, understanding common humanity, and being mindful toward your experiences. For international students at graduate level, it is hard to go through the challenges, such as adapting to new academic conventions, establishing a sense of belonging, or develop a researcher identity, without being kind and caring toward themselves. In my case, in addition to my academic studies, I sometimes teach as sessional instructors or do a part-time job while taking care of my young kids; self-compassion used to be the last thing on my list. Although I tried hard to manage various roles, most of the time, I was still haunted by self-criticism, guilt and shame to claim myself as a Ph.D. student or a qualified mom. Only until I started practicing self-compassion with awareness, did I realize I could be the one that cared about myself with acceptance without judgements. When I attune to my needs, rather than

ignore them, I also become more present to others' needs and concerns. In some critical occasions, such as taking Candidacy exams, I prioritized my need to focus on writing papers and invited my mom to be a helping hand. By drawing on my inner source of compassion and cultivating it in my academic and life environment, I gained a solid sense of agency.

Connection

An ecological perspective focuses on relations between people and their living environment, which is interactive and reciprocal (van Lier, 2004, 2008). As human beings, we are wired to connect with others. However, having authentic and intimate connections with others may be challenging. Although social media and technology have become popular, you can talk online all day without truly being connected. International students may also face the challenges of connecting with others both socially and academically. Investigating the socialization process of Mexican international students in a Canadian university, Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) found students managed their academic learning challenges by building their individual network of practice. In their study, EAL students were observed to seek support from helpful others by exercising learner agency in classrooms and beyond. As an international student who occasionally felt marginalized and isolated in my learning community, I learned to build meaningful connections with supportive people and resources in my surrounding environment. Given the constraints of campus shutdown during the COVID-19 period, I navigated my challenges of academic writing by meeting online with a tutor at the writing center in my university for a whole year, despite my responsibilities of taking care of my kids at home. During the process of interacting with helping specialists and engaging with various supportive resources, my learner agency was actualized and further strengthened.

Commitment

Making a commitment to a long-term goal and taking efficient action toward it is also an enactment of learner agency. I practiced making and honoring my commitment to my doctoral studies by rooting my research interests in my learning community. Committing involves dedicating yourself to a cause. I would recommend careful decision-making for anyone who commits to the challenging journey of entering a PhD program. According to recent statistics, which are pre-COVID 19 numbers, almost 50% of graduate students will not complete their PhD (Cassuto & Weisbuch, 2021). Some students may withdraw from their program because of life transitions or changing goals of academic pursuits.

This is understandable and the earlier they could make informed decisions, the better for their overall life. However, if their reasons lie in the challenges, such as writing a dissertation or negotiating a relationship with your supervisor, I would suggest clarifying their commitment. A professor who impacted me a lot asked questions during class time: How do you define academia? What kind of academic do you want to be? These questions reminded me to continuously reflect on my purpose of pursuing my PhD studies. Although I kicked off my study without a clear picture in my mind, I gradually learned to integrate a goal with my lifelong commitment: Learning knowledge and skills in a way to serve people who need help. Accordingly, I exerted my learner agency by committing to a meaningful long-term goal and identifying myself as an emerging scholar who exerts efforts in academic pursuit.

Creativity

Learning agency can also be exhibited through creative interactions with a surrounding environment and engagement with various activities. Being creative is also part of human nature and a source for seeking purpose for our life. In PhD studies, being creative is a natural flow of energy, the full expression on a topic or a project you spend 4 or 5 years on. To be creative is the core for being energetic and engaged with research activity. However, being creative in academia does not mean crafting a project from the original, doing an experiment, or writing a journal article from scratch. We are finding ways to enter into a conversation by connecting with the existing literature and building on others' contributions. As such, it is a process of co-creation with expert others within a research community, in which learner agency is manifested as being creative and cooperative. If we focus too much attention on creating the original idea or project, it is easier to be trapped by perfectionism and procrastination, which may prevent us from enjoying the process and being resilient in navigating challenges, setbacks, and uncertainties. Coupled with commitment, creativity means finding meaning and purpose in both academic and personal life. If doctoral students could find ways to enjoy the process of crafting their research journey, at least trying to find some rewards on the way, such as a relief after composing a strong argument or a sense of fulfillment after submitting an article for publishing, they could creatively integrate their efforts into long-term committed goals.

CONCLUSION

In a study abroad context, my involvement with doctoral studies has been characterized by four factors: compassion, connection, commitment, and

creativity. In this reflection, I called the interrelatedness of these factors the rhythm of a doctoral student's academic life since I have acted on them and modified my practices ongoingly in my daily academic studies. However, the achievement of agency is also a complex and nonlinear process involving an interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual factors. This reflection encourages discussion and insights into how international doctoral students can live their academic and personal life in a holistic manner, especially now when we seem to be stuck in collective anxiety and uncertainties, and how to be ready for returning to the new normal during and after the pandemic.

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