

Impact of a Chapter Editing Service on Doctoral Capstone Progress

Michelle Stallone Brown, Kelly R. Chermack,
Madysen Sinclair, Tobias Ball

Walden University

INTRODUCTION

Roughly 50% of students who begin doctoral programs do not complete their education. Barriers to doctoral program completion include personal or environmental factors, including imposter syndrome or writing anxiety (Cassuto). Researchers have found that doctoral candidates are often highly influenced by such factors (see Marshall et al. 7). Doctoral programs continue to look for ways to improve retention and positively impact doctoral completion rates (Arbelo-Marrero 279). Providing additional support to students in the various doctoral skills and readiness domains is important to our university. Our chapter editing service is one approach to address scholarly writing.

Working in a large, broad-access online university, we understand how distance learning has reshaped access to education for adult learners. Our university provides a diverse community of adult learners with the knowledge, skills, and credentials to reach their personal and career goals. At the doctoral level, which includes 27 doctoral programs with approximately 9,000 students enrolled (Ph.D. and professional doctoral programs), this means building and applying skills to ensure success in the capstone (e.g., dissertation, doctoral project study, etc.) stage. Specifically, with scaffolded co-curricular instructional support, we assist with skill-building and readiness earlier in the degree program, beginning in the first term. One of the doctoral competencies supported in these efforts includes scholarly writing. Our focus is on student progress and providing services to build capacity in students throughout their doctoral journeys. Specifically, skill building focuses on the standards for doctoral degree competency in scholarly writing, including cohesion and flow, doctoral-level voice and grammar, and APA 7 style.

BACKGROUND

Early review and feedback systems—from a variety of angles (e.g., the committee, writing support professionals)—have a positive impact on degree progress (Council of Graduate Schools). According to John Hattie and Helen Timperley’s model, determining the appropriate level of feedback for students is necessary to learning. Services used to build capacity in the areas of writing and research are critical components to development, which can



MICHELLE STALLONE BROWN



KELLY R. CHERMACK



MADYSEN SINCLAIR



TOBIAS BALL

strengthen students' abilities (Lim et al. 202). Writing interventions have proven to be effective (Baltes and Brown 90; Pleasant and Trakas 6).

Our university's Chapter Edit (CE) service, provided by professional editors who are full-time staff, is one such student-focused but faculty-initiated service. This writing-focused service is for students whose capstone progress is impeded because of their writing, and that need must be demonstrated when a dissertation committee chair requests this service. Editors engage the student document for a 1-hour, asynchronous edit on a faculty-specified area of writing. The goal is to correct and model scholarly writing patterns so students can improve and continue to implement edits on their own. A CE could be requested at either the proposal (before proposal approval) or final study stage (after proposal approval). The university focuses on progress (which means consistent movement/fewer delays) over retention. Retention is business-centered, while progress (timely completion) is student-centered. Students are paying tuition, and supporting students so that they can finish in a timely manner is an initiative of which all areas of the university are cognizant.

We also found the 1-hour-edit to be sufficient. We initially piloted this program following a developmental process where the student engages with the editor multiple times, over multiple iterations. However, in this model we experienced too much attrition. In one hour, we provide an edit of 10-15 pages, which we have found to be sufficient to model and explain changes. As Stephen North mentioned, writing professionals need to reflect on and take into account what types of writing support are helping their students and how to support them best.

The CE process is as follows. Once a committee chair recognizes that the student's capstone progress is impeded because of their ability to communicate effectively in writing (not the content, method, etc.), and committee members have failed to move the student forward because of the writing (rejected), the chair (and only the chair) can request a CE. The chair then completes an online form and identifies the writing challenge that is preventing the student from moving forward in the capstone process. This form consists of several open-ended areas as well as a list of common writing challenges. Chairs can check up to three boxes/areas for support. We receive the request and assign an editor.

Our focus is meeting students where they are, skill-set-wise, and providing support. We have a diverse body of students with different levels of skill and knowledge regarding American Academic English and English grammar. In these instances, there is a clear objective (student progress milestone) that is not being met and the chair has identified the need for a writing intervention. Paul Barron and Luis Ciccirelli noted that figuring out how to present ideas is helpful for figuring out the ideas themselves. It was our hope that this CE service helps students not only improve their writing and meet a milestone, but that it benefits them in their development as writers and scholars as well by helping them clarify their ideas and arguments.

Our editors are experts in APA style (used throughout our university) and have a background or degrees in English, writing, rhetoric, or social science scholarship. In our 1-hour, asynchronous CE, editors focus on the identified writing challenge, modeling the changes recommended using track changes and inserting comments with instructions and links to resources. Our approach includes getting a sense of where the student's writing ability is currently, and then considering what changes would be required (i.e., per APA or English grammar) and what changes would be recommended (i.e., would improve readability) but may not be imperative. Helping the student to understand and make improvements, while at the same time not overwhelming students with too many changes, is our goal. The student can then use our comments and modeled edits to

continue making changes to the pages we did not get to in the 1-hour-CE, as we provide extensive discussion, explanation, and links to ensure that the changes we are making are clear.

CURRENT STUDY

The CE program has been running smoothly from our perspective, but we wanted to understand if the service was helping students progress in their degree process. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the CE service on (a) number of days from an approved prospectus until proposal approval and (b) number of days from proposal approval to final study approval among students who received the CE service and a similar group of those who did not. Time to completion is not a specific goal of the CE service, but it is something that all university offices strive for. Time to completion may be the best or most objective measure of the success of the CE service—not only whether a milestone is met, but that it is done in a shorter time.

RQ1: What is the difference in time to proposal approval between students who used a chapter edit service and those who did not?

RQ2: What is the difference in time to final study approval between students who used a chapter edit service and those who did not?

PARTICIPANTS AND ANALYSIS

For each research question (RQ1 and RQ2), we compared two groups of capstone students who received final capstone study approval between 7/2016 and 12/2020. The two groups consisted of a treatment group and a control group to compare the effect of using the CE service. The first group received the CE service between 7/2016 and 12/2019. The second group of students did not receive the CE service prior to or during this time. Because this was a 4-year-span, students could potentially be included in tests for both RQs. During analysis, a random sample was pulled from the NOCE (no Chapter Edit) group to assist with comparable group sizes. We accessed this data from university channels. We did not select for or separate out specific degree programs. This is discussed further in the limitations section. We created a dataset based on CE service data and completed capstone student data. The two numeric dependent variables included the number of days from prospectus approval to proposal approval and the number of days to final study approval. Data were imported into SPSS. The variable representing the CE service was recoded as a numeric variable (0 = NOCE and 1 = CE). To assist with comparable group sizes, a random sample of 900 students was pulled from the original data set resulting in a total sample size of $N = 1,776$, with NOCE = 900 and CE = 876.

RESULTS

To address RQ1, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the differences in CE participation and the number of days to proposal approval. The ANOVA F test is a General Linear Model (GLM) procedure that evaluates the differences in group averages (means) on some numeric dependent variable based on group membership, such as test or control (Green and Salkind). Research in educational settings does not often provide the conditions needed for random assignment; therefore, posttest-only group comparisons of cohorts are useful (Edmonds and Kennedy).

Due to missing values, the sample size for this analysis was $N = 1,355$. The mean number of days to proposal approval was higher for the CE group ($M = 495$) than the NOCE group ($M = 430$). The ANOVA was significant, $F(1, 1353) = 12.92, p < .001$. While the ANOVA F test is the measure of the significance of a difference, the effect size statistic (eta square) provides the magnitude of the difference (Green and Salkind). The effect size statistic for the GLM procedure is eta square. In

this case, the strength of the relationship between use of the CE service and time to proposal approval, as assessed by partial eta square, approached a small effect size, with the CE service accounting for less than 1% of the variance in the dependent variable.

For RQ2, one-way ANOVA was also conducted to evaluate the differences in CE service participation and the number of days to final approval. The sample size was $N = 1,776$. The mean number of days to final study approval was lower for the CE group ($M = 367$) than the NOCE group ($M = 395$). In this stage, we see that students who received a CE service saw fewer days to final study approval. The ANOVA was significant, $F(1, 1774) = 4.00, p = .045$. The strength of the relationship between use of the CE service and time to final study approval, as assessed by partial Eta squared, was not strong. Overall, the differences were present and, in the direction, hypothesized for RQ2.

TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS¹

Dependent Variable: Days between Prospectus Approval and Proposal Approval

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Chapter Edit Service	1402147.339	1	1402147.339	12.917	<.001	.009
Corrected Total	148268582.20 2	1354				

a. R Squared = .009 (Adjusted R Squared = .009)

TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS

Dependent Variable: Days between Proposal Approval and Final Study Approval

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Chapter Edit Service	338732.791	1	338732.791	4.006	.045	.002
Corrected Total	150332592.6 33	1775				

a. R Squared = .002 (Adjusted R Squared = .002)

LIMITATIONS

Our model comes with limitations. We did not control for degree program or committee chair; both could potentially be confounding variables. It may be that progress is quicker among degree programs where CEs are more commonly used. It could also be the case that more involved chairs

tend to request CEs more than those who take more of a hands-off approach to capstone mentorship. In future studies, we would like to explore these variables in more detail.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of both tests were statistically significant. RQ1 was focused on differences in time to proposal approval among CE and NOCE groups. We failed to reject the null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant difference in the number of days to proposal approval for these groups. The difference was small and not in the direction that we would have expected.

We did not emphasize directionality in RQ1 or RQ2. In wanting to understand the impacts of a CE, we saw a difference here that we did not expect. According to our results from testing RQ1, students who received a CE had significantly *more days* to proposal approval. We predicted that the CE group would see fewer days, if the CE writing intervention benefited students and reduced their time in the proposal approval stage. We saw the opposite. A CE is a writing intervention, and it is only enacted for students who are not making timely progress due to writing challenges. It may be that, often, the CE student has already been at the proposal writing stage for more days than a NOCE student, even before the CE is initiated. This is something that we could explore further in future studies. Further research should also take qualitative data into account. We advocate the use of a mixed-methods approach for a better understanding of the landscape of how CEs work for students. The addition of qualitative data here may help us understand these results in context.

Regarding RQ2, we also observed a statistically significant relationship. CE students had *fewer days* to final study approval than NOCE students. The effect size is nil. While the F test indicated significant differences were present between the groups, the effect size, reflected in partial eta square, provides the magnitude of that difference. In this case the difference was small (c.f., Sullivan and Fein). We take these results in context. In the first stages of the capstone process, CE students took longer from prospectus approval to proposal approval—one of the determiners for a CE was rejection by committee members and not making timely progress. However, what we saw with these data was that CE students were able to not only get caught up but had fewer days from proposal approval to final study approval than NOCE students. We interpret this as the effect of the CE; a difference of about 30 days, but a significant difference considering the student group. Something occurred here where CE students were able to make quicker progress between proposal and final study approval than NOCE students. We suggest this is due to some amount of learning and ability that was strengthened through the CE process.

The potential impact here is encouraging regarding reducing time in the capstone stage. In a recent survey of doctoral students at our institution, students who used support services found them to be very helpful and felt that the services supported their progress (McCune). We are hoping that this study provides some context and echoes that finding. It may well be that a CE helps to prepare students to write their capstone and once proposal approval is achieved, they have strengthened abilities and greater capacity for writing. The CE approach supports previous findings that early review and feedback systems have a positive impact on progress.

The results tell an interesting story about student experiences with a CE. We see that these students may be struggling during the proposal stage but seem to have a timelier progression to final study approval. The impact of the CE may be that the intervention is helping students to prepare for the capstone writing process and, although they may struggle with writing early on (what triggers the CE request to begin with), they have a smoother time to completion. Students who receive a CE at the proposal stage take longer to proposal approval, but CE students move

quicker through the final study stage than NOCE students. We conclude that a CE does support progress by providing feedback to support students with their writing to narrow the progress gap between them and students who did not need the CE. We found fewer days to final capstone study approval between proposal approval and final study approval for CE students compared to NOCE students (367 days vs 395 days). What we have shown here is that providing specific feedback, directed at identified areas for improvement (between proposal approval and final study approval) can enhance progress, even for students who previously lagged behind.

NOTE

1. For full statistical tables, see: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZFiHrqivkmaR2m-EGRleWbmp6gmoe5/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=108801564361128731849&rtpof=true&sd=true>.

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