What More Should Online Doctoral Programs Deliver Beyond Knowledge, Skills, and Scholarly Dispositions?

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Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer brings much needed attention to the topic of online doctoral programs.[1] As the world continues, in early 2022, to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions find themselves running *de facto* online programs, or at best, hybrid ones, which brings urgency to the examination of questions about how to best serve students in these programs. Greenhalgh-Spencer focuses, correctly in my view, on two main questions at hand: to paraphrase, these are "What do online doctoral students miss out on as online students?", and given that some, if not all, of it could make a difference to their future as scholars, "What can we do differently to deliver this to them?" I frame this response by showing how far Greenhalgh-Spencer's discussion of scholarly dispositions goes in answering these questions, and then give a brief discussion of what it leaves out.

To begin, suppose we could list *everything* a good online doctoral program should provide. Course requirements in the program would cover much of the items under, say, the knowledge and skills header, particularly when it comes to those items deemed discipline specific. It seems uncontroversial to say that we are not done with our list. Greenhalgh-Spencer's discussion on scholarly dispositions does much to fill the rest. Defined from the viewpoint of virtue ethics, as Greenhalgh-Spencer does, dispositions link skills and knowledge with other variables that affect success, such as practice, consistent performance, motivation, and so on. Dispositions also cover the ability to apply knowledge in new and novel ways, in different contexts, and further, the ability to improve said knowledge and skills, as well as the ability to gain new ones. Finally, and important from an education standpoint, the virtue approach views dispositions as something that can be taught, as opposed to innate traits, and therefore as something we can add to our list.

How close to completion are we in our list after adding scholarly dispo-

sitions? To see, let's consider one of the examples used by Greenhalgh-Spencer, the example of a nurse, borrowed from scholarship by Joanne Profetto-McGrath.[2] When, let us ask, does a nurse become a nurse? Is it when they complete their educational requirements? When they pass their licensing board examinations and obtain their professional accreditation? I suspect that if we ask this question to several nurses, we are going to get just as many different answers. Some may say it was on their first day at work, and some may even say that they were "always" a nurse, starting as far back as childhood. I will not contest when a nurse *feels* that they are a nurse. But I am going to propose a time for when *their colleagues* looked at them and deemed them a nurse. I believe that to be the first time they went to work and were handed a list of patients for which they were responsible, without anyone assigned to check their work. This would typically happen on their first nursing job, after they complete their orientation/ new nurse training. Of course, a new nurse will not likely be handed the most challenging patients. Those will likely (we hope) go to the more experienced nurses in the team or shift. But given that they are carrying out, on their own, nursing duties, it seems safe to suggest that their colleagues and the rest of the healthcare community deem them nurses at this stage, no matter how "junior" or inexperienced they might be.

The importance of the above becomes clear once we think of the goal of a nursing program as preparing students for that first shift. From this point, we can backward design a nursing program that will get students there. Clearly, such a program will include the acquisition of nursing science knowledge and skills, and the corresponding dispositions. But that is not enough, because it leaves out a lot that a nurse will need to assume the identity of a nurse, namely all that will allow them to integrate within and be a part of the nursing community. Greenhalgh-Spencer points, correctly, in my view, to the importance of focusing on more than knowledge and skills in the process of assuming an identity. But on my reading, the thrust of her argument seems to be on applying the knowledge and skills gained in coursework and program requirements in the contexts that students will encounter as professionals—that is, in contexts beyond the classroom. That leaves out, in my view, a lot of the

knowledge, dispositions, and other elements needed to integrate and function in the scholarly community.

In a nursing program, beyond acquiring nursing knowledge and skills, students undergo a process of socialization and mentorship that starts in the classroom but is continually enforced in hours upon hours of shadowing nurses in the field, and goes on throughout new nurse training, where they will work a certain number of hours under the immediate supervision of a nurse. While the focus may well be on technical skills, they are also being socialized and mentored into the nursing community, which is also part of assuming the identity of a nurse.

Now, a doctoral program is, beyond the knowledge and skills conveyed, a socialization experience meant to prepare students for their careers, and lives, as a scholar.[3] The first part of Greenhalgh-Spencer's discussion seems to be focused on the technical side of a doctoral program's experience, while the second seems to be focused on the social and community part of it. We may thus say that Greenhalgh-Spencer's notion of scholarly dispositions includes the pertinent social and community know-how (or knowledge and skills, if you will) plus the accompanying dispositions learned during this socialization process. Or, alternatively, we may say the latter is some *sine qua non* component of the scholarly life, which ties the technical matters with the social and community ones. It matters not. The important thing is that, as Greenhalgh-Spencer recognizes, the opportunities for online students to absorb and accrue these components are limited. How to make the most of a conference (or even attending one), how to find the best avenues for publication, when to start publishing, which peers are doing what in the program, even *who is* in the program, let alone chances to socialize and learn from them, can all be a challenge. Traditionally, these tend to be learned, as Greenhalgh-Spencer points out, in tacit ways, in thousands of informal interactions that happen during doctoral study, in optional gatherings, after class discussions, conferences, and so on. The challenge is then to create spaces and opportunities for online students to experience these.

In addition to the strategies Greenhalgh-Spencer points out, it is crit-

ical, in my view, that online students in a program seek each other out. Faculty should stress the importance of learning from peers, and of building and being part of a community. For example, my doctoral studies started during autumn 2020, amid COVID-19 restrictions and challenges. Yet, my cohort developed ways to keep in touch, such as using mobile phone apps to communicate, short meetings via zoom, and so on, eventually being able to include the rest of the students in the program, which gave us the chance to learn from them. Eventually, this evolved into a student organization that schedules meetings and activities every other Friday during the semester, online and, when possible, in person. Without these it is not an exaggeration to say that I and my peers would have missed out on much of our development as scholars. The other factor I feel is key is feeling that one is part of the university's community. When I enrolled in my earlier online master's program, for instance, I received a welcome package from the program director containing a couple items from the giftshop such as a keychain, bookmark, and a book (authored by the program director). The items in questions have long lived their usefulness; the feelings of community they endeared persist, even though the school in question is overseas and I never set a foot on its campus.

I want to end with a note of caution: socializing and mentoring doctoral students is not a challenge unique to online programs. Stories of new PhD graduates that plan on being "professors at a research university" yet do not know what that entails, and are therefore woefully unprepared for it, are not rare. Therefore, while there may be unique challenges to running an online doctoral program, just as it is the case for in-person programs, the socializing and mentoring of students takes planning and conscious effort. It demands, as Greenhalgh-Spencer points out, being intentional in ensuring that online courses and programs provide students with *all* the tools they will need, both for scholarly practice, *and* to integrate into the scholarly community. They will need both if they are to become scholars.

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1 Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, "Scholarly Dispositions in an Online Doctoral Program," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 4 (2022).

2 Joanne Profetto-McGrath, "The Relationship of Critical Thinking Skills and Critical Thinking Dispositions of Baccalaureate Nursing Students," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 43, no. 6 (2003): 569–577.

3 Vicki J. Rosser, "The Socialization and Mentoring of Doctoral Students: A Faculty's Imperative," *Educational Perspectives* 37, no. 2 (2004): 28–33.