

Leveraging Scholar Transformation Theory (STT) to Engage Doctoral Students in Becoming Scholars

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Introduction

Upon discovering Scholar Transformation Theory (Welsh et al., 2020), I realized that part of the reason our students struggled in their dissertation work is because they lacked key skill development in becoming scholars. To address this, I developed a course called Grounding Research in Literature that aligned the coursework writing their literature review with mastering the initial stages of STT.

Scholar Transformation Theory

Scholar Transformation Theory (STT) was identified by Welsh et al (2020) to understand and support doctoral students through dissertation writing. The theory posits that students work through the following five stages of development as scholars related to their identity, positionality, thinking, reading, and writing: passive information gatherer, active information gatherer, active knowledge gatherer, active knowledge consumer, and active knowledge producer.

Grounding Research in Literature Course Strategies

In the first module of the seven-week online course, students learn about STT and reflect on which stage they are in. Students without any background in research may find themselves in the first two stages, as well as those who have not done research in a long time. Students who have completed a research master's degree are likely in the middle or later stages.

The second course module focuses on finding literature, and students receive library instruction in searching for sources and using resource management tools. AI is suggested for brainstorming search terms, but students are cautioned against using AI to find sources without confirming they actually exist. Students collaborate with each other to discuss their search strategies and databases and evaluate which resource management tool works best for them. The evaluative thinking this module's activities requires supports students moving into the Active Knowledge Gatherer stage, going beyond the focus on just information in the prior stages.

Reading literature is the focus of the third module. Students learn strategies for reading journal articles efficiently and using the Pomodoro technique to work effectively in managing their time (Cirillo, 2018). These activities, as well as sharing strategies with each other, support their reading development in the Active Knowledge Gatherer stage.

In the next module, students focus on analyzing literature by describing the gap they see emerging in the literature they found and creating an outline of their sources. They use PaperPal to create an AI-generated outline on their topic to compare to the one they created themselves, so they can critically evaluate the suggestions for alternate approaches and refine their outline. Students submit their PaperPal outline and the one they develop so evidence of their critical thinking is clear. This combination of thinking, reading, and writing helps students master the Active Knowledge Gatherer stage and begin to embrace their identity and positionality as a researcher with some expertise on their topic.

Students focus on synthesizing literature in the next module. One component focuses on effective quoting and paraphrasing using AI to query the effectiveness, as well as peer feedback, so enhancements

can be considered. The major activity is using the outline to synthesize content. Students are encouraged to work on any part of the chapter they desire to reinforce that writing is iterative rather than linear. This thinking and writing help students move into the Active Knowledge Consumer stage because they are using others' knowledge to produce their own work.

Up until module six, no emphasis was placed on theoretical or conceptual frameworks to enable students to focus on other aspects of the literature. In this week, students focus on re-visiting the literature from the perspective of what frameworks were used and querying AI to identify which frameworks are most relevant to their research. Students share their initial ideas in a discussion and often find commonalities or get ideas from each other. They finish the module by drafting their framework which elevates their thinking and writing to the Active Knowledge Consumer stage.

In the final course module, students focus on drafting their literature review by using their outline to flesh out the remaining content. They share an initial draft with each other for comment mid-week and the final draft at the end of the course. The thinking and writing required of this helps elevate their identity and positionality to an Active Knowledge Consumer. This important foundation will enable them to become an Active Knowledge Producer in designing, implementing, and evaluating their own research study in future courses.

The success of this model is demonstrated in a number of ways. First, students identify the challenges they have in reading, writing, and thinking about research and their identity and positionality when they discuss what stage of STT they are in at the beginning of the course. The instruction is designed to support their growth in these areas, and the students' work reveals the progress they make. Second, in peer discussions, students share their learning with each other which both reinforces their new knowledge and enables them to learn even more from their peers. Third, students' use of AI as a feedback tool enables them to evaluate suggestions to improve their work. And finally, students share how impactful their learning has been. They leave the course with a new sense of confidence in their research, ready for the next steps. As one student put it, "Had it not been for this course, I would not have a draft of Chapter 2. Every week was carefully curated revealing layer after layer, making every step doable based on my own path of learning."

References

Cirillo, F. (2018). *The Pomodoro Technique: The acclaimed time-management system that has transformed how we work*. Crown Currency.

Welsh, B. Ellington, R., Shockley, K., & Prime, G. (2020). *Scholar transformation theory: Empowering students to get the job done write*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614545.pdf>