Peer Relationships and Information Sharing between LIS Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT
Doctoral students rely on their peers as important information sources. However, information behavior studies in academic settings most often describe peers as intermediaries who simply assist individuals’ information seeking for academic resources. To address this issue, the authors interviewed six LIS doctoral students at Florida State University in order to explore the types of peer relationships and information sharing between LIS doctoral students. The preliminary findings confirmed the existence of close, social/academic, and other peers that can be categorized as special, collegial, and information peers using Kram and Isabella’s continuum of peer relationships. In addition, it was found that work-related and everyday life information is shared in all three types of peer relationships, while relational strength influences the scope and depth of information sharing. Future work will investigate the role of peers as mentors and agents of socialization in academic settings, and will further address the types of information shared as part of such mentoring relationships.

Keywords  
Peer relationships, information sharing, doctoral education, library and information science

INTRODUCTION
Multiple studies have described the important roles of peer relationships as well as faculty mentoring for doctoral students’ successful degree completion (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2007). Peer relationships influence the satisfaction and retention of graduate students in their programs (Lovitts, 2001; Gardner, 2008). Interview participants (Gardner 2007; 2010), have even mentioned receiving peer support more frequently than faculty support during their doctoral work. Sometimes peers act as mentors, providing instrumental and psychosocial help to other graduate students (Grant-Vallone & Enshe, 2000). In library and information science (LIS), Sugimoto (2012) has found that peer mentoring is characterized by formal and informal collaborations and has described how peers can fill the “missing piece of doctoral mentoring” (p. 16). Nevertheless, little research has focused on peer relationships in doctoral education using a theoretical lens.

Information behavior is a core element of human communication, and many information science researchers have investigated interpersonal information behavior in social settings (Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2007; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Savolainen, 1995). According to Kram and Isabella (1985), peer groups can be an important information source, sharing work-related and personal information with each other. Lovitts (2001) also noted that information transfer occurs within doctoral student subculture and reported its particular benefits for students whose relationships with advisors are not close. From the perspective of information behavior, Veinot (2010) suggested the positive role of information exchange among peers who share similar experiences. Despite the significant role of peers as information providers, many information behavior studies, especially in academic settings, regard them solely as intermediaries who simply assist individuals’ information seeking for academic resources (George, et al. 2006; Korobili, Malliari, & Zapoundiou, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to explore the types of peer relationships and information sharing between LIS doctoral students. Specifically, Kram and Isabella’s (1985) framework of three types of peers, developed in workplace settings, was applied to investigate peer types in academic settings.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Three Types of Peer Relationships
Kram and Isabella (1985) identified three types of peers found in corporate settings: (a) information peers, (b) collegial peers, and (c) special peers. With an information peer, individuals usually exchange information about work and their organization; this relationship has a low level of self-disclosure and trust. Collegial peers have a moderate level of trust and self-disclosure, and they often talk about “evolving professional roles and job performance” (p. 125). The primary functions of a special peer are confirmation,
emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship. In this kind of relationship, people discuss job-related as well as personal concerns. Although Kram and Isabella attempted to describe the information themes in peer relationships, the focus of their study was about the functions and types of peer relationships. Few studies have attempted to apply and test their framework in academic settings, especially within doctoral education.

Role of Peers in Doctoral Education
Many studies have examined the role of peer relationships in the socialization of doctoral students (Gardner, 2007). For example, Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, and Dhanarattigannon (2007) found that the peer group provided doctoral students with instructional support, assistance for participating in the academic community and discourse, informal (practical) information, improvement in writing, and emotional support. In a recent study, Chui, Ziemer, Palma, and Hill (2014) investigated the nature of peer relationships in doctoral programs in counseling psychology and identified the critical roles of peers, providing instrumental and emotional support. In their study, however, the negative experiences of peer relationships, such as competition or hostility, were also reported. In LIS doctoral education, Sugimoto (2012) found that doctoral student peers provide academic or emotional support for each other. These studies, however, did not identify the different types of peer relationships or information activities within those relationships.

Interpersonal Information behavior
People have been acknowledged as one of the main information sources in work and everyday life settings (Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2006; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Julien & Michels, 2000). Tuominen and Savolainen (1997) supported this, arguing that information is both constructed and used during social interaction. Based on this approach, Pettigrew (1999) defined information as “a discourse phenomenon” (p. 810). In academic settings, however, researchers have typically described interpersonal sources as intermediaries whose role is limited to providing referral services. For example, Korobili, Malliari, and Zapoundiou (2011) showed that graduate students in a Greek university tend to perceive interpersonal sources, such as professors or fellow students, as consultants who support their information seeking behavior. In addition, although George et al. (2006) reported the influence of people (such as advisors, colleagues, and librarians) on graduate students’ information seeking, their role was limited to assisting students’ information seeking activities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
This study asks two following research questions:

RQ1. What types of peer relationships exist between LIS doctoral students?

RQ2. What types of information are shared in peer relationships between LIS doctoral students? Are there any differences between the types of information shared in different types of peer relationships?

METHOD
Data Collection
This is a qualitative case study, exploring types of peer relationships, and information shared within those relationships, in the context of a doctoral program. As a pilot study, the authors interviewed six doctoral students (first-, second-, two third-, fourth-, and sixth-year) enrolled in the School of Information at Florida State University. To achieve transferability and generalizability of the findings, future studies using different samples are required. In the interviews, the authors asked interviewees about development, maintenance, and types of their peer relationships. We also asked about information sharing within peer relationships. The interview protocol will be made available on request. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Data Analysis
In the data analysis process, two authors coded the first two interviews independently and then created a codebook after comparing and discussing discrepancies. Concepts coded include types and functions of peer relationships, information types, and external factors which influence peer relationships. Each concept is further broken down into series of sub categories to best capture detailed data. The authors used both descriptive (i.e., inductive) and hypothesis coding (i.e., deductive) techniques (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Data which did not fit into an established code were coded with “other,” along with a brief description or suggested new code. To ensure internal validity, the first and second authors collected and analyzed data, and the third author reviewed the process and the findings (Merriam, 2009). A formal process for establishing intercoder reliability was not established; instead, following creation of the codebook, the authors coded all interviews independently and synthesized the codes collaboratively, reaching agreement on all coding decisions.

FINDINGS
Types of Peers
When asked about the types of peers they have, participants typically described their close peers, cohort, social or academic peers, and others. The close peer relationships were often developed through spending time together in class or having shared interests or experiences. For this reason, doctoral students in earlier stages of a program (first and second year) were more likely to describe their cohort members as close peers, as they spend ample time together in shared coursework. However, senior doctoral students tended to characterize their close peers as those with similar interests or experiences. In addition, participants described social or academic peers as those with similar personal or professional interests. For instance, one participant noted that he has peers who share similar research interests and
those who have similar hobbies, such as video games. Finally, the participants described peers with whom they do not interact often, but who, when they do, talk about both everyday life and academic matters. Overall, the existence of close, social/academic, and other peers was confirmed by the interviews, and can be mapped onto Kram and Isabella’s continuum of peer relationships, categorized as special, collegial, and information peers. In particular, as illustrated in Figure 1, most participants emphasized different levels of trust in peer relationships that are closely associated with communication, shared interests, and other factors. The authors identified facilitative and prohibitive factors that may influence in building and maintaining peer relationships. Some facilitative factors include physical proximity and shared interests/backgrounds, and prohibitive factors cover marital or international student status, independent nature of doctoral work, lack of time, or social cost.

![Figure 1. Characteristics of peer types](image)

**Types of Information Shared**

In terms of topical dimensions, doctoral students in this study shared both work-related and everyday life information with each other. Work-related information sharing includes content relevant to doctoral students’ coursework, research, or other academic activities, such as assignments, conferences, doctoral exams, the job market, and more. In terms of everyday life information, the participants shared information about their daily lives, including information about relationships, hobbies, social events, and more. International students in particular noted the need for daily life information in the early stages of settlement in the United States.

Both work-related and everyday life information was shared in all three types of peer relationships. However, it was found that relational strength influences the scope and depth of dialogues. A male participant says, “Once we are close to each other, I try to share more casual and private information” (IP 1). Another participant supported this, commenting that “When you first meet people you share certain things and you start to see how the relationship works, and then based on that you decide what to share” (IP 6).

Further, some study participants suggested the psychosocial dimension of information sharing. For example, one participant described information sharing as being more affectively oriented with her close peers and more cognitively oriented with information peers. Similarly, another participant responded that she only expresses emotional issues to her close peers, as a result of the high level of trust she shares with them.

**DISCUSSION**

Even though students can also have relationships with peers in other disciplines or institutions, the scope of the study is limited to doctoral students’ information sharing within a specific LIS program. However, given that the cultural and disciplinary norms within a particular department or institution can influence individuals’ relationship building or information behavior (Gadner, 2007; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), focusing on a single bounded-case may be useful for identifying the patterns of peer relationships and information sharing.

Within the program, participants had different types of peer relationships that can be categorized into Kram and Isabella’s three types of relationships: (a) special, (b) collegial, and (c) information peer. Participants had the closest relationships with their special peers based on high levels of trust. Collegial peer relationships were often built from shared interests or backgrounds, and personality attributes along with moderate levels of trust. They also had information peers who shared limited work-related and everyday life information. In particular, the study found that the dynamic nature of peer relationships might be associated with individual or contextual factors, such as stage of doctoral work, age, gender, international student status, or physical proximity.

Participants share both work-related and everyday life-related information with each other, but the level of relational closeness influences the topical diversity in conversations and degree of disclosure. This finding may be related to Fisher, Landry, and Naumer’s argument (2006) that homogeneity facilitates information sharing. However, the relationship between homogeneity and relational closeness among peers should be discussed in more detail. Moreover, although the psychosocial dimension of information sharing identified in the study can support the affective role of information sharing in strong ties (Pettigrew, 1999), further work is required to confirm the value of weak ties in acquiring new information (Granovetter, 1983).

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK**

This study, limited to a single site and a small number of participants, suggests that the interactions between doctoral peers in the sample always includes the sharing of information directly relevant to the professional and career concerns of those students; however, as relationships between students grow and deepen, the types of information exchanged follow suit, with increasingly personal information becoming part of the mix. In other words, for doctoral students, the social, the personal, and the professional aspects of their lives are inextricably
intertwined. This study also suggests that, despite the fact that they have most often been characterized as intermediaries in the information seeking activities of doctoral students, peers play an important role as information sources in their own right.

Future steps in this ongoing project will investigate the role of peers as mentors and agents of socialization in academic settings, will further address the types of information shared as part of such mentoring relationships, and will extend the study into additional LIS schools as well as other academic disciplines in order to explore the degree to which the findings of the current study are generalizable.

REFERENCES


