



Evolution of the Dissertation in Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue on the evolution of the dissertation in practice, presenting a brief overview of the history of the EdD and the concerns raised over professional doctorates, that triggered efforts to redefine the education doctorate through the leading role of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate.

KEYWORDS

dissertation in practice, professional doctorate, Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate

Doctoral programs first emerged in the nineteenth century and revolved around knowledge transmission in traditional disciplines. They later expanded towards critical thinking approaches and began including professional practice in order to accommodate part-time students with careers, offering them professional doctoral degrees (Archbald, 2011; Taysum, 2006). The first professional doctorate originated in the field of education in 1920, in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, as Doctor of Education (EdD) (Dill & Morrison, 1985). Subsequently, other disciplines followed. Nowadays, professional doctorates vary from education to engineering, to health-related professions, business, and others (Hawkes & Yerrabati, 2018; Kot & Hendel, 2012). While no consensus on the nature of these degrees and no standard definition suitable to the different disciplinary contexts exist, professional doctorates focus on preparing students in becoming scholarly practitioners (Kot & Hendel, 2012). The Council of Graduate Schools (2007) identified three characteristics for a professional doctorate program:

1. It addresses an area of professional practice where other degrees are not currently meeting all employer needs.
2. It emphasizes applied or clinical research or advanced practice.
3. It includes in its ranks leaders of the profession who will drive the creative and knowledge-based development of its practices and the development of standards for others. (p. 7)

However, the differentiation between the traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and a professional doctorate raises concerns regarding rigor and purpose (Lester, 2004; Storey & Hesbol, 2014). In education, EdD programs are often advertised as practitioner-oriented; whereas traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs are advertised as research-oriented, although the difference between them in total hours and research courses is minimal (Leist & Scott, 2011). Lester (2004) argued that knowledge generated from professional doctorate research must be purposeful in solving practice problems and initiating change. Similarly, Shulman et al.

(2006) maintained that the PhD and the EdD “serve distinct purposes” (p.25) and called for grounding the EdD in scholarship while preparing student-practitioners “to solve educational problems” (p. 26). Moreover, Leist and Scott (2011) asserted that educational institutions must re-examine the purpose of each degree and its structure and align its components in order to resolve the ambiguities surrounding these differences. These voices and others initiated efforts to redefine the education doctorate. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) took the lead in setting clear differences between the EdD and the PhD, establishing EdD design principles, proposing its coursework, and implementing related signature pedagogies that provide experiences in solving educational dilemmas (Boyce, 2012). Under the CPED model, the culminating project is referred to as the dissertation in practice (DiP) (Storey & Hesbol, 2014).

Perry (2016) highlighted that DiPs are distinguished from more traditional five-chapter dissertations. Educational professional doctorate research provides a unique bridge between the researcher-practitioner gap. According to CPED (2021), DiP research advances professional knowledge, incorporates rigorous and ethical methods, addresses a complex problem of practice, includes innovative or interdisciplinary inquiry, and reflects an alternative format from traditional research. The CPED organization has worked strategically to redesign and reimagine EdD dissertations. To disseminate knowledge and further provide a forum to enhance EdD programs of study, CPED developed a CPED Improvement Group (CIG) focused on reimagining DiPs. CPED’s (2021) DiP CIG efforts have centered on issues that include:

- Exploring new research models and approaches that dismantle traditional practices.
- Considering actionable points that allow for faculty and students to engage in new reimagined dissertation models.
- Identifying new opportunities for DiPs.



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- Conveying potential barriers to engaging in and conducting reimagined DiP models.

The CPED framework outlines design concepts for EdD programs to be inclusive of DiP models that focus on a problem of practice (PoP). Research PoPs are contextualized and focus on specific issues that are embedded within professional practice. By addressing PoPs in research, students can evaluate issues that result in improved understandings, experiences, and outcomes. DiPs allow for students to conduct research that encompasses the application of knowledge and skills that are acquired through experiences. EdD graduates gain valuable skills that allow them to become transformed leaders. Further, DiP approaches allow for the reinforcement of practitioner learning (Perry et al., 2020). Essentially, DiPs contain a more practical focus and address existing workplace problems in comparison to traditionally structured dissertations.

This themed issue focuses on the evolution of the dissertation in practice. It showcases examples of program redesign, alternative dissertation formats, and innovative strategies that aim towards DiP improvement. The following list provides an overview of the articles.

- In *Taking Action: The Dissertation in Practice at Northeastern University*, Ewell and colleagues describe the redesign of their EdD program towards an alternative model that supports their students in creating social justice-oriented change in their professional settings. They detail the challenges and successes faced by moving from a traditional five-chapter dissertation to a three-component dissertation.
- In *Using Mentor Texts to Develop Disciplinary Literacy of Scholarly Practitioners through Dissertations in Practice*, Markus and Buss discuss the use of Mentor Texts to strengthen the disciplinary literacy of EdD students as they develop their Dissertation in Practice and become scholarly practitioners, by transforming them from consumers of text to producers of text through a community of practice learning environment.
- In *Professional and Practical Considerations for the Program Evaluation Dissertation*, Varga and colleagues propose program evaluation dissertations as alternatives to five-chapter dissertations to better serve the needs of their students. They outline how students use the utilization-focused evaluation process to develop their DiP and present issues to consider in program evaluation dissertation models.
- In *Clearing the clouds: Finding motivation and clarity in a non-traditional dissertation using Arts Based Educational Research*, Kramer reflects on her experience in completing an art-based dissertation in practice, authoring a non-fiction script to improve her students' reading skills. She recounts her challenges and successes in navigating the process during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In *ARTful Design: Disruptions within the Dissertation in Practice*, Hash paints her dissertation in practice journey, elaborating on how she circumvented disruptions of design, knowledge, format, and identity, negotiating interesting fields while using visual arts to help students construct knowledge of writing and knowledge of self.
- In *Reframing the Problem of Practice: Transitions in Baylor University's Ed.D. in Learning and Organizational Change Program*, Blevins and colleagues report on their institution's utilization of a community of practice to engage in organizational change processes to reframe their conceptualization of PoP dissertations. They provide practical suggestions on how to accommodate online learners in addition to considerations for an inclusive program design and for student support systems.
- In *The Group-Based Dissertation in Practice: A Journey Worth Taking*, Hamilton discusses the processes involved with his journey of engaging in a team-based DiP and how he progressed through the group development stages. He further shares how group DiPs can positively disrupt traditional research paradigms and the implications for utilizing this research approach.
- In *Reading Research for Writing: Co-Constructing Core Skills*, Bjorn and Quaynor highlight the importance of doctoral-level writing and reading skills and their impact on student performance. They emphasize strategies and processes that support acquisition and development of these vital skills.
- In *Improvement Science as a Frame for the Dissertation in Practice: The Johns Hopkins Experience*, Pape and colleagues examine their Applied Dissertation to be inclusive of improvement science principles to further support their scholar-practitioners to possess the ability to take on future workplace challenges and opportunities. They provide reflections from this process and emphasize how scholar-practitioners' narratives provide insights for future growth and improvement.

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