


Pivoting from Problems to Possibilities in Response to Dual Pandemics

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 brought not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also a wave of racial injustice, which impacted many in the U.S. and beyond. Combined, these phenomena have been characterized as dual pandemics, which introduced new demands that forced faculty to redesign aspects of their doctoral programs to ensure sustainability during the pandemic and post-pandemic era. The purpose of this essay is to highlight changes we made to sustain our EdD program during and post dual pandemics. We achieve this by employing Ginwright's (2022) four pivots and brown's (2017) emergent leadership as a framework and to conceptualize how we transitioned from viewing the events of 2020 as problems to embracing the possibilities they offered for the present and future of our EdD program. Practical implications and recommendations for this work are discussed to offer EdD faculty ways to design, develop, and sustain their doctoral programs in the post-pandemic era.

KEYWORDS

EdD programs, dual pandemics, learning associates, pivots, emergent leadership

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, COVID-19 and continual acts of systemic racism in the U.S., which have been described as dual pandemics (Coley & Thomas, 2023; Jones, 2021), introduced new realities and rapidly brought about changes to our daily lives and norms. Within education, faculty and educational leaders were forced to frantically strategize new approaches to engaging and supporting learning associates (students) in ways unimaginable (Capello, 2023). In the midst of much uncertainty, the COVID-19 pandemic required faculty in EdD programs to: 1) traverse the abrupt transition from in-person and hybrid to virtual and hybrid-flexible methods of teaching and learning, 2) manage care and safety for themselves and their families including young children, aging parents, and the immunocompromised, 3) comply with new and changing policies at the federal, state, and local levels around mask and vaccine mandates, and 4) maintain doctoral program studies and quality (Browning, 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello, 2023). Likewise, learning associates had to manage and navigate the personal and professional implications of the new normal ushered in by COVID-19.

In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pervasiveness of racism and oppression in the U.S. gained much

attention after the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, whose death was recorded and seen around the world. These incidents compounded with the disproportionate percentage of deaths related to COVID-19 within the Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities (Coley & Thomas, 2023; Jones, 2021) resulted in outcries and demonstrations in cities across the U.S. and abroad. Subsequently, both new and continued demands for anti-racism quickly materialized (Beatty et al., 2020). During this time, colleges and universities crafted statements denouncing racism and called forth task forces devoted to enacting anti-racism and addressing racist incidents on their campuses and in their local communities. While these actions felt like progress, many faculty, staff, and students had mixed emotions about the extent to which these actions would bring about impactful change.

Although educators sought to provide academic and emotional support to students prior to 2020, the unprecedented, socio-political impact of the dual pandemics within the field of education required EdD program faculty to be amenable to change while also providing intentional, nuanced support for learning associates (Capello, 2023). As faculty in an EdD program at a regional institution that follows the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED, 2022) Framework, the concerns for providing quality engagement and



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learning experiences in an online format were essential for us. While we understood the need to make changes to our program prior to 2020, we had not planned for or initiated the changes that were necessary during the height of the pandemics. Without question, the dual pandemics forced us to make changes in efforts to sustain our program while preparing social-justice oriented educators and change-makers. Being forced to make program changes during the dual pandemics made us recognize the possibilities of what could and should be instead of maintaining the status quo. In this essay, we explain the changes we made through the concept of pivoting (Ginwright, 2022) and frame our sustained changes through practices of an emergent strategy consisting of fractals, moving at the speed of trust, and creating more possibilities (brown, 2017).

Theoretical Framework and Tools

Shawn Ginwright (2022) offered the concept of a *pivot* as “a small change in direction from a single point where we are” (p. 16); he clarified that a pivot is not a move away from what is currently known, but rather “it braids together what we know with how we feel and who we wish to be” (Ginwright, 2022, p. 16). Ginwright (2022) centered his work around the concept of four *pivots*: from lens to mirror, from transactional to transformative; from problem to possibility; and from hustle to flow. The first pivot, from lens to mirror, calls us to cease to rely only on a sociological lens to explain social problems and instead to consider the ways in which we, as individuals, participate in those social problems. The second pivot, from transactional to transformative, challenges us to move beyond processes, which are efficient but ignore the human element in relationships, particularly when healing is needed. The third pivot, from problem to possibility, requires that we shift from a reactive response to challenges within an existing framework and instead dares us to recognize the possibilities that could emerge from a given challenge. Finally, a pivot from hustle to flow involves moving away from a culture of busyness and instead toward calm and flow (Ginwright, 2022). While we did not utilize this framework in making changes to our program, the concept of the four pivots helps us name and explain the program changes we implemented throughout the height of the dual pandemics.

As we made these pivots, which we understand as larger shifts in mindset, we also made specific, individual decisions. We understand these decisions as the tools used to make and demonstrate our pivots. The specifics of our work were demonstrations of emergent leadership, which adrienne maree brown described as “the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies...; how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (brown, 2017, p. 3). While much of brown’s work resonates with us, we find ourselves most influenced by the principles “change is constant; never a failure, always a lesson; and what you pay attention to grows” (brown, 2017, pp. 41-42) and the elements of “intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, resilience, and creating more possibilities” (brown, 2017, p. 50).

We draw collectively upon Ginwright’s (2022) four pivots and brown’s (2017) description of emergent leadership given their alignment and usefulness in highlighting how we changed and sustained our program during the peak of the dual pandemics. What follows first are our descriptions of the specific program changes we

made. Next, we discuss changes that have occurred since that time, which were deeply informed by spring, summer, and fall of 2020.

Operationalizing and Facilitating Aspects of the Program Online

As stay-at-home orders were established, we ceased in-person activity and moved all aspects of our program online, primarily through Zoom. This alone represented a challenge to our norm as a program. As a faculty, we were challenged to create asynchronous course content. Although we had experience teaching asynchronous classes in other programs, we had intentionally shied away from relying solely on online course delivery in the EdD program. Instead, we purposely utilized in-person formats to better support the social dynamics of the cohort-based model that was foundational to our program. Since our EdD courses were designed based on the co-creation of knowledge between faculty and learning associates in the learning space, the COVID-19 restrictions presented new challenges to in-person instruction. Transitioning to online instruction allowed us to maintain content delivery, engagement with our learning associates in meaningful ways, and the integrity of the cohort model during the spring of 2020 until the fall of 2021 when the institutional stay-at-home and social distance mandates ceased. For the first time in the history of our program, we brought in a new cohort during the fall of 2020 virtually, which lasted the entirety of the first full year in the program. The online transition allowed us to be creative while building community amongst the Fall 2020 cohort and other cohorts who started with the in-person program approach. The flexibility of online delivery methods was one way we were able to maintain the integrity of our program. While this began as a response to a problem (stay-at-home orders), we recognize now that this presented an opportunity for us to pivot to possibility (Ginwright, 2022).

Historically, our program has been based around an executive model— meaning that students attended classes in-person approximately one weekend a month with the rest of their time spent asynchronously. Since the class meetings are limited throughout the semester, we traditionally prioritized in-person attendance for the entirety of the class meetings and rarely offered the opportunity for students to attend class virtually using technology. Additionally, each of our class sessions normally lasted four hours per three-hour course (4 hours on Friday evenings, 4 hours on Saturday mornings, and 4 hours on Saturday afternoons). During the height of COVID-19, we quickly recognized that spending 12 hours on Zoom within a 24-hour window was simply untenable. We took into account the likelihood that our learning associates who are all fully employed were likely engaged in many Zoom meetings during the week for their jobs, community engagement, and other responsibilities. Therefore, we promptly made the decision to develop an alternate schedule for our class weekends to minimize Zoom fatigue and overload, as shown in Table 1. Instead of all three courses meeting for 12 hours each class weekend, we designed a rotating schedule in which one of the three classes met synchronously for the full four-hour window while the other two classes met for an hour synchronously each class weekend. Then, the next two class weekends, one of the other two classes met for four hours, while the others met for an hour. This schedule continued throughout the semester giving each class an opportunity to meet for four hours at least once. The faculty identified the most germane content to be explored during each class meeting, in addition to developing asynchronous approaches to engage our learning associates in



Table 1. Alternate Schedule for Fall 2020 Courses

		August 21-22	September 11-12	October 16-17	November 6-7	December 4-5
Course 1	Friday 4:30-8:30 p.m.	A Schedule	B Schedule	B Schedule	A Schedule	B Schedule
Course 2	Saturday 8:00 a.m.-12 p.m.	B Schedule	A Schedule	B Schedule	B Schedule	A Schedule
Course 3	Saturday 1:00-5:00 p.m.	B Schedule	B Schedule	A Schedule	B Schedule	B Schedule

Note. A schedule is up to 4 hours of synchronous class meeting via Zoom. B schedule is any 60 minutes of synchronous class meeting via Zoom within the standard class meeting time.

ways that were not previously achieved consistently across all our courses. By implementing this alternative class schedule, we maintained the rigor of our courses and also prioritized the needs of the learning associates by utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous approaches. A by-product of this approach was us eliminating obsolete strategies to instruction and student engagement. Integrating the alternate class offering aligns closely with Ginwright's (2022) second pivot: from transactional to transformative.

Since the fall of 2021, we have continued to offer virtual and asynchronous options to accommodate our students' busy and complex lives and responsibilities. Currently, our required courses have returned to an in-person, hybrid format, but we are now offering our cognate/elective courses online as a means for increasing flexibility within the program. As we reflect on the lessons learned about the power in online instruction, asynchronous class attendance, and the use of technology, we realize maintaining these aspects of our program in the post-pandemic era has offered more flexibility, inclusion, and accessibility for our learning associates.

Finally, we had to immediately develop an approach for dissertation defenses for our learning associates who were completing their dissertations-in-practice during the dual pandemics. Previously, we had occasionally utilized Zoom to include a committee member who could not physically be present at a dissertation defense. The majority of faculty had little experience with facilitating Zoom meetings, particularly during those high-stakes moments such as a dissertation defense. The challenge of facilitating defenses online was also combined with needing to learn how to coach our learning associates as well as the audience, which quickly grew beyond faculty and students to include family members, friends, cohort mates, and colleagues. Holding dissertation defenses virtually also allowed the broader community to attend based on their interest in various dissertation topics, which we realized was more aligned with our action research programmatic focus rather than our previous in-person defenses. As a faculty, we came to understand that the expansion of the dissertation defense audience helped to generate a community of support for learning associates who were defending their research. This was beyond anything we had previously experienced prior to the use of virtual defenses. As such, this practice of online dissertation defenses has continued beyond the pandemic as a means for cultivating communities of support for our learning associates and is another example of how what began as a problem ended up pivoting to the creation of new possibilities (Ginwright, 2022).

Engaging in Anti-Racist Practices

As a program faculty, we were all struck by the realities of the dual pandemics— particularly the disproportionate toll of COVID-19 on Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. Additionally, we were astonished by the ongoing racial injustice, violence, and killing of Black folk. We, along with the rest of society were faced with the visual images and dialogue offered by the media and across social media outlets. Many of our Black learning associates expressed fear for their safety and the safety of their family members and loved ones. Similarly, our White learning associates shared concern for our Black learning associates. The toll on the physical and mental health of our EdD community, including faculty, was devastating. This realization brought us all to Ginwright's (2022) first pivot: from lens to mirror, which required us to move beyond gazing at the societal issues and unearth how they were reflected within us internally.

For some of the White program faculty, the summer of 2020 was a wake-up call to arms in support of faculty and learning associates of Color, as well as the college, university, and greater community. We all acknowledged the complications and multiplicity of the situation, as we aimed to become better listeners and scrambled to find the words and actions to demonstrate love, care, and support for all our faculty colleagues and learning associates. Some of the White faculty members engaged in book exploration of *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* by Asha Bandele and Patrisse Cullors. This exploration was led by a learning associate from our program and was open to any member of our college faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders. The Black faculty member in the program also participated in a book exploration of Ibram Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* and bell hooks' *All About Love: New Visions*. In sum, these book explorations helped us expand our knowledge and understanding of oppression, while providing outlets for us to cope with the heaviness of the moment. Further, these opportunities gave us better tools to be able to support our learning associates as they journeyed through the dual pandemics.

In addition to engaging in anti-racist practices, we found it essential to create space for grieving, healing, and support to express our concern for and solidarity with our learning associates who were simultaneously being affected by the dual pandemics. As faculty members we understood the need to show an ethic of care for our learning associates (see Capello, 2023) while pivoting in how we approached support in our program. Noddings (2003) suggested the primary obligation educators have is to cultivate the ethical ideals of their students in a caring manner. Further, Capello (2023) argued EdD faculty are well-positioned to utilize care ethics in their

classrooms and programs, which can serve as a model for educational leaders who also act as sources of support and care for students, colleagues, community members, and others. As Capello (2023) stated, “the question [is] not should EdD faculty engage in an ethic of care to support their students through the COVID-19 pandemic but rather how can EdD faculty effectively do this” (p. 38). For the faculty in the EdD program, creating space for our learning associates to grieve, heal, and receive support was one way to effectively demonstrate an ethic of care.

To create these spaces, the three faculty members utilized our agency, creativity, positional power, and resources within our program, college, institution, and professional networks. One grieving and healing space included the Black faculty member creating an intentional affinity space specifically for Black learning associates and other racially minoritized learning associates to be in community with and process all that transpired during the racial unrest of 2020 in context with the long history of anti-Black racism within the U.S. (see Dumas & Ross, 2016; Wilder, 2013). This led to a series of virtual open-forums facilitated in a collective, safe, supportive, and healing-centered environment by one of the authors. In this space, learning associates were able to express their feelings, emotions, and meaning-making around the anti-Black racism being felt as well as the aftermath being amplified in the media, social circles, and other avenues. Additionally, learning associates were able to share coping strategies and self-care practices they were engaging in for their mental health and well-being. As these forums continued after the summer of 2020, learning associates seemed to be more comfortable sharing their personal experiences with and feedback regarding the EdD program and opportunities for improvement, particularly around advancing their dissertation topics. Consequently, the forums transformed into seminar and workshop style sessions where learning associates were connected with institutional resources (e.g., writing center, career center, and library) and faculty who shared advice, strategies, and tools to advance their dissertation-in-practice research.

In addition to providing spaces outside of the classroom, faculty members also allotted time and space in classes for learning associates to grieve, heal, and be supported by others. Collectively, we opened class with open-dialogue to give all learning associates the opportunity to share their emotions, feelings, needs, affirmations, and resources relative to the dual pandemics. Pre-scheduled class topics were deferred or altered to devote space in-class to discuss socio-political realities and implications of the pandemics. Additionally, we amended due dates and timelines for class assignments and offered alternative assignments that could be focused on real-time developments of the dual pandemics. On a consistent basis, faculty sent messages of support to our learning associates. As discussed above, we offered open office hours for all learning associates and faculty; while these sometimes served procedural means, they were also spaces to check in on one another, to ask after one another and one another’s families, and to acknowledge the pain we were each experiencing. By acknowledging the impact and implications of both COVID-19 and systemic racism, we pivoted our program to become a more humanized experience for our learning associates, our communities, and ourselves while modeling an ethic of care (Capello, 2023).

Learning Associate Centered Program Changes

In light of current events and the experiences of learning associates and faculty, we turned our sights inward as a program. This inward reflection included us taking a deeper look into what made a strong and competent leader, and what type of leaders are needed in the world today not just for our learning associates, but for us as program facilitators and leaders. This reflection, which aligns with Ginwright’s (2022) first pivot (from lens to mirror) led to several significant curricular changes; in deciding to make these curricular changes, we reflected a pivot from problem to possibility, focusing not on what we could do within the scope of the existing program but instead dreaming about how to build the program we wanted to see in the world. Through a year-long series of program retreats, we generated a proposal for an EdD program with two primary goals for our learning associates: 1) to develop the personhood of a leader who can act in fair and just ways and 2) to recognize themselves as being able and equipped to make a difference in the community, positively addressing a problem of practice within that community. This revised program would be built upon four pillars: 1) leadership, 2) action research, 3) justice, and 4) wellness. The first two pillars had always been key aspects of the EdD program, and we had begun to offer justice and wellness courses as cognates over the past several years. However, we now recognized the need to embed justice and wellness as core requirements of the program as a means for more deeply impacting complex problems of practice.

For the purpose of this EdD program and in line with the CPED framework (Storey et al., 2015), we chose to define justice as actions related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Pairing justice with EdD work moves justice out of the realm of a concept or framework and into action with integrity as the result of a dissertation in practice. Although we would not require learning associates to conduct research that centered on justice as the problem of practice identified, we wanted to provide them with knowledge and awareness to ultimately inform their decisions as leaders.

From our own experiences, we know that justice work does not come without struggle. As we were reminded by the recent challenges of the dual pandemic, justice work can be grueling, traumatizing, and re-traumatizing. If we expected learning associates to engage in justice work, we also wanted to make sure they cared for themselves and for those they lead. As such, wellness became a critical component of the program with a focus on mindfulness and self-care. We are now poised to engage in the systematic process of institutionalizing these changes. However, we continue to struggle with what it means to be responsive and learning associate-centered in an inherently slow-moving system (also known as the university curriculum processes).

On the surface, all these short-term and long-term program revisions and curricular adjustments would seemingly address some of the issues exposed during the dual pandemics. Upon deeper reflection, however, the authors realized much more pressing issues lie below the surface of the program, that if left unaddressed, would continue to perpetuate oppressive practices. At the heart of the issue are the questions: Can Black faculty alone move the needle to anti-racist practices? Can White faculty allies really make inroads against racial injustice, beyond curriculum development? Tokenism does not negate racist practices. Titles and course descriptions do little to acknowledge racialized experiences in any meaningful way. Providing grace and space only acknowledges pain and does little to foster acts of resistance or action. Addressing racism extends far



beyond diversifying programs. Becoming an anti-racist program requires generating programs that are developed by and for Black communities.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDD PROGRAMS

The dual pandemics were the impetus for pivoting our program as we confronted the challenges our learning community faced during 2020. The incremental changes, especially at the beginning, were reactive in nature, but later began to be woven into the framework of the entire program. The process was not linear in nature, and although we can identify the beginning points of transformation, the end is not yet in sight. Looking inward, pivoting from lens to mirror is an ongoing process as we seek to understand how we each contribute to the safety and success of our learning associates. We consistently question practices that focus on the process without considering the humanity of our learning associates and faculty, moving from transactional practices to transformative practices. We continue to seek ways to practice anti-oppression and anti-racism within the program and develop a program that helps to build leaders who have the capacity and drive to make changes while moving from problem to possibility. As we embark upon the university's curriculum process to sustain the curricular changes devised, we hope to move from the hustle brought on by the dual pandemics to flow.

Perhaps the most salient aspects of our program exposed by the dual pandemics were the realities of racism and race-neutrality. Efforts at performing acts of justice, demonstrating a value for the Black and Brown learning associates and faculty were translucent at best, with racism running rampant beyond the veil of strategies and promises. As many White dominated programs in higher education prior to, during, and after the dual pandemics, our program attempted to address inequities and eliminate racism within the program by hiring one Black faculty member, hiring a myriad of Black adjunct faculty, and developing curricula on anti-oppression to balance out the program's Whiteness. However, surface efforts like these only exacerbate the issues because they allow White program faculty to sit back and say "see, we're not racist." True reform toward anti-racism occurs through community built upon the spiritual, communal, social histories, healing, and love shared among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). White faculty, staff, and students can certainly be allies, accomplices, and supporters, but they need to decenter themselves to listen, learn, and let leadership decisions be generated by BIPOC communities. In this way, action may look like taking direction from BIPOC leaders and communities, and even getting out of the way when necessary.

As a program, we made strides in developing a curriculum that strives toward anti-racism and anti-oppression; thus, making our focus toward social justice explicit as Strom and Porfilio (2017) suggested. Yet, the wounds of racism fester, boiling beneath the surface. Frameworks for proactive EdD programs, such as the one offered by Becton et al. (2020), can only carry a program so far, especially if the goal is anti-racism and anti-oppression. What is missing is the realization that this work of the program will not be successful unless historical and current issues of representation, marginalization, oppression, and trauma are addressed and a safe community for processing, questioning, and action is created, centering Blackness, other racially and ethnically minoritized populations and their experiences.

The collaborative inquiry and reflection process engaged in by the authors provided an opportunity for the self-reflexive analysis supported by Beatty et al. (2020) and Strom and Porfilio (2017). This process provided the critical insight needed to name the issue of active racist practices in a seemingly anti-racist program. Through this insight, we offer the following actions as steps we need to take to move our program forward. Other programs may want to follow suit. To this end, here are recommendations for EdD faculty to consider:

- Shift any curricular focus on race and racial justice to racism and anti-racist practices.
- Using an ethic of care (Capello, 2023) as the lens, identify and critique the racist and anti-racist practices perpetuated on your campus (Beatty et al., 2020) and in your program.
- Provide substantive responses to racism (Beatty et al., 2020). Move beyond simply acknowledging the existence of racist practices toward action and change. If White faculty are unsure of how to address racial injustice and racism, read, ask, listen, and learn, follow, and then take action.
- Foster and encourage mentoring networks that expand beyond the institution for the Black faculty, staff, and learning associates, creating "healthy and uplifting communities of like-minded individuals" (Beatty et al., 2020, p. 11) through which meaningful and relevant support, healing, and action can occur.
- Implement virtual dissertation defense formats as a concrete way to offer opportunities for communities of support to rally around, learn from, and celebrate the successes of their family members, friends, colleagues, and community members.
- Foster White allies within the program by providing ongoing professional development (Strom & Porfilio, 2017) and opportunities to listen and learn from the Black community.
- Create safe processes through which the EdD community can call out White cultural practices that suppress Blackness and Black community (Beatty et al., 2020).
- Move beyond *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980), which Beatty et al. (2020) defined as "an illumination of how Black racial justice only occurs when it aligns or converges with the interest of white people" (p. 17).
- For White leaders, recognize and rise above your White fragility (Beatty et al., 2020), breaking free from the anxiety paralysis White fragility provokes.
- Offer flexible course delivery models to increase accessibility of the course content while maintaining collaborative practices within each cohort.

If we, program leaders, can hold ourselves accountable and raise up the humanity of all the learning associates, faculty, and staff that make up the EdD community, progress may be realized. We have come to understand that although hopelessness may outbalance hope and personal experience does influence a program's trajectory, anti-racist practices must be proactively addressed for substantive change to occur, and EdD programs can truly reflect the ideologies they espouse.



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