# It Is Harder to Generate Alternative Dissertations Than It Looks

**Edmund T. Hamann** ⓘD
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*
*ehamann2@unl.edu*

**Laura Boche**
*ECMC Foundation*
*laurabethboche@gmail.com*

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines 39 education doctorate (EdD) dissertations that were completed by members of five cohorts of EdD students from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's (UNL) Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education (TLTE) to consider what constitutes an alternative dissertation. All of the dissertation authors began their EdD studies after UNL began its affiliation with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). After pondering what makes an EdD dissertation "alternative", the article notes both that most of the dissertations remain traditional (i.e., structurally like doctorate of philosophy [PhD] dissertations) and that all of the advising faculty are PhD-holders. The article does offer accounts of two dissertations, however, that seem to encapsulate well the spirit and rationale for alternative dissertations or dissertations in practice (DiPs).

**KEYWORDS**

*alternative dissertation, dissertation-in-practice, Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED)*

## I. THE RATIONALE FOR ALTERNATIVE "DISSERTATIONS IN PRACTICE" (DiPs)

As part of their championing of the education doctorate (EdD), several scholars have noted ways that traditional doctorate of philosophy (PhD) preparation is not always pertinent to advanced, practicing educators who are attempting to address challenges and seize opportunities in their particular professional contexts (Mehta et al., 2011; Perry, 2013; Shulman et al., 2006). However, if the PhD dissertation model has serious limitations as a template for what most pertains to the professional challenges and circumstances of advanced education practitioners, EdD advocates have been loath to replace culmination of the EdD with anything other than a dissertation (Perry et al. 2020a). After all, the word *dissertation* conveys a serious intellectual effort worthy of approval by experts in a field. Dominant understandings of the word perhaps tilt more towards discovery than application, but "dissertation" clearly works as shorthand for "demonstrated expertise and accomplishment," and that is not a description/operative condition that EdD programs want to shed. Moreover, it is not easily clear what else would as straightforwardly provide a similar tangible means to display competence. It is hard to imagine the equivalent of bar exams or medical boards for the field of education because the arenas of practice and possible practice are so varied. If one point of a doctoral program is verified demonstration of advanced expertise, completion of a dissertation certainly functions as a known and thus expeditious way to demonstrate such competency. Indeed, in the conclusion we will return to the idea that DiPs can be vehicles for displaying/demonstrating advanced professional knowledge, and from that display, they illustrate why, as cutting-edge practitioners,

such advanced experts should have the autonomy and respect that allows them to deploy their professional expertise.

Yet promoting a familiar and valued practice that nonetheless is a poor fit or is of only partial relevance to the field one wants to prove competence in has its obvious drawbacks. So, slowly, the idea has emerged that an EdD dissertation should be alternative, i.e., a DiP (Perry et al., 2020a). At least three reasons make defining the DiP as a suitable alternative difficult. The first is the power of the existing PhD template. This power comes both from the traditional dissertation's longstanding ubiquity, but also from the fact that PhD-bearing faculty members sometimes are skeptical of the need for or relevance of doctoral preparation programs that move away from a "theoretical/research" orientation to a practical, practitioner-oriented one (Perry et al., 2020b, p. 2). Such faculty may tolerate EdD programs' existence, but they persist with the sensibility that such programs are less rigorous and yield a lesser degree (Perry et al., 2020b). In turn, this inhibits their willingness to see an alternative dissertation (i.e., a DiP) as appropriate or valuable.

While the EdD may propose to be more suitable for practice, the conservative norms of what counts as scholarship in academia favors the hiring of PhD holders thereby these PhD-holding faculty in turn prepare the EdD-seeking practitioners. Extending Lortie's (1975) classical model of the "apprenticeship of observation" to higher education, if we teach the way we were taught, in turn we teach "dissertating" the way we learned to "dissertate," thereby making it challenging for PhD-holding faculty to value a different way of demonstrating expertise or accomplishment and to encourage their students in such a direction.

The second challenge, however, comes from the particularity and therefore the variability of attending to different educational contexts, which is something that an advanced practitioner is often attempting to develop and prove competence in. As Hamann and Reeves (2012) have noted, while borrowing substantially from McDermott (1977) and Seidel and Shavelson (2007), optimal education solutions are a product of both universal educational patterns, or rules, and context-specific ones. With allusion to the "what works" emphasis of the federal What Works Clearinghouse that was created when the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) was launched and that rejected broad swaths of research that was not quantitative and "experiment/control group" in design (Hamann, 2003), "What works [everywhere]" is not enough to guide educational problem solving. DiPs are not only/mainly quests to discover universal truths about education. Rather they are messier and more applied efforts to ameliorate *this* situation or *that* circumstance *here* and *at this time*. Thus, DiPs can vary substantially because problems of practice vary substantially. Moreover, this variation may well be in format and structure, as well as in content.

This second point needs to be emphasized because it speaks to the frequent dilemma that advanced practitioners can encounter in education research-oriented PhD programs. The practitioners are seeking to better understand and attend to particular problems of practice. It is not that universal education truisms do not interest them, but they are less interested in "what works" (abstractly) than in "what works *here*" (Datnow et al. 2005). Anthropologist Laura Nader (1996) distinguished this as an ecological orientation, which is responsive to context, versus a physics orientation, which seeks to explain the universal. One is not necessarily better than the other, but they do talk past each other.

A third challenge is the dominance of social science (particularly psychology) in defining what constitutes educational research. There are advanced demonstrations of competence and expertise that may not be aptly characterized as social science research, per se. Social science seeks to describe, whereas practitioners often seek to develop DiPs that are much more applied than that. As two dissertations that are favorably characterized as DiPs at the end of this article illuminate, curriculum development and pedagogical innovation (Kramer, 2021), as well as practitioner reasoning about practice (Scheinost, 2021) are compelling ways to develop and display expertise, an accomplishment apropos for earning an advanced credential (an EdD) that marks one as an advanced scholarly practitioner. Understanding these as "education research" or as proof of capacity as an education researcher (as traditionally understood), however, might be a little harder to assert. More importantly, such an attempt wanders away from being a match for the skill development an advanced EdD student is attempting to realize and demonstrate.

Perry et al.'s (2020a) *The Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice* links DiP production to improvement science (Bennett et al., 2018; Bryk et al., 2011) and, as such, substantially advances ideas for how to develop a DiP. Yet that means it better describes what DiPs *should be* than examining what, so far, they actually are. While describing what they could or should be is important (not least for its teleological utility), Mead (1961) has powerfully argued that our thinking about "what educationally could or should be" is always constrained by our understanding of "what already is." In other words, competing with any new vision is an already developed sense of what something is supposed to look like. Thus, imagining DiPs as alternatives to more traditional PhD dissertations in education is nonetheless constrained by already extant understandings of what dissertations are.

Here we consider 39 DiPs produced by EdD graduates from one program's first five "CPED cohorts," i.e., from the biannual cohorts that began between 2009 and 2017. In that program (which uses "CPED" and "CPEDers" as program and participant identifying terminology), new EdD students start together every two years and take roughly half of their coursework together which substantially synchronizes their timelines and steps for program completion and how they pursue their DiPs. All of these dissertations were produced under direction of faculty in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education (TLTE) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). UNL was one of the original member institutions that formally affiliated with CPED as it launched in 2007. TLTE offers one of two EdD pathways at UNL. The other pathway is through the Department of Education Administration (EDAD), which, according to its leaders, has also sometimes struggled to move away from "theoretical/research" orientations to more practical ones. Nonetheless, it has permitted an alternative dissertation structure at least twice. For instance, recent UNL EDAD EdD graduates, Panyoua Yang (2022) and Nick Mumm (2022), wrote linked dissertations wherein they collaborated to coauthor a joint literature review, but then conducted different applied studies. This, however, is not a study of EDAD's EdD dissertations. Rather it is just a consideration of TLTE. The goal here is to consider a sustained, extant effort to help EdD students craft DiPs that indeed are alternative and better aligned with their circumstantial needs of becoming better practitioners and better recognized for that expertise. We should add that we are "naming names" in this study because everything examined here is public record; the dissertations are each part of an online digital repository maintained by UNL's library system.

## II. CONCEPTUALIZING AN ALTERNATIVE DISSERTATION

Before we look at what these 39 dissertations are evidence of, we need to think about what constitutes an alternative dissertation. How would we know one as one if/when we saw it? One idea we pursued is that they should look different related to appearance and structure. A traditional PhD dissertation in our experience runs for five or six chapters. It starts with an introduction that has three tasks: (1) to clarify what question or questions guided the study, (2) to summarize or provide an advance preview of the research literature that was considered, the methodologies pursued, and the research setting, and (3) to provide a roadmap for how the remainder of the document will be organized. The second chapter is usually the literature review and can often be subdivided into various subsections. The core task of the research review is to convince readers/faculty reviewers that the author knows well the particular field to which their dissertation contributes. This sets up the later claim that the dissertation constitutes a novel or original contribution to human knowledge. The dissertation needs to clarify what was already known to set up assertions regarding what new knowledge was created. The third chapter of a traditional dissertation describes the research methodology. This can include a brief tracing of paths not taken (my topic also could have been studied by doing X or Y or Z) but mainly describes how the study was pursued. How were data gathered? Per what conventions? How were reliability and validity

pursued? Why should readers see the products of the pursued methodology to be credible?

Usually, the biggest chapter of the traditional dissertation comes next: The presentation of the collected and preliminarily sorted data. Sometimes there is enough to share here that it makes sense to divide this fourth chapter into two, hence a fourth and fifth chapter. Then, there is a final chapter (chapter 5 or 6), depending on whether the data presentation occurred in one chapter (more common) or two, which includes the bulk of the analysis, plus implications and next steps. This format may feel constraining in some fashion. The national CPED initiative has identified several possible constraints, including the idea the DiPs should be guided by the consideration of "problems of practice" rather than research questions. With this consideration, an alternative dissertation would plausibly look different than the traditional five or six chapter dissertation, although it is possible to imagine dissertations that loosely follow the traditional structure but are "alternative" in other ways, such as methodology or approach.

Increasingly, lead thinkers involved with CPED, most explicitly CPED's Executive Director Jill Perry and her coauthors (e.g., Perry et al., 2020a) are arguing that another way EdD dissertations should be alternative is to serve needs of advanced practitioners, hence the movement to DiPs. (CPED's publishing partnership with Myers Educational Press is generating a number of titles that further explore this). What is it that advanced EdD candidates need to figure out and how is the resulting dissertation an illustration of that acumen and achievement?

## III. METHODOLOGIES TO EXAMINE THE ALTERNATIVENESS OF DiPs

Our inquiry began both serendipitously and expeditiously. The lead author (Hamann) was involved for a number of years as a faculty member and then coordinator of TLTE's EdD program. As such, he was a regular participant in the semiannual and then annual CPED convenings where the problematization of traditional dissertations and the emphasis on supporting DiPs were becoming increasing points of focus. Additionally, his direct experience chairing and serving on EdD students' advisory committees had him wondering to what extent alternative (and related adjectives of "more relevant "and "more appropriate)" characterized TLTE EdD dissertations or could characterize them more. In turn, the second author (Boche) was just finishing her PhD in the higher education strand of UNL's EDAD department and told her advisor that she was eager to engage in more research. That advisor then put the two coauthors in touch for the first time. All of the coauthors' initial conversations and meetings were via Zoom, as this was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first dilemma we confronted was to decide what constituted an improved/more appropriate (i.e., "alternative" or "DiP") EdD dissertation and then to ponder the related task of what could be studied to fulfill that line of inquiry. Slowly and steadily, we decided that a good starting point would be to look comparatively at the 39 dissertations that had been successfully defended by members of the first five TLTE EdD cohorts. We knew the backstory on many of them (because of the lead author's involvement), but we also had the second author's fresh eyes, not knowing any of the now-graduated dissertation authors, nor any members of the host department except for the lead author. Those 39 dissertations had been completed

between 2010 and 2022, and because they had been generated by different cohorts, they enabled some chronological analysis of whether the department was getting better (or not) at moving away from traditional dissertations to those better characterized as DiPs. Because the dissertations were all in the public domain (in the university library's digital commons), there was no inquiry that involved needing participant consent or IRB approval.

Back in 2007 UNL was one of the first campuses to sign on to the then-nascent CPED project, and TLTE faculty were among the first (see Latta and Wunder [2012]) to assemble a multi-institutional consideration of what it meant to put practitioner knowledge at the center. In 2009, TLTE organized its first biannual CPED cohort (with EdD students referred to as "CPEDers"). Since then, in 2011 (second), 2013 (third), 2015 (fourth), 2017 (fifth), 2019 (sixth), 2021 (seventh), 2023 (eighth), and 2025 (ninth) eight more cohorts with as many as 20 students and as few as four have launched. When the analyses of completed dissertations that are described here began, in 2021, there were no graduates yet, from TLTE's cohort six, nor from cohorts seven, eight, or nine, though now both the 2019 and 2021 cohorts have their first graduates (which are not further examined in this analysis). Two more lingering DiPs have also been completed by members of the fourth and fifth cohort respectively (bringing the total to 41), but those are not examined either.

To the dilemma of how a DiP might look different from a traditional education research PhD dissertation, we conjectured about a number of features that might look different and then examined our corpus of 39 to see whether our conjectures had explanatory power. Among our posed questions were how many chapters the dissertations included, whether key introductory concepts were named—i.e., ontology, epistemology, praxis, iterative/iteration, and efficacy (Hamann & Trainin, 2018)— how long the dissertations were, if chapters were about author's own practice, whether they were shared in first person or third, how many references they included, whether chapter two was aptly categorized as a literature review and chapter three as methodology, and how long it had taken students to go from starting their EdD journeys to completing it. We noted that participation in a cohort likely would make program length less variable, although, given our continued emphasis (like with the PhD program) of students identifying their own lines of inquiry, we did not expect all members of a cohort to graduate at the same time. Some lines of inquiry take longer than others to pursue (and EdD pursuers' full-time employment status also vary in terms of how much time they give advanced practitioners to focus on their doctoral pursuits). We also examined dissertation titles to see how practice-oriented they seemed.

## IV. NOT SO DIFFERENT

The examined dissertations varied in a number of ways, including length and citations. The shortest was 113 pages while the longest was 347. They tended to get shorter over time. The first cohort's median dissertation was 221.5 pages, while the fifth cohort's was 164. The number of citations also varied with cohort one (from 2009) having 113 as the median number of citations (median from 10 dissertations), while the low, from cohort four, was just 62, although that figure came from just two completed and defended dissertations. The trend line in median number of citations declined modestly and consistently over time with the first cohort having the most, then cohort two, then cohort three, and then cohort five (with cohort four

being slightly below the number of citations per dissertation from cohort five).

Regarding a conventional chapter number and structure, those actually became more conventional over time. Only one out of ten from cohort one seemed well described as conventional (with seven not being so and two unclear). By cohort five, seven of ten were conventional and only three were not. Here, conventional references structure with both the number of chapters and their role, with the introduction-literature review-methodology-data presentation-data analysis/next steps model becoming increasingly common. This pattern may be a result of a changing composition in TLTE's faculty. Many of those who advised the first and second cohorts have retired or left (which is not a surprise when the analysis is occurring 10 to 14 years after the fact). They were the faculty members who had turned to CPED seeking an alternative to the "PhD lite" focus of the pre-CPED EdD efforts (McGowan & Pedersen, 2012). More recent hires did not share the same deliberative history regarding whether to connect and embrace the CPED framework or not. That was already an accomplished fact when most came on board. UNL and TLTE were part of CPED. This conjecture suffers, however, when one notes both that 15 of the 18 successfully defended dissertations from the third, fourth, and fifth cohorts were supervised by just three TLTE faculty, two of whom had been part of the initial decision to affiliate with CPED.

One conventional finding was that research methodologist John Creswell was cited 109 times in 20 of the 39 dissertations. Yet, the somewhat more obscure work of Clandinin and Connelly (primarily related to narrative inquiry) was even more frequently cited, with 137 references across the body of dissertations, with direct appearances in 16 of the 39 of them. We think this reflects the fact that a professor who taught qualitative inquiry to each of these first five cohorts is an expert in narrative inquiry and an acolyte of Clandinin and Connelly's work. Many of the dissertations then reflected the direct preparation from program coursework.

Perhaps the most striking point about the DiPs reviewed from TLTE's first five cohorts is that they did not depart much from the appearance and conceits of PhD dissertations. Primarily, they depended upon substantial grounding in the research literature, almost all were primarily written texts organized by paragraph into sections and chapters. Though a few referenced video and/or audio analysis, none included hyperlinks to these materials. Although we did not engage in a comparative analysis of the PhD dissertations generated by PhD students from the same department during this same time period, the lead author (Hamann) was a committee member or chair for 38 TLTE PhD dissertations and did not identify an obvious or categorical difference. Indeed, as one colleague (Dr. Guy Trainin) has suggested, "Perhaps our EdDs don't look much different from our PhDs because most of our PhD students are also pursuing problems of practice" (personal communication).

It is worth exploring Dr. Trainin's conjecture a little more. More than half of the PhD students in TLTE are part-time students and full-time practitioners. Circumstantially, they are more like the advanced practitioners who are intentionally targeted by the EdD program and less like the full-time student, immersed in the library and/or field sites, who resembles the traditional model of a PhD student. It follows that this portion of PhD students bring ideas about problems of practice to their advanced studies, even if their inquiries into it are more stilted (force fitting into a program less designed for them than the EdD program is). The relative lack of departure from the PhD model may be because the PhD as practiced in TLTE at least

sometimes veers into EdD territory. In this scenario, the EdD is not so much like the PhD program as the PhD program is sometimes like the EdD.

If a sprawling analysis identified no clear smoking gun consistently distinguishing EdD DiPs from PhD dissertations, a brief examination of two of the EdD dissertations suggests ways they can be strikingly different from their PhD cousins. One, (Kramer, 2021) does not superficially appear much different from the conventional PhD version. It has six chapters, 145 pages, and 108 references. Yet, its content is clearly rooted in the pursuit of a problem of practice. For the dissertation, which was titled *Considering student voices in reading intervention: Re-conceptualizing and rethinking possibilities for high school reading through arts-based educational research*, a high school reading intervention teacher named Angela Kramer (2022) decided to craft a play about various types of students who are in reading intervention. Her play was overtly a work of fiction, but she had her students read it to check its verisimilitude and see whether they found it interesting.

In general, in reading intervention classes, most students feel stigmatized because of their status as challenged readers (Hamann & Malone, 2020); so, getting them to engage in a task—reading—that they don't like and have not previously done well at can be difficult. Nonetheless, to Kramer's delight, her students loved the play and proposed a number of edits, including the addition of a new "reading intervention student type." Kramer's students suggested she add a student who *liked* being in her class because, whatever the stigma about reading, they appreciated a class with an interested and friendly teacher who seemed to care deeply about students like them.

Students' interest in the play meant that Kramer added it as a recurring feature in her curriculum, occasionally tweaking it per the recommendations of students but mostly sharing it in its initial flawed form to give her students material that they were expert at to correct. As of this writing (in 2025), Kramer remains an advanced practitioner teaching at the high school level, and additionally, she teaches as a college lecturer and supports the school district by supporting professional development. Per the idea that a DiP can be proof of advanced understanding and professional qualification, Kramer's DiP and the degree—the EdD—that it helped her obtain appear to have been helpful for her securing the professional autonomy and advanced roles her district has increasingly afforded her.

A second EdD dissertation that comes from this sample of 39 was finished in 2021. Scheinost's (2021) *Considering gentle teaching and equitable reading practices* was structurally much more *avant garde*, with the dissertation including 21 short chapters that Scheinost hoped could individually stand alone as blog entries that could be shared practitioner to practitioner. Excluding a relatively conventional opening chapter (which introduced the intent of the dissertation and its organization) and the final chapter, which was designed to demonstrate Scheinost's skills at synthesis, all the chapters were intended to be miniature examinations of problems of practice and their prospective resolution/amelioration. Instead of a conventional literature review, roughly half of the chapters start with a dilemma identifiable in the literature about reading instruction at the middle school level and then give illustrations of how that problem has manifested in Scheinost's practice and her responses. In turn, the other half of her chapters start with a dilemma from her practice. Then, she turns to the literature to identify prospective promising responses. After finishing this DiP, Scheinost was able to leverage her status as an expert to lead to substantial customizations of a new

middle school reading program brought in by the district, limiting use of portions of it that were not supported by the research.

The point in highlighting these two chapters is to assert that, while the broader body of TLTE EdD dissertations from UNL has not yet created strikingly different/alternative DiPs, there are some examples that show both the development of and implementation of advanced and efficacious reflective practice. Recently, with TLTE's cohorts eight and nine, the lead author of this paper used both of these dissertations (and two others) as examples of innovative engagement with problems of practice and also used Perry et al. (2020a) as a course text for the first (and second) time. Whether this ultimately pushes members of either cohort to create dissertations that appear strikingly different from their PhD counterparts remains a not-yet-answered question.

## V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRAXIS OF PROMOTING DiPs

As noted, despite the recognition of the need for a different type of dissertation in a practitioner-focused program, the traditional dissertation still dominates TLTE's output, a few striking outliers notwithstanding. On the one hand, this suggests the power of tradition and the difficulty of faculty imagining something much different than their own experiences in earning their doctorates as well as their ever-growing experience with graduate students. Yet, this point should not be heard/read entirely as a lament. As the two recently reviewed dissertations indicate, clever and consequential DiPs are possible in current conditions. Moreover, one thing perhaps obscuring the DiPs' degree of relative innovation is that faculty participation in CPED (in the EdD program) is pushing them to think of PhD dissertations as increasingly utilized in the pursuit of problems of practice as well.

One reason for celebrating the two highlighted dissertations is because they stand on their own as exemplars. As the opening of this paper reveals, both authors of this piece are familiar with the growing body of work encouraging increasingly more practical and sometimes less orthodox DiPs. However, their experience is not necessarily representative of TLTE's faculty or the experience of faculty in other CPED-affiliated programs at other institutions. While the conversation about DiPs seems to be an increasing CPED focus over the last decade and always a component of the broader argument for clarifying distinctions between the PhD and the EdD degrees, that CPED-network conversation has not necessarily been broadly joined in on by TLTE faculty. Most TLTE faculty have not participated in CPED workshops, neither the low-cost virtual options nor the more intense workshops that are regularly part of annual convenings. This may be a failure on the part of the lead author to get TLTE faculty more involved in CPED-sponsored activities, but it likely also reiterates Perry et al.'s (2020b) discovery (noted earlier) that PhD-bearing faculty continue to think of the EdD with lower regard even as programs supported by their departments flourish. That a vigorous conversation about DiPs is happening does not mean that all who could or should participate in it are doing so. In turn, unlike most of his department colleagues, the lead author has attended as many as 10 in-person convenings to date, as well as participated in a number of the CPED-facilitated virtual professional development workshops. Broader faculty engagement with programming by the national CPED initiative would likely be expeditious for building more support for DiPs.

Perhaps epitomizing the relative isolation of tenure-line faculty from conversations that would push them to radically rethink their work, including how they supervise DiPs, both authors of this chapter do not have a feel for how anomalous or typical, what we broach here is to readers connected with other EdD programs. However, in workshopping this article at both a CPED convening and at the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) annual conference, we do have a sense that the points we raise here generate interest beyond the boundaries of UNL. It is comparatively easy to support wanting EdD dissertations to look different and to serve more expedient purposes. However, actually incubating the creation of such texts and inquiries remains an elusive problem of practice.

Remembering that good educational practice responds to both broader or universal truths as well as more contextual and particular truths (Hamann & Reeves, 2012), one resulting task is to convene fellow EdD program faculty and to engage them explicitly into the CPED DiP conversation. They need to not only understand how/why a DiP proposes to be different from a more traditional dissertation, but also to be convinced that they can and should support the production of such texts. Similarly, they need to be made uneasy with the status quo, seeing traditional dissertations as insufficient for the skillsets and problem-resolving capabilities our advanced practitioner students are seeking to develop and demonstrate.

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