


## Nourishing Alternatives: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue explores the expanding landscape of alternative dissertations within Doctor of Education (EdD) programs, showcasing how scholar-practitioners are reimagining the dissertation as a dynamic platform for addressing authentic problems of practice. Moving beyond the traditional five-chapter format, EdD programs are embracing formats such as dissertations-in-practice, public scholarship, portfolios, and multimedia projects. These alternatives encompass theoretically informed inquiries that reframe problems of practice through multifaceted lenses, empowering educational leaders with new ways to understand, navigate, and respond to the complex realities of their work. In this introduction, we provide a conceptual overview of the shift toward alternative dissertations, through the work of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) and calls to bridge theory and practice. We also preview the articles in this issue, which offer insights about the design, implementation, and implications of alternative dissertation models from multiple perspectives across institutions—including those of Graduate Schools, programs, faculty advisors, and students. Collectively, these contributions illuminate how EdD programs and EdD students are reshaping the dissertation to better serve educational leaders and their communities, while honoring the complexity and diversity of scholarly practice.

### KEYWORDS

*alternative dissertations*

By now, the critique is familiar: traditional dissertations don't work for practitioner-focused Doctor of Education (EdD) programs. Imported uncritically from the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, traditional dissertations—focused on finding and filling a knowledge “gap” in a tightly-disciplined literature base—offer the assurance of academic legitimacy...at a cost.

For practicing educational leaders, traditional dissertations are often burdensome to write; linear and formulaic; disconnected from practice; psychologically constraining and draining; and largely inaccessible to a practitioner audience. If the purpose of EdD programs is to train change leaders and uplift stewards of the profession, traditional dissertations often feel unfit for the task.

In response, the Carnegie Project for the Educational Doctorate (CPED) and a diverse community of EdD programs have advocated for dissertations-in-practice (DiP). This form of dissertation centers action/improvement-oriented methods, in which practitioners seek to generate and document specific changes in local systems.

Dissertations in Practice (DiPs) have increasingly become the norm—and often the gold standard—among EdD programs, particularly those affiliated with CPED. According to a 2020 survey of CPED member institutions, more than half use the term *Dissertation in Practice* to describe their culminating scholarly endeavor (Perry, 2024).

While the specific purpose, methodology, and format of DiPs may differ across institutions, they are united by a shared emphasis on addressing complex problems of practice through applied, practice-embedded research. As Perry (2024) explained, through the DiP, students are “expected to apply scholarship, inquiry, and research to a broad educational problem that they see playing out and face daily in their organization and work” (p. 14). In doing so, the DiP not only serves as a rigorous academic exercise, but also bridges the gap between theory and practice and produces tangible improvements in educational settings. Such focused, problem-solving inquiry has an impact that ripples out from the site of practice. Working through cycles of improvement in a local educational setting, students gain skills that they can use again, to lead change processes in the future. In this respect, the DiP has become a professionally-attuned and adaptable vehicle for the development of scholar practitioners in EdD programs (Everson et al., 2024).

Early in our editorial conceptualization of this special issue on alternative dissertation approaches, we encountered a key question: is it all about DiPs? The DiP model itself is flexible and can accommodate multiple methodologies and formats including collaborative and product-oriented models (Perry, 2024). Many of the proposals for articles that we received did indeed explore various incarnations of the DiP. And that led us to wonder: even with its flexibility, has the DiP itself become a new form of “traditional”



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dissertation? In what ways has the DiP animated, guided, clarified—and constrained—the collective imagination and inquiry practice of EdD students and EdD programs?

Even as CPED has championed the dissertation in practice and improvement-oriented methods, the DiP continues to demonstrate its elasticity. As highlighted in the 2020 CPED Convening and subsequent professional exchanges in *Impacting Education* and other spaces, the DiP has morphed into new shapes that still have a family resemblance, as well as forms that have broken free from academic convention, often employing new media to enhance accessibility and engagement.

The unsettled quality of the EdD dissertation is a good thing. Long-standing questions about the form and purpose of the EdD dissertation have enriched the field. In their article in this special issue, Carter and Krahenbuhl (this volume) point out that dissatisfaction with the status quo is a key force for innovation. They envision the EdD dissertation as a “maker project” and ask:

- What if the dissertation could take the form of a podcast?
- What if the dissertation could be written in problem of practice teams?
- What if the dissertation could be replaced by a digital portfolio?
- What if a dissertation could be a documentary film?

Fortunately, these are no longer “what if” questions. They’re living possibilities, with models, inspirations, reflections, and caveats from faculty and EdD graduates who are eager to share their insights.

This special issue features several DiP-related approaches, such as the three-chapter dissertation model from Dayton University (Ziskin et al., this volume) and the dossier style dissertation from Johns Hopkins University (JohnBull et al., this volume). These models continue to expand and enrich the repertoire of DiP options. While highlighting these innovations, this special issue also leans into contributions that open other spaces in the conversation about alternative dissertations. We’ve been particularly interested in approaches that center accessibility, engagement, identity, creativity, advocacy, and theoretical thinking; as well as perspectives that pose underlying questions of form and function, amid the broader politics of knowledge/action production.

Given the multiplicity of options at play for constructing dissertations within the EdD community, this special Issue of *Impacting Education* offers a sampling of dissertation possibilities. It does not attempt to categorize certain approaches as being DiPs or not; nor does it attempt to draw boundaries among alternative approaches. A primary purpose of this special issue is making alternative approaches to the dissertation more fully visible, highlighting emerging models with enough detail to enable faculty advisors and EdD students to clearly see the content, organization, and design of a particular model. In several articles, EdD graduates narrate their experience with these models to provide a grounded, first-person perspective on the enticements and obstacles involved in creating a different kind of dissertation. Doctoral students who have ventured beyond tradition have often overcome institutional barriers, academic conventions, and self-doubt to produce something very different than a disinterested five-chapter document.

A secondary purpose of this special issue is opening broader dialogue regarding the institutional politics and programmatic dilemmas posed by dissertation alternatives. We are very curious

about how alternative approaches to the dissertation can unsettle EdD curriculum and surface the trade-offs involved with customized dissertation designs vs. standardized approaches that can increase program efficiency and completion rates.

Traditionally, this introduction would preview the special issue’s purpose and then provide brief highlights of the content of each article. But we decided to write the introduction a little differently. As the program director and dissertation coach in the EdD program at Appalachian State University, we have been advising and thinking about alternative dissertations for many years, together with our colleague, Dr. Chris Osmond, who collaborated with us on the conceptualization and development of this special issue. We are aware that our experiences at several levels—pedagogical, methodological, philosophical, and programmatic—have entangled us deeply in the dialogue about what dissertations look like, how they function, and what they’re for. Because we have been thinking with the contributions to this special issue for more than a year during the editorial process, we felt it was more appropriate, and more interesting, to compose this introduction as an integrated reflection on dissertation work in EdD programs, engaging with the contributing articles as touchstones for larger insights and questions.

In the following pages, we spotlight several key themes that thread the articles in this special issue together and speak to the restless evolution of the EdD dissertation. We start with a brief discussion of the challenge of mapping the prevalence of alternative approaches, much like counting the number of flowers blooming in a meadow over the course of a summer. We then summarize several key arguments our contributors make for the importance of dissertation alternatives, centering matters of access and engagement. We also explore how alternative approaches may rewire the circuits of energy flow for scholar practitioners.

Our discussion then turns toward some of our own recent experience with dissertations at Appalachian State University to consider the idea that dissertations may be their most powerful when they become the work that only that particular student could do. From there, we consider the programmatic implications of alternative dissertation approaches. Finally, we briefly revisit the role of theory in EdD dissertations and the challenge of labelling emerging approaches as “alternative.” Our introduction closes with a series of unresolved questions for readers to carry into their own dialogue with our contributors.

## IT’S HARD TO KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING OUT THERE

How many EdD programs feature alternative vs. traditional dissertation models? Hard to say: the extent and nature of alternative dissertation approaches are difficult to determine with any empirical precision. Some programs advertise “brand name” alternative approaches in their program websites or handbooks, such as a program-specific version of the Dissertation in Practice. Meanwhile, some EdD programs are going hybrid, with students having choices among DiPs and the traditional model.

Sometimes, a prospective applicant to our EdD program asks: do you require a traditional dissertation? Our answer is inevitably, *yes and no*. A program like ours at Appalachian State University features a mix of mainstream dissertations and alternative approaches, without direction on what alternatives look like. We don’t advertise being traditional or alternative; we are open to both, and



doing things differently is an emergent possibility rather than a program-made model. We may not be unusual in that regard. In the broad field of EdD programs, it is impossible to count the number of programs in which alternatives are happening, because they are often unnamed or inchoate, percolating up from the creative bubbling energies found in programs that ask “what if?” as happening at Middle Tennessee State (Carter & Krahenbuhl, this volume) and “why the f\*\*k not?” as happening at Northern Kentucky University (Worthy et al., this volume).

After compiling this special issue, our impression is that many non-traditional dissertation approaches fly under the radar and may not be visible on program websites or graduate school bulletins. Alternative approaches may flourish under particular organizational circumstances: a flexible Graduate Dean; a methodologically-eclectic faculty; a non-conforming cohort of EdD students. The creative products arising from such circumstances can open a pathway for other students to follow and may become an ongoing feature of an EdD program.

In compiling this special issue, however, we’ve learned that alternative options can wither when the growing conditions change. In their article about collaborative dissertations at American University, Cohen et al. (this volume) remark that collaborative projects are no longer being undertaken. Similarly, faculty from San Jose State note that their program is no longer supporting documentary film (Jaffer et al., this volume). Clearly, not all innovations take root and become institutionalized. The sustainability of alternative dissertation approaches often depends on the continued presence of their original champion (among the faculty or in the Graduate School) as well as EdD students dissatisfied with traditional models.

## THE ARGUMENT FOR ALTERNATIVES: ACCESS, ENGAGEMENT, AND ENERGY

In a world where there is such intense competition for attention, long formal documents—especially when composed in a dry, third-person voice—have limited circulation. Making dissertations more accessible and attractive—to professional peers, to community stakeholders, and to policy-makers—emerged as one of the most prominent arguments for alternative dissertation approaches.

At Rowan University, the EdD program emphasizes the power of public scholarship, centering students’ opportunities (even responsibilities) to craft their findings and recommendations to engage readers in public dialogue about critical educational issues (Johnson & Kerrigan, this volume). As part of their dissertation work, EdD students at Rowan write both an academic journal article and create a “student’s choice” product—a webinar, an infographic, or a public art project—that puts their research to work for advocacy. Thus, the dissertation inquiry propels them to become both scholar practitioners and public intellectuals.

The power of a dissertation to advance critical awareness or advocate for action on a particular problem depends, to a large extent, on its accessibility. Students at San Jose State found that documentary film enabled their work to reach non-specialist audiences in more complex ways than a traditional document ever could (Jaffer et al., this volume). Likewise, Lane (this volume) explains how she was able to engage multiple audiences with a documentary film that adapts material from her dissertation document. The film reached audiences that may not have read the

dissertation and can now engage with the critical questions and insights posed by Lane’s research examining the marginalization of Black American English within K–12 curricula and instructional practices.

With regard to broadening impact, several contributors to this special issue point to the power of decentering, even intentionally shrinking, the traditional literature review. In the three-chapter model at Dayton University, for example, the first chapter includes an abbreviated literature review along with all the other elements of a typical dissertation design; in short, the literature review is one component of chapter one, instead of being its own large chapter. As Johnson and Kerrigan (this volume) point out, an exhaustive literature review can distract students from more pressing research activities. When faculty change the expectations for students to demonstrate “command” of research literature, students can put more energy into creating articles/products that will be attractive and useful to a professional audience.

As several authors within this volume attest, when doctoral students have a creative hand in shaping their work to reach audiences that matter to them, the work takes on a greater level of urgency and authenticity. In the e-portfolio dissertation, for example, one of the authors points out that having an electronic portfolio has proven more accessible to family and co-workers (Lee-Johnson et al., this volume).

At another level, a more creative, inclusive approach to dissertation work can enable what might be called “accessibility-to-self,” i.e., enable students to incorporate multiple aspects of their own identities. As Mullooly notes, “utilizing the eportfolio granted me the opportunity to create doctoral work that felt more representative of my multi-faceted identity as creative, a scholar and a professional” (Reynolds et al., this volume, p. 43).

Having a more inviting, accessible form of the dissertation carries professional value for EdD graduates. As authors from Webster University point out, potential employers may engage with the accessible elements of a digital portfolio (such as a professional website or video) in ways that may never have happened with a traditional dissertation (Lee-Johnson et al., this volume).

## TAPPING THE DEEP ENERGY

Writing for an audience of three—the faculty dissertation committee—can be dispiriting for professional educators. One of the under-appreciated criticisms of traditional dissertations is that they’re exhausting to write. How many times have doctoral students lamented that they “just want to be done”? One of the most important questions arising from this special issue is this: how might alternative dissertations tap into a deeper wellspring of energy?

As the contributors to this special issue highlight, there are different kinds of energy to unleash via alternative dissertations. The Dissertation in Practice taps into the professional desire for organizational change and equity. Through the use of improvement science processes (e.g., root cause analysis, identification of driving forces, and iterated cycles of action/measurement/reflection), dissertation work by scholar practitioners can generate the energy of the new and improved; the energy that arises when an organization breaks free of its operational constraints to enact innovation. That energy flows beyond the individual scholar practitioner; it circulates throughout the team involved in the work and ideally, throughout the organization and broader stakeholder communities.

In this special issue, several articles point to other sources of energy that dissertation work can unleash. In Johnson and Kerrigan's (this volume) article, for example, they point out that public scholarship, as it ripples out into a community of practice, produces the energy of contributing to social dialogue and shifting understandings of educational problems. Through the Dossier Style Dissertation at Johns Hopkins University, students conduct a needs assessment and, on that basis, author an applied innovation project, such as a guide to designing visitor-center art exhibitions for museum professionals (John Bull et al., this volume). Such products provide immediate, tangible, useful material for informing, advancing, and energizing practice.

Another source of energy is the personal meaning of the project. When a dissertation project enables a student to explore and articulate a deep question in their own lives, it becomes a transformative project that can generate moments of healing; moments of power; moments of intense intellectual realization that can become a catalyst of embodied transformation.

These multiple energy sources are not mutually exclusive; in many cases, the personal and professional energies can fuse together, resulting in projects that are both impactful and introspective. Ideally, EdD dissertations can be both. Far from being template-driven or replicable, these dissertations are as unique as the individuals who create them. With rich reflective elements—such as leadership philosophy statements, journal-style narratives, and personal letters to key stakeholders—these works integrate theory and practice in deeply personal ways. They serve not only as scholarly contributions but also as a testament to the profound personal growth that takes place during the doctoral journey.

## THE WORK THAT ONLY THIS PERSON CAN DO

In spring of 2025, the EdD program at Appalachian State hosted more than 20 dissertation defenses. One of those projects, written by a speech pathologist, used decolonizing methodologies to articulate a strengths-based framing of Black parent engagement in education (James, 2025). In another project, a Black woman principal (McIntosh, 2025) gathered together other Black women leaders to create a quilt to represent their resilience. Both of these projects were deeply grounded in the students' embodied (racialized, gendered) experience in the world. In a poststructural genealogy of educational assessment, Smith (2025) found inspiration from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to organize his critique in "cantos" and "hymns" that narrated the ways assessment practices had scarred him as a child and fueled his critical analysis as a teacher, buttressing his transformation into a scholarly practitioner.

This summer at Appalachian State, Jimenez (2025) defended our first podcast dissertation. Like colleagues at Rowan University, Jimenez positions her podcast as public scholarship and, similar to the EdD graduates from Webster University and Portland State, she was motivated to make her work on culturally sustaining practice and technology accessible to a broader audience. Her work was grounded in her own commitment to children's belonging in schools and her desire to humanize research by giving extended airtime to the nuanced voices of her participants. Jimenez's podcast, as a medium, enables her and her participants to be heard in different ways—and by a different audience—than a traditional text-only dissertation could allow.

One of the simple, yet radical, threads linking these projects is that they could only be composed by that very unique human being. In our program, we often encourage students to explore and write what only they can write—what's brilliantly particular to their educational experience and being in the world—both grounded in, and extending beyond, their current practice. How the project may (or may not) fit within a traditional five-chapter framework is a secondary concern. Similarly, the authors (Worthy et al., this volume) from Northern Kentucky University point out:

Many of us found that the start of our work began with intentional attention given to what bothered us, what moved us, what mattered to us. We chose different dissertation design paths not (necessarily) to buck the systems and structures that maintained fixed containers but instead as an agentic move toward the creation and elevation of liberatory and identity-formed scholarship. That is, at its core, what we believe a dissertation should do. (p. 97)

That said, we've also learned that deviation from tradition based on individual visions demands more thinking, more energy, and more time from both students and faculty advisors. In our program, we counsel students to be cautious about pursuing a non-traditional dissertation, reminding them that doing something "cool" or "new" will likely intensify dissertation committee feedback and prolong their graduation timeline. When timeframes are tight and students' energy for innovation is limited, it is often most prudent for students to stick with convention and follow the step-by-step guidance for traditional dissertations found throughout the methodological (and ABD self-help) literature.

## BESPOKE VS. EMBEDDED

Organizationally, there are several implications of the idiosyncratic—and sometimes fragile—nature of alternative dissertation approaches. At one level, it is clear that creative approaches to doing dissertations differently depend on the mentoring, support, and advocacy of individual faculty members who are willing to take the leap with their students. As long as those faculty members nurture difference, it can flourish.

Through the knowledge sharing hosted by CPED, the dissertation in practice has become embedded as a signature feature of many EdD programs. There are multiple benefits: when all students in an EdD program do action research dissertations, then the curriculum can provide sophisticated training in action research, and the development of students' projects can be scaffolded consistently in coursework. This line of thinking has enabled multiple EdD programs to hard-wire the development of a dissertation-in-practice within students' coursework. Key dissertation components are drafted (even completed) within the context of particular courses. After three years of courses, the entire dissertation is complete! For students, this approach can be highly alluring because it saves time/money and protects them from falling into ABD-despair. EdD programs with embedded (often three-year) dissertations often enjoy tight curricular alignment, higher completion rates, and streamlined advising processes.

The downside, however, is that everyone in the program is doing action research. Even such an elastic, pragmatic, multi-modal methodology as action research may not be big enough to house the radical imagination and complex positionalities of our current (and future) students. In general, a programmatically-espoused





methodology can become a constraint that limits the possibilities for students to pursue alternative approaches.

## THE TRADITIONAL IS THE NEW ALTERNATIVE: INTEGRATING THEORY

To propel the ongoing evolution of dissertation inquiry, this special issue offers provocative thinking about the role of theory, philosophy, and critical traditions in generating possibilities. Several articles pose questions underneath the critique that differentiates the DiP from traditional dissertations. Whereas the DiP offers a vehicle for scholar practitioners to pursue programmatic change within the dissertation process, theoretically-informed dissertation work can challenge the way problems are framed, who benefits from a particular framing, and what other framings might reveal. Theoretically-informed dissertations can also support new modalities; as Cohen et al. (this volume) explore, anti-racist theorizing can become symbiotic with collaborative dissertations, challenging white cultural norms of individualism and centering concern for social justice.

By engaging with multiple ways of thinking about epistemology and methodology, students' thinking can move outside the well-schooled conventions about the nature of research and data. In our program at Appalachian State, several students have taken up feminist, critical, and poststructural approaches to research that have changed their questions and avenues of inquiry. These projects often become what Brown and Proctor (this volume) call dangerous dissertations," i.e., projects that can challenge the ways problems have been posed and critique dominant discourses that have defined the common sense of educational practice, often through detailed analysis of the exercise of power, sometimes in the writer's own educational spaces (or related spaces), which makes this approach particularly fraught and nuanced.

The intentional emphasis on theory, however, is not intended as a conservative move to reassert traditional scholarly standards associated with PhD programs. As argued by Thomas-Reid and Nelson in this issue, challenging students to reconsider the deeper framing of their problems and options for reframing can support CPED principles and core values. Changing the ways problems are framed from multiple ethical/philosophical perspectives can lead to fresh solutions—even if those solutions haven't been put into practice yet.

## REFUSING THE BINARY FRAMING

Several authors (Foster et al., this volume; Worthy et al., this volume) in this special issue pose this challenge: Do we need to stop using the term "alternative" to liberate our thinking and de-center "traditional" dissertations as an archetype? Even as we celebrate new models, are we caught in binary thinking (traditional/alternative), which continues to privilege the "traditional" and uphold it as the preferred mode of knowledge production? The discourse of "alternative" is challenged by Foster et al. (this volume) who argues that, from a Black feminist standpoint, it is important not to position difference as deficient in relation to a normative model. Indeed, the discourse of "alternative" can maintain the master-status of tradition and can position alternatives as marginal or lacking legitimacy.

If we don't call them alternatives, what are they? One of the interlocutors in the article from Northern Kentucky University remarks:

I love this idea that we don't do alternative dissertations like, let's just fuck with the framing altogether and reject the idea that this is an alternative to anything. *These* are dissertations. This is what dissertations *are*. (p. 101)

The provocative dialogue from the EdD program at Northern Kentucky University (Worthy et al., this volume) situates alternative dissertations in a shared ethos of liberatory creativity, rather than in a particular form or format. From this perspective, dissertation work can become a sandbox without defined edges—a playful, imaginative space of freedom—and the most serious work.

## FINDING AN OPENING

We have realized there is much that goes unsaid in public discussions of the dissertation as an academic genre and convention. As they wrote about the different ways of thinking/doing dissertations in their programs, we also invited authors in this special issue to speak to what is going on behind the scenes in their EdD programs. We asked questions about the origins, functions, challenges, and tensions of alternative dissertation work. How have EdD programs incubated alternatives within conventional academic cultures? How do you cultivate methodological creativity with a limited curricular menu of research courses? Once alternatives start to bloom, how do you make sure they are seriously alternative—and not perceived as avoidance of the hard work of thinking, leading, and writing?

Several articles tell origin stories about their alternative dissertation approaches. In the case of the eportfolio at Portland State, for example, the program found an opening for pursuing a portfolio model in the Graduate School's policy that allowed a dissertation to include multiple articles for publication (Reynolds et al., this volume). At Webster University, the EdD program pursued a strategy of researching alternative approaches in other EdD programs and proposing a digital portfolio that still includes a "mini-dissertation" to address concerns for traditional notions of academic rigor (Lee-Johnson et al., this volume).

Another strategy involves the development of dissertation guidelines that find a sweet spot between flexibility in form/format and programmatic expectations for the culminating product for earning the EdD. In our program at Appalachian State, we have established guidelines for three-article dissertations and a general guideline for "alternative" dissertations. The guideline for alternative dissertations challenges students to articulate their rationale and the form/content they envision for their dissertation, to ensure that there is clear understanding among the student, the dissertation committee, the EdD program, and the Graduate School about what the student will produce. In this regard, the guideline serves as a grounding and guardrail to prevent frustration and wreckage down the dissertation road.

## WHAT'S STOPPING US FROM DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT? IS IT US?

Beyond policy manuals, several contributions to this special issue point toward another barrier for change: the socialization and mental models carried by faculty advisors. In the article by Hamann



and Boche (this volume), the authors chronicle trends in dissertation production at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). Even though the UNL EdD program was an early CPED member and deeply engaged with CPED dialogue, the program has primarily produced dissertations that mirror traditional models. Given the gravitational force of academic convention in individual mindsets and institutional expectations, the title of the article says it all: “It’s harder to generate alternative dissertations than it looks.”

Questions about faculty capacity (and desire) to explore dissertation alternatives take on a more critical edge, in situations where the identities and concerns of EdD students differ from those of their faculty dissertation advisors. In their article, Foster et al. (this volume) suggest that faculty may constrain options for Black women to pursue their desired dissertation pathways. The authors note that Black women students may “uphold tradition out of fear about how faculty would respond to their pursuit of possibilities” (p. 88). They then point out that:

Without the graduate program leaders and faculty advisors disrupting tradition or redefining their positions as mentors, graduate students will continue facing obstacles to pursuing alternative courses of action in developing their dissertations. (p. 91)

Faculty dissertation advisors should be ever-mindful of the ways in which long-established expectations in the academy can stifle minoritized students (Foster et al., this volume). The possibilities for EdD students to approach dissertations differently often starts with advisors themselves being willing to reconsider which doors they’re closing and which doors they could open.

## CONCLUSION

For those of us who read dissertations for a living, well, let us admit it: the genre can become tedious and predictable. When you have read 100+ dissertations over the years, there’s no suspense anymore about what happens in chapter 5.

One of the reasons we have assembled this special issue is to expand our own sense of possibility for dissertation work and seek new sources of energy (with all the entangled tensions of change) that can animate our work as dissertation advisors and program leaders.

We advocate for “dissertation multiplicity” (Miller & Brown, 2024) while honoring the power, relevance, and adaptability of the Dissertation in Practice in the formation of scholar practitioners. By no means does this special issue contain all possible alternatives or limit new possibilities. There are far more alternative approaches sprouting out there; some of which have names, while others may be unique new creations that challenge our categories.

Overall, our goal with this special issue is to provide a platform for further experimentation and adaptation, informed by the individual and programmatic experiences of emerging differences in dissertation production. From our work on this special issue, coupled with our ongoing dialogue with each other and our colleagues about doing dissertations differently, we have harvested a series of animating (and often dilemma-riddled) questions:

- How can the process of dissertation inquiry enliven doctoral students? What would it look like—for any individual EdD student—to pursue dissertation inquiry that generates multiple forms of energy, from the energy of organizational

change at school to the energy of personal/professional metamorphosis?

- While promoting the DiP as a model for enabling professionally-valued dissertation work, how can we expand notions of what it means to do dissertations rooted in the practices, identities, aspirations, and values of our students?
- How can students meet programmatic expectations for doing dissertation work in ways that enable new kinds of public accessibility and creative expression? How might digital and portfolio approaches provide a generative container for multiple products/formats that enable a dissertation to be many-things-in-one?
- How can faculty unpack their own assumptions about the form/function of the dissertation to better support alternative possibilities? What processes enable faculty to move beyond their own proclivities for holding fast to long-established forms?
- How do EdD programs and faculty advisors hold a flexible, plural, yet coherent sense of what students are accountable for, in the doing of their dissertations?
- How can we remix, resize, and repurpose the traditional components of the dissertation to situate applied inquiry in the service of both professionally impactful and exquisitely personal projects?
- What language should/could we use in framing “alternative” models and approaches to avoid undermining the power of difference?
- At a pragmatic level, what are the trade-offs involved in espousing, encouraging, or even allowing non-traditional models? How flexible and supportive can EdD programs afford to be, while also enabling students to complete their degree in a reasonable timeframe?
- How can alternative approaches be sustained over time, in ways that don’t fossilize a particular innovation? How can programs continually produce new work, while also offering students coherent dissertation preparation and clear pathways to completion?

These are just a few of the questions we find ourselves asking now, after imagining and curating this special issue. There are more and other questions that the articles in this special issue will spark. We are curious what possibilities and cautions emerge for readers of this special issue, and we welcome the opportunity to engage in continued dialogue. With each new problem our students encounter—and each student that encounters methods, theories, and their own histories anew—the EdD dissertation cannot help but continue to co-evolve with our practice.

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