

An Argument for Practice Reviews in the Professional Education Doctorate

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes the *practice review* as a potentially important component of the professional education doctorate (EdD). First, a rationale for the practice review is provided, grounded in the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate's conceptualization of the professional doctorate. Next, examples of practice reviews are presented to demonstrate their potential utility in learning to conduct research centered on problems of practice. Finally, examples from other disciplines highlight areas for future development of the practice review within the professional education doctorate.

KEYWORDS

literature review, wisdom of practice, practitioner literature

THE CARNEGIE PROJECT VISION OF THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION DOCTORATE

In the United States, there are currently two terminal degrees in education: the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and the Doctor of Education (EdD). From the onset of these degrees, there has been ongoing debate about their similarities and differences. A full recounting of these discussions is beyond the scope of this essay, but readers are encouraged to consult Dill and Morrison (1985) and Perry and Imig (2008) for historical context.

This proposal for the practice review is situated within a contemporary effort to redesign the EdD, led by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). CPED is a network of over 130 schools of education committed to the integrity of the professional education doctorate as a unique terminal degree for leaders and scholars in education. In 2007, CPED articulated a vision and mission for the Education Doctorate:

The professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession. (Perry, 2012, p. 43)

Within the CPED (2022) framework, EdD scholarly work is framed around a problem of practice, which is defined as "a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes" (para. 12). Unlike traditional academic dissertations, which are motivated by a gap in research literature or the need for refinement of theory,

scholarly work in the EdD is motivated by a problem of practice and the desire to improve conditions or outcomes in a specific context (Taber, 2013). Our proposal for a practice review stems from the explicit centering of problems of practice within the professional education doctorate.

Engagement with research literature is a hallmark of doctoral training and that respect for research literature is evident in CPED's vision of the EdD. EdD students and their faculty advisors use research literature to frame problems of practice, identify and critically assess proposed interventions, develop robust research plans, and situate their work within the broader education research discourse. A recent study found that one university's EdD dissertations "overwhelmingly offered references to the literature as evidence of the problems of practice (41, which comprised 77% of N=53 dissertations)" (Leach et al., 2021, p. 4). Firestone and colleagues (2019) examined how four EdD programs teach research and evidence use. While faculty introduced a wide range of ways to evaluate research, the team noted, "in a muted way, faculty conveyed a message that some sources of information are more credible than others," (p. 92) with preference given to high-impact journal articles.

Though much has been written about the importance of research literature in the preparation of doctoral students, less attention has been given to conceptualizing the role of practitioner literature in the EdD. Leach et al. (2021) reported that just over half of the EdD dissertations they reviewed "offered practitioner expertise or anecdotal accounts" (p. 4) to support or motivate the problem of practice, but did not specifically name practitioner literature as a



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potential influence. In Firestone et al.'s (2019) study, one student referenced practitioner magazines, but practitioner literature was otherwise not discussed. EdD recipients must be well-versed in research literature and able to apply it to practice. However, wisdom of practice is more than knowing how to apply research to practice; it also encompasses an appreciation for the state of practice and knowledge that may not be documented in research literature.

In 2006, Lee Shulman and colleagues envisioned a new professional education doctorate that would prepare graduates to be "stewards of the discipline" (p. 27). Stewards not only possess specialized skills and knowledge but also care for and improve their discipline for future generations. To realize this vision, Shulman et al. (2006) recommend that professional doctorate program developers begin with studying and reflecting on the best examples of accomplished practice, which they refer to as *wisdom of practice*:

This "wisdom of practice" strategy begins with studying and thinking about the most able exemplars of accomplished practice that can be identified. We can then ask what they do, and do well, that leads us to consider them exemplary, and what tasks or settings enable such accomplishments to be demonstrated. How would one know if practitioners have reached that level of accomplishment, short of shadowing them for a year? What kinds of exercises, simulations, investigations, writings, and approaches to the systematic observation and documentation of practice is needed to make a grounded judgment of practitioners' competence? (p. 29).

Practitioner knowledge, or wisdom of practice, is central to the design of EdD programs. Notably, Shulman et al.'s (2006) recommendation encourages EdD program developers to seek out exemplars of practice wherever they "can be identified" (p. 29). There is no restriction that these exemplars must be derived from research literature – wisdom of practice exists in a variety of forms (Feldman, 1997).

If we acknowledge the value of the wisdom of practice in designing the professional education doctorate, shouldn't we also ensure that our graduates are prepared to engage with it? Yet, ironically, many discussions of the professional education doctorate continue to emphasize students' knowledge and application of research literature as the starting point for identifying problems of practice.

For some practice-focused dissertation studies, research literature may indeed be the best documentation of wisdom of practice. This may be the case, for example, if the research community and practitioners are collaborating on longstanding problems of practice and sharing their results in research venues. However, there are also pressing and persistent problems that are of interest to doctoral students, and the wisdom of practice pertaining to those problems is not well documented in the research literature.

We propose that an approach more consistent with contemporary visions of the professional education doctorate would require EdD students to determine where wisdom of practice is best documented, develop an ethically sound plan for accessing that documentation, and inform their proposed study based on what they learn. We refer to this process as a *practice review*, inspired by state-of-practice reviews in fields like engineering, social science, and medicine.

ILLUSTRATING THE NEED FOR PRACTICE REVIEWS

To illustrate the need for practice reviews, we present a few examples drawn from our research.

Exclusion in Science Museums: Xinxin Wang is tackling the persistent issue of exclusion in science museums and centers in the United States, particularly as it relates to multilingual adult learners. Peer-reviewed research literature reveals many important aspects of the problem of practice, for example, theorizing motivational factors that influence if and how visitors engage with museums (Falk et al., 2007; Rowe and Nickels, 2011). However, the research literature does not provide very much information on the current state of practice as it pertains to museum programming for multilingual adult learners.

Because of this gap, Xinxin chose to conduct a practice review to systematically examine practitioner-generated materials and programs that inform real-world change but are not yet captured in scholarly literature. She analyzed multilingual exhibit descriptions, community outreach initiatives, and signage templates. These sources helped her understand what museums are doing to engage multilingual adults and where current efforts fall short. The practice review approach is essential to Xinxin's dissertation because it brings visibility to a population and a body of knowledge that traditional academic research has largely ignored. It allows her to learn from practice, drawing insights from museums that are already experimenting with translation, simplified English, QR codes, and culturally contextualized programming. These practice-based findings shape the foundation of the dissertation's research questions, which focus on multilingual visitors' expectations, engagement, and feedback on museum accessibility.

Xinxin's review exemplifies why EdD researchers may need to look beyond peer-reviewed literature to understand and improve professional practice. Informal science educators do participate in research, but many of the advances that they have made, which Xinxin would want to account for in the study design, are not represented in peer-reviewed journals. Thus, one important reason for requiring a practice review for a professional doctorate is if the wisdom of practice is not well-documented in research literature. We must ask ourselves where, and how, is that practice documented? Museums document their programming efforts through their websites, program materials, program evaluations, magazines and newsletters, social media, practitioner-oriented conferences, and strategic reports. By centering practitioner knowledge and surfacing emerging efforts to support multilingual adult learners, Xinxin's study models the value of the practice review as a method for bridging educational theory, research, and real-world innovation.

Place-Based Education: Tasha Williams, a literacy specialist in an urban public charter school, became interested in understanding the role of curriculum developers in addressing the persistent issue of equitable access to place-based science education. The body of peer-reviewed research defines place-based education, describes its underlying philosophy and goals, and assesses its impact on learners (c.f., Yemini et al., 2025). However, there is little discussion in this research literature about how curriculum developers make decisions when designing place-based materials, such as who they have in mind when they design materials and what places they are designing for. Some relevant knowledge can be found in practitioner-oriented outlets, such as the *Bank Street College Occasional Paper Series*, which includes



personalized accounts of curriculum development processes that explain who the developers were, and their relationship with the students and place they were designing for. Because this information was not, at the time of the study, readily available in peer-reviewed literature, it was gleaned from other outlets.

Based on the examples above, we identify three scenarios where a practice review is warranted in the professional education doctorate:

1. Wisdom of practice is absent from research literature.
2. Wisdom of practice is well-documented in practitioner outlets, in lieu of or in addition to research literature.
3. Wisdom of practice documented in the literature is not representative of all practitioners or practices.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE PRACTICE REVIEW FOR THE EDUCATION DOCTORATE

While research literature will continue to play an essential role in the EdD, there is a growing need to introduce doctoral students to additional sources of information that document the state of practice relevant to their research. Practitioner literature takes various forms (e.g., periodicals, books, blogs, social media) and provides an important venue for practitioners to network, share knowledge, and advocate. As the previous examples demonstrate, practice reviews can be especially helpful when practitioner literature – not research literature – leads the conceptualization of practices within that domain.

To conceptualize the practice review in the EdD, it may be useful to look at analogs in other fields. Ruffini (2020) provides the example of science diplomacy, whose practitioners are referred to as science diplomats. Within the United States, science diplomacy emerged as scientists took on advising roles to shape policy related to the domestic science enterprise, foreign affairs, and international relations. In motivating a review of practitioner literature, Ruffini (2020) argues that these diplomats – not researchers – shaped the discourse and conceptualization of science diplomacy through their policy papers, speeches, and other writings geared primarily toward a practitioner audience. Ruffini (2020) demonstrates that a practice review is an acknowledgement that wisdom of practice cannot be reduced to the application of findings from academic journals.

The professional education doctorate includes many subspecialties (e.g., leadership and administration, curriculum and instruction, special education), each of which has specialized venues where the latest advancements in practice are disseminated among and by practicing professionals. An EdD program preparing stewards of the profession would ensure that doctoral candidates are aware of and seek out information from these venues. Continuing with examples from science education, Brown and Joyce (2024) conducted a review of practitioner literature to understand how multicultural education is represented in material for middle and high school teachers. At the outset of the review, they describe the scope of *National Science Teachers Association* (NSTA) journals, the size of NSTA membership, and usage patterns for the NSTA online learning platform. In conducting their own practice reviews, education doctoral candidates would likewise investigate the audience, authorship, reach, and scope of the leading venues in their areas of interest, important knowledge for serving as stewards of the profession.

Like research articles, practitioner literature also has limitations. Ruffini (2020) finds that even within science diplomacy practitioner literature, there are glaring omissions that could result from author affiliations and cultural bias. In their review of articles about laboratory practices in the *American Biology Teacher*, Puttick et al. (2015) report that only a third of the articles included in their review were written by K-12 science teachers, and none of the articles focused on elementary science instruction. The process of conducting a practice review provides doctoral students with an opportunity to critically assess the strengths and limitations of these venues as sources of knowledge about the nuanced and often multifaceted state of practice within the area of their scholarly work. Practice reviews also make evident an important distinction in Shulman's (2007) conception of wisdom of practice:

There is an important distinction to be made between *existing practice*, that is, what practitioners already do, and *wisdom of practice*, which refers to the full range of practical arguments engaged by practitioners as they reason about and ultimately make judgments and decisions about situations they confront and actions they must take (p. 560).

In conducting a practice review, doctoral candidates move beyond their own local contexts and existing practice, to encounter practitioner knowledge and reasoning at other sites and organizations.

CONCLUSION

The Carnegie Project framework envisions EdD holders who develop identities as scholar-practitioners and stewards of practice, through a doctoral journey that supports both individual growth and organizational change (Kumar & Dawson, 2013). Becoming an “exceptionally well-prepared steward of practice” requires knowledge of wisdom of practice (Perry & Imig, 2007, p.45). Wisdom of practice can include application of findings of research literature to address problems of practice, but it is more than that. Wisdom of practice includes knowledge documented in practitioner journals and other venues where practitioners share how they “reason about and ultimately make judgments and decisions about situations they confront and actions they must take” (Shulman, 2007, p. 560). Given the range of venues where wisdom of practice is documented, we propose the practice review as a signature pedagogy to prepare EdD students to be stewards of this knowledge.

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