

Advancing A Community of Practice Reflections from the Field One Year Later

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ABSTRACT

A year after embarking on program redesign to align with CPED principles and practices, faculty from a small doctoral program at a private university assessed their work. Specific initiatives such as embedding social justice principles into program components and revising admissions strategies were largely successful. Conversely, attempts to re-conceptualize the Dissertation in Practice met with resistance from numerous stakeholders. The challenges and opportunities of substantively changing a long-standing program have affected the way this faculty work together and envision the future of their program. New approaches to collaboration, innovation, and conflict resolution, viewed from an organizational change perspective, and rooted in the program culture, resulted from their collective efforts to strengthen the education doctorate.

Keywords: education doctorate, CPED alignment, program redesign, organizational change

INTRODUCTION

As part of the process to strengthen our Education Doctorate (EdD) program and align it with CPED's principles, we embarked on a long-range planning process to guide program redesign efforts for the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at Johnson & Wales University (JWU) (Billups, Borstel, & DiPaola, 2016). After identifying specific areas for improvement, we developed a series of action steps to guide this work. Our collective vision for our program, a program that is now in its 22nd year, was to reflect CPED principles and practices by transforming our curriculum, advising systems, research, and dissertation projects in order to strengthen and enhance our Education Doctorate (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2017). But something unintended happened along the way to transformation, and we have learned some valuable lessons as a result of our efforts.

Create or Renovate?

David Allen Coe is quoted as saying, "It is not the beauty of a building you should look at; it's the construction of the foundation that will stand the test of time" (as cited in Yellen, 2014, p. 75). More recently, and perhaps more glibly, Lily Tomlin added to that sentiment by noting that "the road to success is always under

construction" (BrainyQuote, n.d., para. 1). Our past year reflected both statements in full measure, as we realized that renovating an existing program was significantly different from building a new program. We envy our CPED colleagues who may be designing their EdD programs without the same types of cultural impediments that might inhabit an established program; every lofty goal we identified met with an obstacle, some of our own making, and some originating from external stakeholders. Using the construction metaphor, we found that renovation was less challenging with nothing in the walls when you broke through. If no structural elements, no pipes, no electrical wires, and no plumbing interfered with tearing down the existing wall, the process was more straightforward. If, on the other hand, the wall was weight-bearing or contained essential elements, the work became more complicated or even impossible. We found that in spite of our best intentions, it was challenging to redesign a program in the midst of a strongly embedded culture and history. There were some program components that the internal, and even the external, community were attached to in ways that made it difficult to achieve change. The small, cohesive, and familial community spirit of the program was grounded in a long tradition of collaborative decision-making and goal setting; program redesign could not be accomplished by the faculty alone. The entire community of alumni, students, staff, and partners, in conjunction with the faculty, felt that they owned important program decisions. As Lewin notes (1951), processual change results in the tension between emergent change and planned change. This was evident in



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the intersection of our efforts to continuously improve our program at the local level (schedule adjustments, class assignments, rubric refinements) and the major pedagogical and programmatic changes that are required to remain viable (program redesign, alignment with CPED principles). The threat of deep change generates conflict and challenges cultural assumptions; we found that we were not immune from these effects (Lewin, 1951; Schein, 1992).

Successes and Challenges

Our redesign efforts met with seamless success as well as with significant resistance. The two major goals we identified in our 2016 plan (Billups, Borstel, & DiPaola, 2016) focused first, on embedding social justice principles into the program and, second, on redesigning the dissertation project. In terms of social justice philosophy and practices, we sought to intentionally define and embed concepts into our curriculum, community dialogue, dissertation research problems of practice, and our program stance. Conversely, the Dissertation in Practice (DiP) work involved a re-conceptualization and a new approach to envisioning and actualizing the dissertation project for our students. Our social justice goals were addressed without much resistance, as if we were starting with a blank wall; alternately, the DiP goal met with considerable resistance, to the point that we have halted work for the present. That particular wall was filled with wires, plumbing, pipes, structural beams, and numerous unexpected obstacles.

Successful implementation of social justice practices

Strom and Porfilio (2017) posit that EdD programs should be able to clearly articulate their understanding of social justice through program operationalization. As a community, we spent two years working with faculty, alumni, and students to define and articulate our understanding of how issues of social justice could be operationalized in our program. Our goal was to generate conversation around the issues of social justice from theory to practice and to view these issues through both an individual and structural orientation (Chubbuck, 2010). We envisioned a community-based approach to beginning the social justice discussion in our program, and a community-read project kicked off this work in 2016-2017. The *One Book, One Read* program we developed is now in its second year, and brings together all first-year doctoral students, program leadership, and faculty for an intentional program of reading, debate, and reflection around issues of equity, inclusion, marginalization, and opportunity. The book selected, *A Hope in the Unseen* (Suskind, 1998), was chosen by a committee of students and faculty, as it was felt that the content of the book best highlighted issues of social justice that were very evident, and in some cases very subtle, in the K-16 educational community. It is our hope that this more intentional social justice focus will lead to stronger identification of problems of practice for dissertation focus.

Our EdD program previously skirted the concept of social justice, without strategic inclusion in our program components. Because there was no precedent, there was little resistance to any new or creative approaches to our synergistic efforts. Additionally, our students are now increasingly choosing dissertation topics that reflect these advocacy stances, and we are now adding a social justice learning outcome to our program outcomes. Our aspirations for furthering these efforts, for creating a climate where students and

faculty are more openly conscious, and talking about issues of equity and inclusion, are proceeding quickly. We feel that the progress we have made in developing our social justice focus is rewarding and encouraging; however, we are depending on that positive impact to balance out our less successful effort to renovate the DiP.

The challenge of redesigning the Dissertation in Practice

Our hopes for introducing new approaches to the dissertation project seemed benign enough when we first discussed the concept. Much work has already been accomplished by CPED institutions with regard to new dissertation formats and designs, so we understandably anticipated similar success. We talked with CPED colleagues, learned from what others had tried, and devised options for our own program that students would find compelling. This naivety was short-lived; while a few students responded positively to the idea of exploring a different approach to the dissertation, the rejection of any “tampering” with the traditional dissertation was overwhelming.

Akin to an underground resistance movement, internal and external groups responded quickly and forcefully to proposed DIP changes. Current students, some faculty, and our academic leadership, along with external groups such as our alumni, fellow practitioners, and professional associations who knew of our program, voiced their concern. The battle was real. Complaints about how we were diluting the dissertation, a “watering down” of the research process, an “easy way out” for new students, and a host of other complaints were hurled at us in rapid succession. We quickly learned that the traditional dissertation format represented our structural, weight-bearing wall; everyone had their own personal nail in those beams, and any change we wanted to make – regardless of our reasons – met with resounding rejection.

The cultural underpinnings, those values and beliefs that lay deep under the surface, unseen and subconscious, surfaced in the form of rebellion. As a program focused on developing close working relationships between students and faculty, these relationships were never more evident than in the dissertation phase. To alter the structure of the dissertation suggested an alteration to the very foundation of a special program feature. Our stakeholder groups worried that the core experience - the working partnership between advisor and advisee – would be disturbed with any shift in the substance and format and approach to the dissertation. While these fears may have been unfounded, they reflect what Schein (1992) notes as the result of cultural values clashing with cultural artifacts; what appeared to faculty as a positive change was viewed as a negative change which affected the espoused values of the program. As a small program in a region where competition is fierce, we were ever mindful of positioning ourselves as viable and rigorous, and able to offer special benefits that other programs might not offer. Our proposed changes to the DIP caused an observable artifact (the dissertation) to be interpreted as the symbol for something greater (the cornerstone value of the program). Although we used the same transparent, collaborative process with the DiP exploration as we did with the social justice program strategies, stakeholders believed that we were disregarding our cultural roots and beliefs. To suggest change in the DIP format affected stakeholders as a rejection of our traditions, our respect for rigor, quality, and working partnerships as central tenets of the program, just as suggesting the introduction of

social justice programming appeared to reflect the best of our cultural roots. There was no way we could have anticipated such a reaction to changing the DiP; in this sense, an existing structure hosts many elements that seem benign until they are disturbed. The DiP was one such element. We are now reconsidering how we want to revise our future goals for the DiP, since we still believe there is value in redesigning it to meet 21st century teaching, learning, and research practices. It will, nonetheless, be a longer journey than we originally expected.

Success by degrees

Have we realized more success than resistance in the past year? In several areas, we have been able to effect positive change for our program. After the shaky experience with the DiP, we approached our other program goals more cautiously. A comprehensive review of our curriculum, complete with a crosswalk exercise, and a review of assignments, grading, delivery of content including the implementation of a hybrid format, and evaluation processes, has proven to be successful on many levels. At the very least, the work prompted more frequent and candid discourse among faculty about how our courses effectively cover and uncover the appropriate content for our students and how this content continues to be relevant and rigorous. Our self-assessment of aligning with CPED design principles formed the basis for our self-study in anticipation of our program review last spring; it will likewise form the basis for our self-study report for our upcoming institution-wide New England Association of Schools and Colleges visit next fall.

Additionally, our attempts to examine our admissions practices have been relatively successful, largely due to a mix of how we approached the redesign, as well as how we instituted the changes. We closely examined admissions criteria, gave more weight to faculty voice, revised procedures and forms, including the redesign of an admissions rubric to better assess disposition, and applied guidelines for greater diversity in the applicant pool. We implemented changes to the follow-up process for applicants, and extended our reach to combine program information with targeted recruiting. In this instance, the foundational footprint of the admissions program remained stable, but we were able to rearrange some of the rooms to meet program needs. Overall, we hope these changes will attract more qualified, more diverse, and more experienced practitioners to our program.

LESSONS LEARNED

So, what have we learned and what can we share with you? Regardless of whether you are “renovating” an existing EdD program, or designing a new program, our collective vision remains rooted in establishing a doctorate that will “educate and prepare those to whom we can entrust the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field” (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006, p. 27). Ongoing conversations with CPED colleagues will support any work you undertake at your respective institutions. This consortium of committed educators and innovators is essential to your redesign process. While our colleagues who are currently designing new programs may have fewer impediments than those of us revamping existing programs, we should use the work we have already accomplished to enhance our “renovations.” The foundation is the same for all CPED schools: Redesign impacts schools, programs, individuals, and implications/practices for the future (Carnegie

Project on the Education Doctorate, 2017). The goals are universal, regardless of where you are in the construction or renovation journey.

One unexpected by-product of this work was our deeper understanding of the role conflict plays in adaptation and change. We found that productive conflict was the key to our most creative problem-solving efforts. Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) captured the tone of generative conflict when they noted that instead of resolving conflict, organizations tend to break the problems into smaller pieces to avoid the pain of making major changes. This conflict avoidance denies a group of decision-makers the chance to take creative risks or try new approaches. Mary Parker Follett (1924) was ahead of her time with her perspective that while conflict was inevitable, the only way to leave the past behind was to embrace conflict as the key to innovation. Her interactionist stance is where we found our best results; in allowing ourselves to engage in healthy conflict, to disagree and to see alternative possibilities, we made real progress. This progress did not always occur smoothly or painlessly, but it was a valuable lesson learned.

For instance, our initial discussions about how or whether to change the DiP led to considerable disagreements among faculty. As we continued to debate the pros and cons, we became more divisive. Increasingly, however, we realized that we could continue to argue the same points and remain polarized or we could adopt a different approach. We recognized that instead of an all-or-nothing approach to changing the DiP, we could explore a pilot program with several options for students and faculty to consider. In this exploration, each faculty member found a way to accept proposed changes and feel validated in their own perspectives. Our conflict ultimately produced two potential DiP options: the first was for students to consider a collaborative dissertation bridging K-12 and higher education research topics, while the other option offered students the opportunity to engage in the traditional dissertation process, which included the individual five-chapter dissertation format. In the end, the DiP options met with too much resistance from too many stakeholders, to move forward; however, the ability to push through the initial conflict was a valuable and surprising benefit. The experience would help us approach other changes with less trepidation.

Thus, we would like to offer the following insights into the redesign process, now that we are one year into this work:

- Individual beliefs, philosophies, and backgrounds provide multiple perspectives that can interfere with forward-progress; an effective starting point in any redesign process is to find a common voice, a shared language, an agreed-upon set of norms and goals to advance the work. Looking back at what “was versus what is” is only going to destabilize your work. Acknowledge this challenge openly and you will find that the conversations are easier.
- When considering changes to an existing program, outside viewpoints challenge the way you see things; in other words, we get attached to what makes us comfortable, but if we can listen to someone who does not own the history of the program or the way things are done, new opportunities can be more easily envisioned. This does not require a consultant or some other costly intervention, but merely a respected colleague or professional who can provide a new way of seeing things. Lewin (1951) posits that



individuals resist change for many reasons, but including external change agents in negotiations can provide leverage to own the new ideas, new concepts, new ways of thinking.

- Use conflict productively, rather than as a negative influence. There will inevitably be conflict among any group of colleagues who are passionate about their work and their product. As noted above, conflict, when used wisely, can produce positive resolutions to challenges that accommodation or resignation might have missed.
- We tend to have single-focused views of how to solve problems, but one thing we have learned through our own process is that there is truly no single answer. Problems can have multiple solutions, programs can have multiple delivery strategies and courses can have multiple interpretations. Just as in-house construction, rooms can be designed to have multiple functions. We had to step back and see how we might re-use, re-consider, and re-conceptualize the way we had typically accomplished our work. We could have abandoned our initial attempts to revise admissions procedures, revise curriculum, or develop new DIP approaches but stepping back and reimagining alternatives allowed us to push ahead, either with significant success or with the realization that we needed to put a plan 'on hold' for a while.
- For our colleagues who are currently building new education doctorate programs, we encourage you to build a program designed for elasticity, with room for possibilities, and to accommodate a vision that anticipates what you think your students will need to know and do in the future. The YouTube video series, *Did You Know?* emphasizes how we are preparing our students for jobs that do not yet exist (Did You Know, n.d.). We should all consciously plan our doctoral programs the same way.
- Finally, do not accept initial defeat as the final word on addressing a problem or achieving a goal; instead, practice the art of retreat and reflection. Do we still believe it is possible for us to create a new approach to the DIP in our program? Yes! Do we believe it can happen soon? ...Probably not. But we will work together to realize an eventual workable solution.

In the end, renovated or newly constructed, we all share the goal: to offer exemplary, relevant, rigorous EdD programs to a new generation of scholar-practitioners. Our pathways might be different, and we might even feel that the renovation pathway is more arduous, but we are heading towards the same endpoint. Whatever we attempt, we must believe in the intention and the goal as worthy and that we are meeting an important need in the educational landscape. As Winston Churchill (1944) noted during the rebuilding of the House of Commons, "We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us."

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