

Christopher Benedetti and Amanda Covarrubias: Teaching Critical Inquiry and Applied Research: Moving Beyond Traditional Methods

Book Review

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Christopher Benedetti and Amanda Covarrubias: Teaching Critical Inquiry and Applied Research: Moving Beyond Traditional Methods. Myers Education Press. 2023. Paperback: ISBN 978-1-9755-0533-2

ABSTRACT

This review examines *Teaching Critical Inquiry and Applied Research: Moving Beyond Traditional Methods*, an edited volume by Christopher Benedetti and Amanda Covarrubias that confronts the education doctorate's longstanding struggle to establish an identity distinct from the PhD. Organized around the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), the collection's thirteen chapters present signature pedagogies that prepare scholar-practitioners for systematic, equity-focused inquiry grounded in local practice. The review highlights the volume's strengths, including its humanizing treatment of statistics anxiety and imposter syndrome, its consistent use of student reflections, and its alignment with the Responsible Conduct of Research. It also identifies limitations, notably the limited attention to the resource demands of these labor-intensive models and the risk that microcontextual inquiry may fragment the field's cumulative knowledge. The book is recommended for EdD faculty, administrators, dissertation advisors, and doctoral students seeking a degree that is genuinely distinct from, rather than secondary to, the PhD.

KEYWORDS

education doctorate (EdD), scholar-practitioner, Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), signature pedagogies, applied research, doctoral education

The education doctorate (EdD) does not easily coexist with other professional or terminal degrees in professional higher education. Levine (2005) and Shulman et al. (2006), for example, have previously critiqued the EdD degree by contending that it frequently lacks a distinctive identity and remains disconnected from the urgent, practical needs of the field. This historical tension serves as the primary impetus for *Teaching Critical Inquiry and Applied Research: Moving Beyond Traditional Methods*. The edited volume by Christopher Benedetti and Amanda Covarrubias arrives at a moment of possibility and peril. America's education system currently faces a convergence of new challenges, ranging from pandemic-induced learning loss and social-emotional trauma to deepening political polarization, funding-contingent pressure for federal monies, and an awareness that the omnipresence of artificial generative intelligence (AGI) demands confrontation or cooption. Against this backdrop, the book presents to readers a variety of arguments that compel a belief that the need for school leaders who can engage in systematic, equity-focused inquiry while remaining grounded in practice has never been more vital.

Dr. Christopher Benedetti, an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi,

brings a uniquely qualified perspective to this editorial project. With over two decades of experience spanning the roles of middle school teacher, coach, and elementary principal, Benedetti's work is deeply informed by the realities of K–12 learning and leadership. Covarrubias brings her own unique vantage as an elementary educator and doctoral student in Educational leadership (at the time of editing). They bring to us a collection of contributors who are predominantly practitioner-oriented faculty and program coordinators from a diverse set of institutional contexts. Both the editors' backgrounds and the diversity of contexts represented by contributors helps the volume avoid the pitfalls of ivory-tower abstraction or the perpetuation of the theory-practice divide that plagues educational research. Benedetti and Covarrubias instead offer an in-house guide that hopes to prepare "scholar-practitioners [that] bring change to their respective schools, organizations, and communities" (Benedetti & Covarrubias, 2024, p. xvii) rather than a distant map of foreign terrain.

The book is thoughtfully organized into thirteen chapters, each representing a distinct pedagogical approach to fomenting an applicable learning experience to future practitioners of educational



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leadership and doctoral programs. A defining and highly effective feature of the volume's organization is the inclusion of student reflections on experiences in every chapter. These reflections bridge the gap between the theoretical frameworks deployed and the lived experiences of doctoral students, many of whom are first-generation scholars or mid-career professionals returning to academia after significant hiatuses. The scope of the book is also ambitious, moving from broad methodological shifts to specific pedagogical innovations and structural programmatic changes, all framed by the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED).

The core of the volume focuses on redefining research methodologies to suit the professional practice doctorate. Rather than prescribing a single correct way to conduct research, the authors present a toolbox of strategies that prioritize local, practical solutions over generalizable truths. For example, Buss (2024) details Arizona State University's use of action research (AR) to foster critical inquiry in the first chapter, helping students ease into systematic scholarly inquiry through iterative steps that move EdD students from reconnaissance to mini-interventions before tackling a full Dissertation in Practice (DiP). This emphasis on applicable or resonating results in specific, immediate contexts is further echoed in chapters focusing on Improvement Science. Fordham University and Radford University (Chapters 7 and 8) illustrate how Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles can be used to navigate the "messy" realities of school leadership. These chapters argue that an appropriate EdD learning experience for active practitioners supports students for robust local decision-making needs.

Orr (2024), for example, asserts that it is not only the methodological tools taught by EdD programs that practitioners need but also an experience of how to engage reflectively on how their thinking evolves following engagement with such tools (p. 105). Orr (2024) also cites an adopted facility for conducting "empathy interviews" (p. 112) while Capello et al. (2024) insist that a program oriented toward developing active scholar-practitioners are best organized to include pragmatic scholarly habits that include research synthesis and academic writing (p. 126). In both cases, the practices used by EdD students promise that bridge back to theory so sorely needed: by inculcating scholarly habits in active practitioners to take with them upon their degree completion, we increase the likelihood that such practitioners can articulate the needs and problems that theory must confront.

Beyond methodology, the volume makes a significant contribution to the pedagogy of doctoral education. One of the most pervasive barriers to student success in EdD programs is "statistics anxiety," a theme explored by Corina R. Kaul of Baylor University's statistics course redesign. Kaul (2024) argues that forcing practitioners to master complex manual calculations often creates a barrier to degree completion without providing useful leadership tools. Instead, the Baylor model prioritizes quantitative literacy and relevancy, using personalized datasets related to students' specific problems of practice (p. 147). As one student vignette poignantly illustrates, this shift allows students who were previously discomfited when working with numbers (Kaul, 2024, p. 144) to see data as a vital leadership tool for stakeholder communication and systemic change.

This humanizing approach to scholarship is a dominant theme throughout the collection. Chapter 2 addresses imposter syndrome by advocating for the scaffolding of the research process into low-stakes, manageable assignments (Shelton et al., 2024). Similarly, Chapter 3 utilizes Garrison's Practical Inquiry Model (Ludwig, 2024)

to demystify research design, anchoring itself in habits of reflection, critique, and practice. Bazner and Ponton (2024) provocatively accept in Chapter 4 that because "subject mastery is necessary but is not in itself sufficient to the formation of scholars," (p. 50) that it is just as important that EdD programs must attend to the identity transformation of the student to that of a scholar. This is perhaps most powerfully articulated by Foster et al. in Chapter 5, who critique the "traditional gaze" (2024, p. 67) of hegemonic research approaches and cisgendered heteronormativity characteristic of scholarly communities. The authors advocate for Black Feminist Theory and culturally grounded methodologies that honor lived experiences of scholars of color and disrupt colonial research orders to ensure that equitable care is afforded to minority scholars underrepresented in academia generally and so desperately needed in K-12 learning contexts. By centering these perspectives, the volume demonstrates how doctoral programs can move beyond traditional academic norms to promote truly transformative research in historically misrepresented communities.

The soundness of the arguments, insights, and reflections offered by the volume is bolstered by its alignment with established frameworks like the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) discussed in Chapter 13 by Thompson and Nkansah (2024). There they successfully argue that CPED principles for equity, justice, and mutual respect fundamentally align with federal standards for responsible conduct of research, ensuring that an emphasis on local, practical research as championed by CPED does not come at the expense of scholarly integrity or rigor. Furthermore, the volume provides innovative models for programmatic structure, such as the research team approach at Boston College centered in Chapter 6 (Cho et al., 2024), where students partner with local districts to address social justice barriers collaboratively. Chapter 10 (Kumar et al., 2024) extends this discussion to the online environment, highlighting how the University of Florida fosters a "community of inquiry" (p. 158) across geographic distances.

To that end, the volume would benefit from a postscript acknowledging and addressing the more recent attacks on the same equity principles and how the future of research into and advocacy for the development of the EdD ought to be adjusted further. Benedetti and Covarrubias' volume stands out comparatively because it focuses less on the technical mechanics of research and more on the teaching and mentoring of teachers in practitioner-oriented programs. Benedetti and Covarrubias contribute to CPED's necessary mission by giving voice to what CPED calls "signature pedagogies". Benedetti thus moves the field forward by documenting how specific institutional changes can empower students to transition from their practitioner identities of traditional into agentic change-oriented scholars embedded in the schools and systems that research often talks past. As Chapter 11 notes, the scholar-practitioner should be viewed as a heuristic (Taberski, 2024, p. 175), recognizing that the most impactful learning experiences are iterative, reflective, and treat the researcher's own professional context is a valid subject of scholarly study.

Despite these substantial strengths, the volume is not without its limitations. While the intensive, personalized approaches to faculty support and dissertation scaffolding are inspiring, the book offers little discussion on the resource requirements necessary to implement them. The models, reflections, and recommendations offered in the volume are incredibly labor-intensive for their leaders and students alike, and readers may wonder how programs can sustain such high levels of engagement without faculty or practitioner



burnout. Additionally, the emphasis on microcontextual relevance raises questions about the cumulative knowledge of the field. If every DiP is centered on a specific, local problem, there is a risk of creating islands of knowledge, thereby exacerbating the theory-practice divide that CPED seeks to bridge or eliminate. A more explicit discussion of how these localized findings might accumulate to inform a research base capable of advancing broader policies for institutional adaptation would have enhanced the book's utility for practitioners seeking to contribute to that base with their experiences. Similarly, a more explicit discussion of how these experiences deliver to theory a coherent set of real-world "messes" that theory must confront with insights and testable solutions might help the theory side of the bridge fulfill its portion of the theory-practice contract. Finally, while the authors acknowledge the "messiness" of students changing professional roles mid-program, more concrete strategies for navigating these common disruptions would have been a valuable addition.

Ultimately, *Teaching Critical Inquiry and Applied Research* is a highly recommended resource for EdD program faculty, administrators, and dissertation advisors. It is an equally valuable tool for doctoral students who may feel alienated by traditional research paradigms that seem detached from their professional lives. The book succeeds because it treats the EdD not as a secondary version of the PhD, but as a distinct and powerful degree in its own right. It reminds us that educational leaders do not need to study the history of architecture in faraway places when their own roofs are leaking; they need the skills to diagnose the problem, design a solution, and implement improvements using the resources at hand. For any institution committed to reimagining doctoral education as a tool for social justice and organizational improvement, this collection provides both the inspiration and the practical blueprints required for the journey ahead.

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