

Making the Doctoral Dissertation Relevant

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### Abstract

With increasing tuition costs, greater job demands, and a need for credentials, students are searching for higher education degree programs that bridge personal interest, professional work, and practical relevancy (Orr & Ophanos, 2011). Specifically, educational leadership doctoral candidates often possess a desire to build connections between authentic contexts and experiences while enrolled in scholarly doctoral coursework (Archbald, 2008, 2010). Additionally, Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2010) noted that the global perspective has become even more important since international issues now impact higher education, often the responsible authority for training educational leaders. In fact, Nerad (2012) recently pointed out that a doctoral education should include a global experience because next generation leaders are expected to possess cultural competency and know how to work with global teams. Because of the emerging higher education needs and individual doctoral candidate interests, engaging students in alternative dissertation research studies intentionally designed to connect real-life, organizational, and global issues with intellectual work has the potential to meet the needs of today's educational leaders while offering opportunities to transform educational institutions and improve the greater community.

*Keywords:* doctoral dissertations, relevant learning, authentic problem solving

### Making the Doctoral Dissertation Relevant

With increasing tuition costs, greater job demands, and a need for credentials, students are searching for higher education degree programs that bridge personal interest, professional work, and practical relevancy (Orr & Ophanos, 2011). Specifically, educational leadership doctoral candidates have expressed a desire to build connections between authentic contexts and experiences while enrolled in scholarly doctoral coursework (Archbald, 2008, 2010). At the same time, scholars have suggested that modifications are needed to the typical education doctorate program (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010; Archbald, 2008, 2010; Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006) because of changing student demographics, technology advancement, and increasing financial worries (McCarty & Ortloff, 2005). Furthermore, we need to ask if we are preparing our students with the traditional dissertation for the twenty-first century (Jacobs, 2009)?

A recent recommended change in doctoral programs is for doctoral students to have an increased global perspective, which has become even more important since international issues now impact higher education, who is generally the responsible authority for training educational leaders (Altbach et al., 2010). In fact, Nerad (2012) recently pointed out that a doctoral education should include a global experience because next generation leaders are expected to possess cultural competency and know how to work with global teams. Specifically, national governments and organizations have become keenly interested in how doctoral researchers are being prepared for next generations to come (Carboni & Proper, 2009; Lester, 2004; Neumann, 2007; Scott et al., 2004). Because of emerging higher education needs and individual doctoral candidate interests, engaging students in dissertation research studies intentionally designed to connect real-life, organizational, and global issues with intellectual work has the potential to

meet the needs of today's educational leaders while offering opportunities to transform educational institutions and improve the greater community.

### **Background**

Historically, the doctoral degree requiring a traditional five-chapter dissertation originated in Germany and was adopted by the United States in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to offer students guidance in scientific methodology (Berelson, 1906; Noble 1994). Even the first generation doctoral degrees often included intensive course work culminating with a dissertation reflecting the research conducted (Maxwell, 2003). This has typically been the tradition for many years since. However, since the late 1990's, educational researchers have questioned the appropriateness of a traditional dissertation for individuals pursuing a Doctor of Education degree (Ed.D.) (Andrews & Grogan, 2005; Duke & Beck, 1999; Levine, 2005; Smith, 2010, 2015). In fact, Murphy (2007, p. 584) surmised that:

By and large, principals and superintendents (those not in preparation programs at the time) do not read journal articles. Anyone with 15 minutes of spare time and access to a phone can confirm this fact. But rather than grapple with the real world of school leadership and examine the types of reading one finds there and the avenues by which ideas are weighted and assessed, we continue to offer up views of the world that are comfortable to university folks but of remarkably little use to practicing administrators. We privilege our world and marginalize theirs.

Likewise, some doctoral programs have begun to focus on applied knowledge using interdisciplinary approaches, emphasizing connections between practice and theory in various workplace contexts, and fostering reflection about relevant, authentic, problem solving (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001; Lester 2004; Maxwell 2003; Rolfe & Davies 2009; Servage, 2009;

Shulman et al., 2006). In fact, this shift in focus supports Burgess, Sieminski, and Arthur's (2006) observation of an Ed.D. degree being "seen as a pathway to being involved in doing research that has personal professional relevance and is applicable to real-life educational practice" (p. 4).

A good example of shifting the Ed.D. dissertation focus is The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, a group of institutions that joined together in 2007 to reimagine and redefine the education doctorate to offer a culminating experience focused on solving a problem of practice because "learning in situ develops praxis in education" (Storey et al., 2015, para. 38). One of the institutions is University of Florida who published the following regarding their culminating or capstone experience:

Unlike the uni-dimensional focus on research in traditional dissertations, our capstone experience is a multi-dimensional opportunity for students to demonstrate competence in teaching, scholarship, and leadership related to their niche and professional context. The capstone experience entails compilation of comprehensive academic artifacts demonstrating competence in each area. (Dawson, Cavanaugh, Sessums, Black, & Kumar, 2011, para. 36)

Another example is Rutgers University who wrote:

Rather than using a gap in the literature as a rationale for doing a study, our students are finding what is present in the literature as a rationale for making intervention decisions to solve gaps in practice. They are not making up out of the blue or inventing the wheel over and over again in deciding what to do to solve a problem. Rather, they are turning to the literature for research-based solutions and testing them out to see how they work in local contexts with particular conditions on the ground. Sometimes these research-based

approaches are conceptual such as the student who is putting into practice what the research reveals to be professional development best practice. (Belzer & Allen, 2013, p. 205)

While not a Carnegie Project member, Johns Hopkins University approached the Ed.D. dissertation in a similar fashion (Johns Hopkins University, 2015). Students select a Problem of Practice (POP), an area of concern that can be investigated within an organization, and focus on it throughout the program. This current doctoral program has used course assignments as authentic and relevant assessment opportunities since the assignments allow the student to focus on the POP.

While Lamar University is not yet a member of The Carnegie Project, we have recognized that the Ed.D. is a professional practice degree and the doctoral student experience should reflect that. In addition, we are taking it a step further in encouraging students to address a problem or issue with global relevance or connection. Several of the research inquiries are based in international contexts focusing on marginalized populations or real-life education and community needs. Other research problems address critical education issues in domestic settings.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose for this paper is to share relevant examples of authentic problems and projects currently under examination through a non-traditional form of dissertation at Lamar University's Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. Specifically, this paper provides background on the process and current authentic problems and projects examined by a group of technically skilled educators participating in the online doctoral degree cohort.

### **Pilot Project with Specialized Online Cohort**

The Lamar University Center for Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership has begun a

specialized online cohort pilot project for Apple Distinguished Educators. Each participant was a leader in one or more educational technology environments in global and domestic contexts, which helped to provide a better global perspective of education. Because of this global exposure, these students were interested in pursuing a doctoral program that encouraged them to examine educational leadership from that perspective. With this in mind, faculty in the Education Leadership Doctoral program set out to provide a more meaningful dissertation research experience for this specialized cohort.

### **Authentic Problems and Projects**

Early on in civilization, instructors lived and worked in relationship with their students, serving as guides and mentors. For advance learning, students would become apprentices in order to learn by doing. This provided students engagement in authentic tasks with relevant purpose while at the same time, an emphasis on contextual learning, using knowledge in particular contexts, and repetition and assessment leading to praxis (Rankin, 2010).

After the development of the printing press, there was a shift to teachers becoming the primary conduit of information with students as receivers (Eisenstein, 1979). With the printed course materials in hand, the emphasis shifted from didactic conversation to differentiating, classifying, and cataloging facts. Next became a focus on memorization of facts and data with repetition becoming primary, and analysis shifting to secondary, with learning being hierarchal, standardized, and narrowly defined (Rankin, 2010). Today, with the advancement of the Internet, a new shift has occurred that encourages instructors to design more authentic learning and research activities for relevant purposes. Students have immediate access to so much knowledge readily available, that the teacher can no longer be the sole conduit of information. Because of this context, we wanted to make the dissertation process relevant and engaging.

While students may still choose to undertake a traditional research study dissertation, we have offered doctoral candidates opportunities to team with organizations throughout the world in order to affect change and impart relevant impact on education and communities. For example, the Volunteer Service Organization (VSO) serves as a venue for doctoral candidates to connect with individuals, Ministries of Education, and communities to address education and community related challenges such as high student to teacher ratios, access to books, education for girls, vocational education opportunities, dropout prevention, and after school programs. Partnerships with business and industry help to leverage funds and expertise to facilitate resolution of real human needs such as improving literacy and numeracy for all children, assisting migrant workers to become productive citizens, creating opportunities for entrepreneurship, and building teaching and learning centers. With each doctoral research study, our hope is the process and results will significantly contribute to making the world a better place.

### **Focused Degree Plan**

In this specialized cohort, a focus on directing them towards their dissertation topic begins with the first course, Dynamics of Global Leadership. Students are formally exposed to scholarly journal articles while working through leadership theories in education with a global application. The next two courses focus on academic writing, APA writing style and format, and synthesizing the literature using scholarly research studies in peer-reviewed journals. The students develop an annotated bibliography, a concept map and outline, and the beginning of their literature review. Additionally, in these first three classes, applied educational research concepts are embedded throughout. If students are interested in one of the projects needed for one of the partner organizations, they begin making contact and focusing their literature review to inform the



design of the solution or intervention.

The second and third semesters are spent on the basics of qualitative and quantitative methodologies so the students will have enough knowledge to begin developing their problem and purpose statements and explore the research methods that could support and inform their inquiry. Each class is designed so that the final project scaffolds to the next course. Throughout the research methodology courses, students are strongly encouraged to connect and collaborate with field experts to gain a sense of the contextual needs and cultural understandings related to the research site and topic of focus. By the end of the first year, doctoral candidates develop research plans and proposals to address the identified authentic problem.

During the fourth and fifth semesters, students conduct more in-depth examinations of organizational change, leadership, ethics, and policies as applied in the authentic, relevant context of the research problem. Ongoing collaborations with colleagues, field experts, and doctoral instructors through the use of Skype, Adobe Connect, and face-to-face interactions engage candidates in meaningful conversations and reflection as they collect data to inform progress toward meeting the challenges identified as authentic research needs. As an end result, doctoral candidates produce a culminating dissertation product reflecting their authentic research experiences and interventions reported as findings, recommendations, and suggestions for solving the authentic problem of focus.

### **Conclusions**

Recently, regarding the Ed.D degree, Smith (2015) asserted, “The current model is no longer adequate to the state of higher education, the state of our disciplines, and the nature of future jobs in the profession” (Breathing Life into the Dissertation section, para. 3). She further contended that if we keep adhering to the same models and practices, then we will have trained

students in a one-model-fits-all version of doctoral education that is no longer adequate to the times and to our values. We agree with Smith and wanted to embrace the need to refine instructional practices and programs to meet the needs of a global education community. In addition, because we teach in a fully online doctoral program, we wanted to provide personal relevance and authentic learning throughout the process. While we are still in the midst of gathering data, we are finding it to be a very rewarding experience for both the students and the faculty.

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