

From the Field:

The Process in Completing a Nontraditional Group Dissertation in Practice for the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, the Ed.D. Educational Leadership Program at Lynn University

By Jerome Vickers

Abstract

This study focused on how a cohort of scholarly practitioners extended the traditional Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) model at Lynn University by undertaking a nontraditional group Dissertation in Practice (DiP). The participants were a cohort of 11 scholarly practitioners known as Cohort 5 who became the first Lynn University doctoral students to extend the traditional cohort model beyond the relationship building and coursework archetype, and undertake a nontraditional group DiP that involved all group members working collaboratively. In 2007, the Carnegie Foundation decided to re-envision the Ed.D. as a way to help address the needs of 21st century educational settings. The Foundation created the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED) and brought together a number of Research 1 (R1) universities designated from the Carnegie Foundation during Phase I of analysis, with Lynn University included. The purpose of this initiative was to redesign the Ed.D. so that it could be recognized and distinguished as a purposeful degree specifically for scholarly practitioners.

Introduction

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study was to discuss the process involved in getting a cohort of 11 doctoral students in the CPED Ed.D. Educational Leadership program at Lynn University in Boca Raton, FL to complete a nontraditional group DiP. Action research is, "a type of applied research to that focuses on finding a solution to a local problem in a local setting" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 100). Practitioners that engage in action research are not seeking to discover new facts or theories. When scholarly practitioners engage others in the process of inquiry, with the intent of solving a problem related to their educational work together, they are doing action research (Stringer, 2004).

Problem Statement

When Cohort 5 began their doctoral program in August of 2013, the understanding was each cohort member

would complete a five chapter dissertation. Over the next two months Cohort 5 received information from their dissertation chair on doing a nontraditional group DiP. After detailed discussions among cohort member and with their dissertation chair the cohort found the idea intriguing thus they decided to work together, nevertheless several issues arose. The first problem was getting each cohort member to agree on the topic to use for their group DiP. The second problem was the 11 cohort members were on different schedules and living in various parts of Florida but they needed to have continuous collaboration in order to complete the DiP. While the final problem was to make sure each cohort member were fulfilling their responsibilities by prescribed deadlines.

Research Questions

1. What was the process involved in getting an entire cohort of 11 scholarly practitioners in an Ed.D. Educational Leadership program at Lynn University to complete a nontraditional group DiP?
2. How did a cohort of 11 scholarly practitioners extend the traditional Ed.D. model at Lynn University by undertaking a nontraditional group DiP?

Research Objectives

The research questions above provided an opportunity to pursue an answer for the following three objectives.

1. How did an entire cohort decide to do a nontraditional DiP?
2. How did the cohort handle issues throughout the DiP process?
3. How did cohort members work individually or in small groups to complete one nontraditional DiP?

Methodology

Setting

This study was conducted at Lynn University, located in Boca Raton, FL and via various internet and technological modes of communication. Lynn University has students from 90 countries and 45 states and territories with an enrollment of approximately 2,400. Lynn University's doctoral program began in 2007. The Ed.D. program at Lynn University is a cohort model comprised of 10-15 students who work together for the duration of the program. Currently there are approximately 60 students enrolled in the doctoral program and six professors (Reedy & Taylor-Dunlop, 2015). Cohort 5 is made up of 11 students and is ethnically diverse, there are 6 African Americans, 2 Latino students, 2 Caucasians and 1 Asian student from China. The cohort has 9 males and 2 females ranging from their late 20's to 50's.

CPED Background

In 2007, the Carnegie Foundation decided to re-envision the Ed.D. as a way to help address the needs of 21st century educational settings. The purpose of was to restore the rigor and rank the doctoral degree deserved and provided a pathway for educators to pursue a practical terminal degree so as leaders they would be able to meet the needs of 21st century K-12 educational environments. The Foundation created CPED. In 2007 Lynn University was joined the Carnegie Foundation during their Phase I of analysis. The purpose of this initiative was to redesign the Ed.D. so that it could be recognized and distinguished as a purposeful degree specifically for scholarly practitioners (CPED, 2010).

The degree would also be useful to those interested in working in PK-12 schools and pursuing careers at the collegiate level such as teacher educators. As a result of the work of the Carnegie Foundation and those members who were part of the CPED Phase I initiative, the new definition of Ed.D. states, "the professional doctorate of education prepares educators for the application of the appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and stewardship of the profession" (Perry, 2012, p.43). Individuals pursuing an Ed.D. become the link to colleges and PK-12 schools (Watts & Imig, 2012).

CPED institutions agree no one-size-fits-all model of preparation will meet the diverse needs of doctoral students throughout the country. The goal of CPED was to redesign the Ed.D. to make it a degree of the highest quality (CPED, 2010). The first phase of CPED concludes Ed.D. graduates should be "scholarly practitioners" (CPED, 2010), individuals who are agents of change, are able to solve problems of practice, which use inquiry to make decisions and engage in critical examination. This was evident when in 2013, Cohort 5 at Lynn University, a cohort comprised of 11 doctoral students, collaborated to write one nontraditional group DiP.

Data Collection

Qualitative research methods were used to gather data that addressed the process of the cohort's collaborative efforts in culminating in a DiP and capture the experiences and perspectives of Cohort 5 in preparation of 21st century educational leadership. The data were collected in numerous ways such as photographs, portfolios, videos

Roles and Responsibilities established by Cohort 5 to document the DiP process

ROLES	RESPONSIBILITIES
Photographer	Took photos of campus settings, cohorts and faculty.
Reporter	Collected notes during all meetings and collaborations also created agendas.
Videographer	Videotaped class presentations and class discussions.
Facilitator	Adhered to the agenda and time allotments for meetings and tasks.
Author	Reviewed all cohort members written works before it was put into the iBook or literature review.
Editor	Ensured written work adhered to the American Psychological Association (APA) 6th ed. Manual standards. Corrected any grammar or spelling mistakes.
Historian	Collected and archived qualitative data such as emails, agendas, photographs and minutes recorded and any CPED articles and other materials relating to the DiP process by placing these materials in a Historian portfolio(s).

Figure 1.0: Roles and Responsibilities established by Cohort 5 to document the DiP process

and emails. The e-mails served as anecdotal notes and two members of the cohort served as the Historians of the process. Other technological tools such as phone calls, texting, Dropbox, Weebly, Google Docs, and ooVoo were also used to collaborate off campus. ooVoo is an online system which allows group video chat with up to 12 people therefore ooVoo meetings were scheduled weekly allowing cohort members to collaborate in real time. At the conclusion of these weekly discussions, minutes were typed and electronically disseminated to all the cohort members, as well as to the dissertation chair. Face to face discussions were videotaped and photographs were taken to capture the experience of the cohort's nontraditional group DiP. **Figure 1.0** illustrates the roles and responsibilities established by Cohort 5 to document the DiP process.

Data Analysis

The data results below were analyzed into sub-categories. The data analysis method consisted of first regrouping the data, and then the data were analyzed to discover any patterns and themes with the research questions and research objectives. While analyzing the data any discrepancies detected were also noted in the findings section below.

Findings

The findings were analyzed and compared to the research questions and research objectives. These findings may be beneficial for future Lynn University doctoral students and students in Ed.D. Educational Leadership programs at other CPED institutions which plan to do a nontraditional group DiP. These findings may also be beneficial for researchers looking to further study the process of a nontraditional group DiP. The following findings resulted from each research objective.

Findings 1 - Paradigm shift

Research Objective #1 - How did an entire cohort decide to do a nontraditional DiP?

After being accepted to the Ed.D. Educational Leadership program, 11 scholarly practitioners in Cohort 5 received a hard copy of an Ed.D. program handbook during an orientation on August 23, 2013. The handbook contained the sequence of doctoral courses, financial aid information, along with information on how the new Ed.D. students' would obtain their student ID card and parking sticker. Although the Ed.D. handbook was informative; there were issues with it such as financial aid information geared toward undergraduate students.

While teaching the EDU 701 Leadership, Policy and Context course in the Fall semester of 2013, the dissertation chair shared with Cohort 5 a conversation that occurred with the Vice President of Academic Affairs at Lynn

University. Based on feedback from students, the dissertation chair expressed concerns regarding the Ed.D. handbook with the specific area of contention being the quality of the handbook that Lynn University planned to distribute to future doctoral students. The Vice President of Academic Affairs then recommended that the paper handbook be developed into an online version. This idea sparked the dissertation chair to suggest Cohort 5 do a nontraditional group DiP with a focus on changing the Ed.D. handbook from a paper copy to an electronic iBook version. Consequently the iBook, a comprehensive review of literature, along with two publishable articles and an executive summary, all would serve as a DiP.

When starting the doctoral program originally each cohort member was seeking to do a traditional five chapter dissertation on their own. A paradigm shift occurred over the course of a two week time period, although each doctoral student still had the option of doing a traditional five chapter dissertation each member of Cohort 5 decided instead to complete a nontraditional group DiP. According to Dweck (2008) through ongoing reflections, a paradigm shift in the mindset of doctoral students and professors is necessary from a traditional dissertation to a nontraditional DiP. Thus a paradigm shift occurred within the cohort with each member changing his/her way of thinking to focus on doing a nontraditional group DiP.

Findings 2 - The Norms

Research Objective #2 - How did Cohort 5 handle issues throughout the DiP process?

Norms were established at the beginning of the project. Cohort 5 brainstormed participation and collaborative norms which would help facilitate an effective and efficient working environment. The norms were created so all cohort members were fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Ideas were shared and the cohort members agreed on an initial list of norms that included: create a safe environment where a cohort member's opinions would be valued and respected; be present for the team, be committed to the team; be accountable to the team; be open to constructive feedback; honor deadlines; ask for support when needed; ask questions; open up to diverse viewpoints; use common courtesy; be respectful; be professional; and be creative, imaginative and have fun.

After further discussions of the previous and prospective work, the list was revised and the norms were narrowed down to a list of six. The final list of norms consisted of what each cohort member felt were the most important with an overarching theme of creating a safe environment. The norms were to be reviewed frequently. Upon violation of the norms, the cohort suspended current work, reviewed the norms and resolved the issue to ensure a safe working environment.

The following list was the six norms Cohort 5 created.

1. Be present, committed and accountable to the team.
2. Be respectful and professional of diverse viewpoints.
3. Honor deadlines.
4. Be open to constructive feedback.
5. Ask for support when needed and ask questions.
6. Be creative, imaginative, and have fun.

Findings 3 - Relational Trust and Collaboration

Research Objective #3 - How did Cohort 5 members work individually or in small groups to complete one nontraditional DiP?

At the forefront of this process, relational trust in various aspects was established to ensure productive collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 2014). Relational trust needed to be established early in the process and maintained between cohort members as well as the DiP chair, professors, and critical friends. Once roles and responsibilities were established and a draft of the new handbook created, the cohort brainstormed and had discussions of topics related to 21st century educational leadership, which became the focus of the DiP for Cohort 5. The norms and protocols were revisited frequently by the cohort.

Through discussions, several topics related to 21st century educational leadership were identified then each cohort member chose a topic of interest. Based on professional practice and theoretical interests, the cohort generated a list of specific areas within educational leadership preparation essential to 21st century educational settings. The cohort determined that CPED, Ethical Leadership, Culturally Responsive Leadership, Community Involvement, 21st Century Skills, Curriculum and Instructional Leadership and Technology Leadership would be the topics for the DiP. While working individually or in small groups, Cohort 5 members researched these various areas and wrote a comprehensive literature review, a doctoral informational iBook and culminated with authoring two publishable research articles and an executive summary.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations provided to assist future doctoral students participating in a nontraditional group DiP.

- Use multiple modes to communicate off campus.
- Create norms early in the process to ensure each cohort members fulfill their part.

- Revisit the norms periodically and discuss any issues encountered.
- At the start of the process establish roles and responsibilities for each cohort member.
- Let each cohort member be involved in the editing of any written documents.
- Document each step of the process and archive all qualitative data.

Conclusions and Implications for Education

In conclusion, the findings emphasized the importance of trusting relationships between the cohort, dissertation chair and professors. The key element in developing the kinds of collegial relationships that encouraged professional conversations, allowed cohort members and the faculty to share their expertise and accumulated wisdom, and provided opportunities for collective learning. This DiP process indicated relational trust was necessary to build a professional learning community. The results of this study were to explore many facets of 21st century educational leadership by researching a variety of issues. As scholarly practitioners, the cohort of 11 doctoral students were able to collectively address current issues in education relevant to the future training of educational leaders. Based on the study findings, the following is a list of implications for education.

- 1) Laboratories of practice enabled cohort members to link theory to practice and informed scholarly practitioners of their respective topics of interests.
- 2) Ed.D. programs must rethink 21st century educational leadership preparation programs.
- 3) Collaborative groups used relational trust to develop norms and protocols, which ensured equity and accountability.
- 4) Higher education needs to use technology as part of their signature pedagogy to prepare scholarly practitioners to become proficient in 21st century educational leadership.

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- Jerome Vickers is a doctoral candidate at Lynn University in Florida, and a football coach for Sports International, in MD.



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