The Group-Based Dissertation in Practice:
A Journey Worth Taking

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ABSTRACT

This personal reflective essay explores a group Dissertation in Practice (DiP) model and process used in a localized Doctor of Education program. It describes and recommends this team-based DiP approach as an innovation that prepares practitioners to tackle complex problems of practice by focusing on a process centered around group dynamics that requires collaboration, advanced dialectical activity, engagement of stakeholders, and application of solutions to localized problems of practice. The framework of the exploration is based on accepted theories of small group development. Implications of this DiP approach include providing doctoral students collaborative problem-solving skills and professional capacity building. Ultimately, the model enables doctoral students, as future educators and leaders, to transform an environment predicated on teaching and learning in isolation to one of a highly functioning, effective team-based professional practice.

KEYWORDS

dissertation in practice, educational doctorate, group dynamics, problems of practice, small group development

By the way of introduction, my name is Bill Hamilton and I am an Assistant Professor and the Assistant Dean for Instruction and Innovation at the Augusta University College of Nursing in Augusta, Georgia. After having been out of school since 1991, when I received a Master's in Business and Healthcare Administration at Georgia State University, I enrolled in the Augusta University College of Education (AUCOE), Doctor of Education (EdD) program in 2017. I successfully defended my dissertation in May 2020 and received my EdD.

The AUCOE EdD program is based on the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) framework (CPED, 2021A) and has adopted a group Dissertation in Practice (DiP) model for its doctoral students. Instead of an individual completing the DiP, it is done by a small team of doctoral students within a larger cohort.

This essay will be a personal reflection on my journey and focus on the team-based DiP model and process used by the AUCOE. The framework of the exploration will be Tuckman's (1965) theory of small group development. Specifically, the doctoral journey of my DiP group will be examined as it progressed through group development stages, as identified by Tuckman and Jensen (1977): forming (testing), storming (conflict), norming (cohesion), performing (role relatedness), and adjourning (disengagement). Then, I will describe this DiP approach as an innovation that prepared us, as scholarly practitioners, to tackle complex problems of practice by focusing on a process centered around group dynamics. Next, lessons learned will be explored that can be used by EdD programs that utilize or are considering utilizing the group DiP model. Following this, larger implications will be discussed about how the group DiP model can positively disrupt traditional educational research paradigms. Ultimately, this approach will be shown to support the

CPED Framework in terms of its guiding principles and design concepts (CPED, 2021A). Finally, future implications for doctoral students that engage with this type of DiP process and structure will be discussed.

CPED FRAMEWORK

As mentioned above, the AUCOE EdD program is based on the CPED framework, which is evident, in part, by alignment of its DiP process with CPED guiding program design principles (CPED, 2021A), as described below. First, the requirement of the group DiP format requires collaboration and advanced dialectical activity among doctoral student groups in order for them to successfully complete and defend their dissertations. Secondly, the DiP groups must actively engage with stakeholders in a contextualized problem of practice. This requires partnering, communicating, and working directly with practitioners that are impacted by the problem of practice. Next, the construct of the DiP requires the students to go into the field and apply realizable, workable solutions to localized problems of practice. Finally, the DiP requires that products are created by the doctoral students that can be used in the localized setting and are transferable to similar contexts, thus generating actionable knowledge bases for the professional practice of teaching.

These examples align nicely with the CPED guiding principles for program design as follow, respectively: "prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities", "provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse

communities and to build partnerships", "provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions", and "emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice" (CPED, 2021A, Guiding Principles for Program Design section).

The EdD at Augusta University

The EdD in Educational Innovation program at the AUCOE is designed for practitioners (teachers and/or leaders) in all settings and at all levels. The program is cohort based and meets on Fridays/Saturdays during each semester. The EdD is a three-year program that is based on a structured plan of study. The first year includes core courses. The second year includes core courses and DiP preparation. The third year includes core courses and the DiP final defense (AUCOE, 2021).

Team Theta's DiP Model

Faculty in the doctoral program created research teams within the cohort and connected each team to a stakeholder with a problem of practice. Our DiP group adopted Team Theta as its moniker and it consisted of four members, including me, and began work in earnest during the second year of the program.

Our DiP focus was the result of a local middle school approaching the AUCOE for assistance in understanding stagnating math and English language arts (ELA) scores in comparison to state targets. In response, Team Theta hypothesized that the use of instructional rounds (IR), in a professional learning community construct, would increase teacher metacognition. The study investigated metacognitive transformation in the teachers who engaged in IR in comparison to those who only engaged in traditional professional development. Ultimately, IR appeared to be a catalyst for metacognitive growth and progression.

It is interesting to note that Team Theta, a group of EdD doctoral students, were studying a group of middle school teachers, using similar conceptual frameworks of group dynamics inherent in IR (via professional learning communities) that they were experiencing reflexively. The DiP study yielded results that showed that collaboration, professional learning communities, and teamwork were important factors in teacher metacognitive development. In other words, effective teaching was proven not to be an isolation drill, but a team-based endeavor. This work resonated with Team Theta during the course of our doctoral journey. We realized that successfully completing and defending our dissertation was not an isolation drill, but a team-based endeavor, as well.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that aligned with Team Theta's DiP journey was embedded in Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development. Tuckman identified four stages of group development, each having group structure (interpersonal relationship patterns) and task activity (interaction in relation to the task) characteristics. In his original work, Tuckman conducted a literature review to identify common themes of small group development among therapy, training, and natural/laboratory task groups. His goal was to create a model that could be generalized for small group development over time. The resultant model represented an ordered sequence of development stages that would occur over a non-specified period of time (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Tuckman believed that the group development sequence he described was consistent across the groups he studied. However, he suggested the content of the stages, rate of stage progression, and the sequence order may be affected by differences across and within other settings not in his original review (Tuckman, 1965).

The first development stage described by Tuckman (1965) was the forming stage, when the group enters a structural testing period. The main activities are involved with orientation to the task at hand. Before the group can move to the next stage, the members must engage in testing of interpersonal relationships, form leader dependency, and become orientated to the required tasks. Next, the storming stage results in conflict and resistance within the group. The task activities are met with emotional responses from the members. The resistance is overcome by cohesiveness emerging resulting from the evolution of standards and role adoption, thus allowing the group to move to the next stage.

The third stage is norming where group members become more open and cohesive. Group member roles emerge and team standards become adopted. There is more open communication and opinion expression during the task activity. This stage begins to end when the interpersonal structure starts to drive the completion of tasks and the next stage is entered. The fourth stage is performing where the action of the team is constructive and the structure accelerates the performance of the task at hand. The interpersonal interactions become the lever for the completion of required tasks. Once the required task is completed, this stage ends. A fifth stage was added by Tuckman and Jensen (1977), which is adjourning, when the group disengages. This creates separation anxiety and melancholy among the members. The group members enter into self-evaluation of the task activities and achievement.

Rickards and Moger (2000) have added to Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) original model to account for their observation that teams may never reach the performing stage and may even regress to former stages of development due to two barriers. The first is a weak barrier that may keep a team stuck in the storming phase and is caused by dysfunctional behavior. Most teams are aware of this barrier, when it is reached, and overcome it though unintentional or intentional establishment of processes, roles, and responsibilities. The second is a strong barrier that keeps a team from reaching high performance, attainment of which requires high levels of creative performance. In both cases, creative or facilitating leadership is the driver that breaks through these barriers and move groups along the development stages. This requires the emergence of a leader within the group structure who assumes the role of team facilitator in creative problem solving, through establishment of creative sustaining protocols (Rickards & Moger, 2000).

While Tuckman's (1965) model is over half a century old, it is considered valid and pertinent in examination of group dynamics. This was supported by Kiweewa et al. (2018) in a recent study that examined growth factors in experiential training groups. They found the growth factors varied over time across different stages of group development, supporting Tuckman's (1965) original model. In another recent study, Guttenberg (2020) recommended Lean Six Sigma project teams should adhere to Tuckman's model to insure development of cohesive and task-focused teams.

With this in mind, my reflection on Team Theta's journey will use Tuckman's group development stages as a framework for explication. Each stage of Team Theta's development will be

discussed in terms of the group structure and task activity, as described in Tuckman's (1965) model. Additionally, I will reflect on the adjourning stage, which was added by Tuckman and Jensen (1977).

TEAM THETA'S DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE JOURNEY

Forming

The forming stage included navigating the mechanics of the formation of the DiP team and managing its? resultant's structure and group characteristics. The main tasks included becoming oriented to the dissertation topic and the overall DiP process and testing our interpersonal relationships in the construct of the work required.

Group Structure

Team Theta was formed in Year 2 of the EdD Program during Fall, 2018. The group members were assigned by the lead faculty in the EdD program. Originally, the group had three members who were in K-12 field, who began working in earnest to hone the topic and began exploratory meetings with the stakeholders. I had been assigned to a different group that was exploring a state-wide assessment of regionally-based professional learning communities. Toward the end of the semester, I was approached by one of the lead faculty members and asked if I wanted to switch groups, based on my stated and visible interest in the use of instructional rounds at the localized level. I accepted the offer and had to disengage from my original group and joined Team Theta, one semester into the DiP process.

The final composition of Team Theta represented a heterogenous mix that included an elementary school assistant principal, (2) high school teachers, and me, a health sciences/higher education administrator with a teaching load. This mix, along with my late entry, created some strain among our interpersonal relationships and stunted our ability to coalesce quickly. There seemed to be a certain level of distrust about my real intentions for joining the group. However, due to the cohort nature of the AUCOE EdD program, we knew each other and had worked together previously. This made the forming stage somewhat easier to navigate, but did not minimize the need for testing of personalities and capabilities. Also, we agreed upon some simple work management techniques, such as using google docs for document preparation and smartphone texting as the primary communication method.

Task Activity

The tasks at hand were centered on honing down the dissertation topic, becoming oriented to the overall task of the DiP process and testing our interpersonal relationships in the construct of the required work of this phase of DiP which include writing the first three chapters of the dissertation (Introduction, Literature Review, and Methods).

Storming

The storming stage saw the emergence of intragroup conflict due to the heterogeneous nature of the team members. The main task was to defend the DiP proposal.

Group Structure

Team Theta experienced an acute onset of the storming phase immediately after forming. The heterogenous nature of the group structure resulted in intragroup conflict. All members had different schedules and each came from a different career background. Additionally, each member had unique career goals and reasons for pursing an EdD. Finally, the work/life balances of each member varied due to different family structures. This led to the task activities and intra-group assignments being met with emotional responses. The impeding deadlines of the task at hand exacerbated the intrapersonal conflicts and overall work quality was compromised. The communication was tense, guarded and non-conducive to productivity. Upon reflection, the group structure at this stage was not supportive of the required DiP task at hand.

Task Activity

The task at hand in this stage was to prepare and successfully defend the DiP proposal. The heterogeneity of the group structure, described above, resulted in conflict in terms of scheduling meetings/work sessions, milestone/goal setting, and overall coordination of delegated work necessary to complete the proposal. The stress levels were high and communication was strained. Ultimately, this conflict led to a failed defense proposal in late Spring, 2019. This required Team Theta to extend their work on the proposal and defend again in Summer, 2019.

Norming

The norming stage included the engagement of intentional conflict resolution activity and role delineation. The main task was to re-defend the DiP proposal defense, after a failed first defense proposal.

Group Structure

After the failed proposal defense, Team Theta began to engage in very intentional conflict resolution activity. Additionally, I assumed the informal role as the facilitating leader and collaboratively engaged the team members in the establishment of new protocols which, in hindsight, was aligned with the work of Rickards and Moger (2000). This included setting clear expectations in terms of communication, schedules, and milestones/due dates. The group began to evolve and adapt by identifying role strengths of the members and assigning DiP components to the member that would maximize its quality and be most accommodating to their work/life environment. Also, informal roles emerged. For example, one of the members took over the scheduling and communication duties, due to a penchant for details and time management. Another member focused on the qualitative data analysis based on a background and interest in this type of research. This is consistent with Tuckman's (1965) model, which observed that groups develop cohesiveness through the establishment of standards and role delineations. Only then, can they pass from the storming phase to the norming stage.

Task Activity

This stage coincided with the DiP second proposal defense in Summer, 2019. The resultant group cohesion and growth in the norming stage allowed for success this time and provided Team Theta confidence, as a team, to tackle the DiP research study, write the results, and defend in Spring, 2020. The group began to communicate openly and entered a stage where conflict was addressed openly and resolved through dialogue and planning, with no lingering resentment.

Additionally, the group began to engage with each other on a personal level and feelings of companionship and caring emerged. For example, the main communication method was via smartphone group texting. The members would text each other through the day to discuss family, friend, and work matters. This created a strong sense of bonding and interpersonal relationship built around a social community. This proved to become a group structure that supported the arduous task of defending the DiP and completing the EdD.

Performing

The performing stage saw Team Theta experience maturation of interpersonal relationships that created efficacious and efficient task accomplishment capabilities. The main tasks were to conduct the research project with study participants, write the final three chapters of the dissertation (Findings, Discussion, Products), and defend the dissertation.

Group Structure

After the successful proposal defense, Team Theta entered into the performing stage. The group experienced a renewed sense of confidence, efficacy, and resiliency after recovering from their earlier failure. The defined roles established in the norming stage began to become more flexible as the DiP required cross collaboration due its mixed method design. The members were assisting each other in their assigned tasks by providing alternate lens and interpretations. Team Theta was operating at a high level of performance, attributable to an overall adoption of creative sustaining protocols by each team member in their role. This result was consistent with Rickards and Moger (2000), who believed that these protocols were necessary to break the strong barrier to reach high performance.

Task Activity

Consistent with Tuckman's (1965) beliefs, the interpersonal relationships became the lever by which the multitude of tasks were accomplished, milestones/targets were met, and the complex problems of practice were addressed. For example, during a late night meeting the group was able to crystallize a convoluted and complex set of results into a concise metacognition progression model, through brainstorming, complicated conversations, active discourse, and opposing analytical views.

Adjourning

The adjourning stage began after Team Theta's successful defense and ended as the relationships dissolved over the next 2-3 months.

Group Structure

The maturation and evolution of Team Theta was apparent during the DiP defense in Spring, 2020. After completing the defense of the DiP proper, we all provided our own oral reflection on the journey to the committee. All members discussed how we had become a close, tight knit group of friends and we would miss each other. The group attempted to remain intact, via phone calls and texting, into Summer, 2020. However, the level of communication waned and eventually dissipated in Fall, 2020. The structure supported the task of adjourning, since we all worked in different disciplines and organizations.

Task Activity

Tuckman and Jensen (1997) believed that the adjourning phase included the task activity of self-evaluation. Team Theta did not engage in this task, directly. However, the depth and breadth of the DiP task and journey seemed to cause a natural, non-provoked reflection for each member. As such, this essay is an attempt to conduct such a reflection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion and upon reflection, the DiP at AUCOE is an innovation that prepares scholarly practitioners to tackle complex problems of practice by focusing on a process centered around group dynamics. It does this by a group dissertation team model that naturally progresses through Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development, ultimately ending with the adjournment phase (Tuckman & Jensen, 2007). Additionally, this approach supports the CPED guiding principles for program design (CPED, 2021A), as described in detail earlier.

Implications

The structure of a group DiP model results in a process that is less isolating than an individual dissertation model. It mirrors the need for collaborative problem solving and provides doctoral students with capacities to address complex problems of practice. Additionally, it helps meet the professional needs of doctoral students as they mature and progress as leaders and changes agents in future localized teaching and learning contexts. They will be able to recognize the progress of team goal achievement through the lens of group dynamics. Ultimately, the model enables doctoral students, as future educators and leaders, to transform an environment historically predicated on teaching and learning in isolation to one of a highly functioning, effective team-based professional practice.

However, there are lessons to be learned from Team Theta's experience as it moved along the stages of group development, as described by Tuckman and Jennings (1977). First, close attention and thought should be given to DiP group formation. Specifically, lead faculty should clearly communicate the rationale for group member inclusion, members should be matched to their area of interest, and efforts should be made to have a heterogenous mix of skill sets (e.g. detail orientation, writing, conceptual and critical analysis). Next, lead faculty should be quick to intervene with the DiP groups to help them move along the group development process, such as facilitating role delineation and the establishment of standards. Next, collaboration and communication among the DiP

groups in a EdD Cohort would have proven to be helpful to Team Theta for support and role modeling. This could be facilitated by the EdD faculty in regular open sessions where each group shares its successes, failures, and roadblocks. Ultimately, EdD programs that utilize a group DiP model could explore Tuckman's (1965) model of group development and recommendations made Rickards and Moger (2000) for breaking down progression barriers with the doctoral students before they embark on their DiP journey. This would have been helpful to Team Theta in recognizing its group development progress and help us to engage in tactics to move as quickly as possible through the stages.

The larger implication points to the argument put forth by Kennedy et al. (2018) that calls for educational doctorate programs to evolve from conducting research using a discrete, objective, detached lens to one addressing and solving problems of practice through contextualized understandings, as articulated by dialectical and reflective process that engages researchers in shared learning though co-authorship, negotiation of contested areas (such as writing), and maximization of individual strengths and perspectives. Upon reflection, this approach is consistent with and supported by the overall construct of the EdD program at AUCOE.

Kennedy et al. (2018) also contended that co-authorship of a dissertation is metacognitive in nature, due to the need for continued critical analysis, conflict resolution, and consensus building. Interestingly, this links well with Team Theta's DiP, which was predicated on developing metacognitive strategies and capacity in a group of teachers that could be passed on to the students. In Team Theta's case, the group DiP model, its ensuing group development journey, and focus of study supported each other in content, structure, and aim.

Ultimately, the group DiP format, Team Theta's journey, and its larger educational research implications, as described above, supports the CPED's 2020 Annual Convening theme, which is "Reimagining and reconstruction the dissertation in practice: Dismantling the hegemonic practices of establishing knowledge in the education profession" (CPED, 2021, Main section). As Kennedy et al. (2018) discussed, the traditional research module is based on technical rationality, where problems are studied as independent, not interdependent parts and are approached by creating knowledge that is linear and accumulative. This type of basic research in education perpetuates traditional power dynamics between the individual student and the dissertation chair/committee and isolates the researcher into an objective corner. A group dissertation model, and its ensuing journey, breaks this power dynamic through collaboration, community building, and contextualized approaches to problems of practice that have many interdependent part.

FINAL SHIP LOG ENTRY

As I reflect back on the DiP journey with my fellow sojourners, my mind travels to Herbert Spencer who asked the critical question of what knowledge is most worth (1860). Reframing the question, I asked myself of what made my DiP journey most worth. The journey to the safe port of the final DiP defense was laden with rocks, shallows, unnavigable passages, and unpredictable weather. This made the voyage demanding, rigorous, and ultimately, satisfying. The only way to reach home was to have a seaworthy ship and crew. Using a maritime example, every crew member on a functioning sea

vessel has a specific role and strength, whether it be the skipper, trimmer, navigator, or helmsperson. A ship cannot complete its journey with single crew member or seven trimmers.

Likewise, Team Theta had a diverse crew with multiple skills and talents necessary to guide the group DiP model. We were able to navigate the Straits of Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning (Tuckman & Jennings, 2007) and reach the safe port of graduation, armed with new knowledge, skills, and beliefs that would enable us to tackle complex problems of practice in our pedagogical journey. Ultimately, the heterogeneity of the group produced an impactful homogenous product that provided real solutions for educators at all levels. This could not have been done without the group DiP model. I would readily take the journey again and strongly recommend the group dissertation model to my colleagues, across all disciplines.

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