

# Think Globally, Travel Locally: Doctoral Program Travel for Inquiry, Equity, and Social Justice

SARA LAWRENCE

Texas A&M University-Texarkana

KATHY LEASE

Texas A&M University-Texarkana

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## Abstract

Real-world experience is often considered subordinate to academic learning at the doctoral level. Doctoral faculty at Texas A&M University-Texarkana developed a travel experience providing a cohort of students the opportunity to better understand themselves as leaders, broaden their understanding of the “other,” and bring current issues and trends to life through experiential, place-based learning. However, issues of inequity and disparity around cost and time for travel appeared among the second cohort creating a need to redesign the place-based learning opportunity. While the potential for inequity and disparity to divide the cohort was real, providing the opportunity for all to participate with minimum economic and time constraints allowed the cohort to form a bond that has provided a greater level of meaningful relationships and peer support through the dissertation process. Aligning to a theoretical framework based on experiential and social learning, the current study shows higher education can be equity-minded and focused on the needs of today’s learners without sacrificing depth and quality required of scholar-practitioners.

**Think Globally, Travel Locally: Doctoral Program Travel for Inquiry, Equity, and Social Justice**

Texas A&M University-Texarkana is located on the border of Northeast Texas and Southwest Arkansas, only minutes away from the borders of Oklahoma and Louisiana. Serving a four-state region where the average income is below the US rate, the university provides an affordable and comprehensive education supporting students’ continued education and long-term career goals. The A&M-Texarkana community values small classes with faculty-student interaction and experiential learning opportunities to connect course content to real-world application (Kolb, 2015). The notion that authentic experiences can connect theory to practice has been examined since Dewey (1916). Freire (1970) maintained that praxis—the process of experiential learning through integrating theory, action, and reflection—is necessary to make sense of learning with a power to transform lives.

In 2016, A&M-Texarkana welcomed the first cohort of doctoral students in Education Leadership. As a university focused on experiential learning, the doctoral program also embraces experiential learning as a core value. Designed as a scholar-practitioner program, the doctoral program develops scholarly leaders for public schools and higher education to take an *inquiry stance* to solve practical problems on their campuses and in their districts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lytle et al., 2018; Ravitch, 2014). A

member of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), the program adheres to principles valuing diverse perspectives for equity-minded leaders (CPED Framework, n.d.). Practice-based instruction provides a structure integrating theory, research, and practice using critical reflection (Ravitch, 2014).

## Problem and Background

Practitioner-based doctoral programs have evolved over the last 30 years in an effort to meet the needs of professionals and their organizations (Banerjee & Morley, 2013). From the start, faculty have argued the relevance of practitioner-scholar models of instruction and research versus traditional scientist-practitioner models of instruction and research in doctoral programs (Stoltenberg et al., 2000). Increasing challenges of organizations, including public schools and higher education institutions, have required doctoral programs to steer solidly towards an inquiry stance for practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lytle et al., 2018; Ravitch, 2014). Even though practitioner research for doctoral programs is now considered conventional, the idea of using experiential learning to prepare scholar-practitioners is not (Piantanida et al., 2019).

Yet, Piantanida et al. (2019) assert doctoral learning is acquired through rigorous study and practical experiences promoting “pedagogical wisdom, theoretical understanding, contextual literacy, ethical stewardship, metacognitive reflection, and aesthetic imagination” (p. 4). The authors recognize that “real world experience” is often considered subordinate to “academic learning” at the doctoral level. However, for years, research has acknowledged “learning is experiential” and relevant experiences are required to make learning meaningful at any level of educational attainment (Kolb, 2015; Piantanida et al., 2019).

While working to make doctoral learning more experiential, a focus on the changing needs of doctoral students has emerged (Lazurko et al., 2020). In a paper grounded in multiple epistemologies, Lazurko et al. (2020) present the needs of today’s doctoral students from their own perspectives as doctoral students themselves. Their work resulted in three general needs including:

- 1. Increased access to virtual environments for coursework and research,**
- 2. Increased flexibility in program processes and formats, and**
- 3. Improved processes so doctoral students may better apply knowledge and research to the real world.**

To support student needs for flexibility and virtual options, A&M-Texarkana provides online courses with synchronous class opportunities and monthly cohort meetings. Course content and formats are designed to support in-depth discussions challenging existing views contributing to inequities and injustices in public schools and higher education. The doctoral program also requires students to participate in a travel component focusing on political and cultural perspectives impacting education. Travel provides first-hand experience with problems of practice, broadening knowledge and perspective for doctoral students considering problems of inquiry and establishing a research agenda (CPED Framework, n.d.). The current study uses the methodology of accidental ethnography (AccE) to systematically examine outcomes from a travel experience connecting theory to practice (Levitan et al., 2017).

Together, Kolb’s theory of experiential learning and Bandura’s social learning theory provide a framework explaining practitioner-based learning in a doctoral program as a phenomenon. Kolb’s theory of experiential learning is a practice-based approach that links experience to existing knowledge, reflecting upon the experience for new understanding (Kolb, 1984). At the same time, Bandura’s social learning theory (1977)—based on behavioral learning theories—suggests observational learning is a mediating process in the stimulus and response loop. In Bandura’s theory, others observed by the learner are considered models that heavily influence learning outcomes. Therefore, a theoretical framework from the perspective of experiential and social learning supports doctoral programs working to meet the needs of today’s professionals while effectively preparing them as scholar-practitioners (Bennett, 2021).



## Methodology & Approach

The current study was not planned *a priori*. It wasn't until we reflected upon and reviewed anecdotal comments based on travel that we recognized the experience potentially held important findings for doctoral programs. This led us to more clearly question the structure and effectiveness of the travel experience. We noted growth in doctoral students' depth of understanding and level of discussion on social issues examined during and following the travel experience. Examination of data collected from travel journals, group discussions, and follow-up assignments evidenced this growth of understanding—and knowledge of—social issues studied. This led to the discovery of Accidental Ethnography (AccE) as our methodology (Levitan et al., 2017). Accidental Ethnography allows practitioners to examine past experiences in a systematic way, contributing to scholarly discussion.

While the methodology was *ex post facto*, the design of the travel experience was planned to use the “Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities” (National Society of Experiential Education [NSEE], n.d.). Pre-work and program planning were *intentional* and *authentic* towards the aim of providing effective experiences that built on the learning objectives of the cultural perspectives course. *Preparation and planning* provided doctoral students with context and background necessary for deep learning. A pre-travel *orientation* enabled faculty

and students to have common expectations for travel and alleviated any issues that might interfere with the learning experience. For example, all doctoral students were required to ride the bus with faculty to allow for group debriefing and discussion after each travel site. Designated time for individual reflection, debriefing, and discussion allowed faculty opportunities to *monitor and improve* student understanding and support students in applying new knowledge and experiences towards future research. Travel and photo journals provided *evaluation and assessment* of doctoral student experiences and the effectiveness of travel in meeting course and travel goals. Lastly, travel and photo journals allowed doctoral students to *acknowledge and share* learnings and experiences with others.

## Local to Global Place-Based Learning

The Education Leadership doctoral program design requires the travel component be tied to the curriculum. Thus, the decision for the *place* of travel is directly related to a specific course using place-based learning through experience (Sheppard et al., 2019). Throughout travel, faculty and students studied, discussed, and reflected on the experiences that allowed students to apply thinking globally (University of Nebraska, n.d.). The initial cohort took a class on education non-profit law, policy, and futurism. The program travel requirement evolved from this class and resulted in a trip to Washington, DC. Doctoral students met with their Congressional delegation,

education publishers, and the Department of Education. Students also met with think tank representatives of various viewpoints on the political spectrum. Panel discussions focused on policy decisions relating to student achievement, racial and income inequities, and more. While the experiences broadened students' perspectives, the primary benefit centered on understanding policy and education from a national level.

In the next cohort, doctoral students faced potential equity issues related to travel. While some doctoral students were campus or district administrators with higher salaries and more flexible schedules, other doctoral students were teacher leaders or university staff with fewer financial resources and less time flexibility. It became clear that travel costs and extended time off from work were prohibitive for several students, which created inequities and disparities among the cohort. The value of experiential, place-based learning from travel would be a moot point if not all cohort members could participate. Doctoral faculty tackled the challenge of developing an equitable, impactful travel experience. By using the Field Study in Cultural Perspectives class and knowledge of impactful travel sites close by, the faculty designed a trip providing all doctoral students with the opportunity to better understand themselves as leaders, broaden their understanding of the "other," and bring current issues and trends to life through experiential and place-based learning (Marx, 2014).

Due to the sensitivity and controversy surrounding many of these topics, learning was intentionally focused on creating empathy with those impacted. The experiential learning goal became how to use the travel experience to bring the academic content to life and impact the hearts and minds of future education leaders. Further, we examined how doctoral students might apply place-based learning from local to global issues. The result was finding a rich, impactful travel experience complementing the curriculum right in our own backyard. By "crossing the border" into Arkansas, we were able to design an equitable trip for our students that allowed them to experience and see most of the major trends and themes they studied during the academic portion of the class.

Prior to travel, students interacted with course materials to help them explore how their personal

cultural perspectives were shaped by families, locations, and experiences. Students studied archival film, primary source documents, readings, and videos related to civil rights, school desegregation, perspectives of the "other," redlining, economic disparity, sustainability, and poverty. The pre-work allowed doctoral students to translate their travel experience into a greater depth of understanding of the trends and issues impacting education and education leaders.

The study expanded to experiences through the eyes of "others." Utilizing archival film and historical documents from the Japanese Internment Camp at Rohwer, AR, and the integration of Little Rock Central High School, students explored these experiences with an opportunity to develop empathy for the young people caught in these life-changing experiences and to explore the role of leaders who created these situations. Further stops on the trip included learning experiences at the Clinton Presidential Library, Heifer International, and Heifer Global Village focusing on experiences with decision-making, sustainability, world hunger, scarcity, and environmental issues.

## Findings and Conclusions

The trip began in the impoverished rural delta region of Southeast Arkansas where students visited the museum created to honor the Japanese Americans who were relocated to the Rohwer and Jerome Internment Camps during World War II (see Figure 1). Having watched archival footage of the traumatizing relocation of those families under stressful conditions, the opportunity to stand in the cemetery where the journey ended for some of the Japanese Americans created an impactful experience for the students. One student posted the following in her travel journal:

Our EDLD trip to Arkansas opened my eyes to the historical intolerance that many in my generation may not be acutely aware. Our trip to the Jerome-Rohwer Interpretive Museum and Visitors Center in McGehee, AR was an excellent opportunity to immerse in the rich culture of the Japanese American people during the 1940s.

Another student became visibly upset while standing in the cemetery where Rohwer was located. She could not believe that she had graduated from high school in Arkansas and had never heard of the

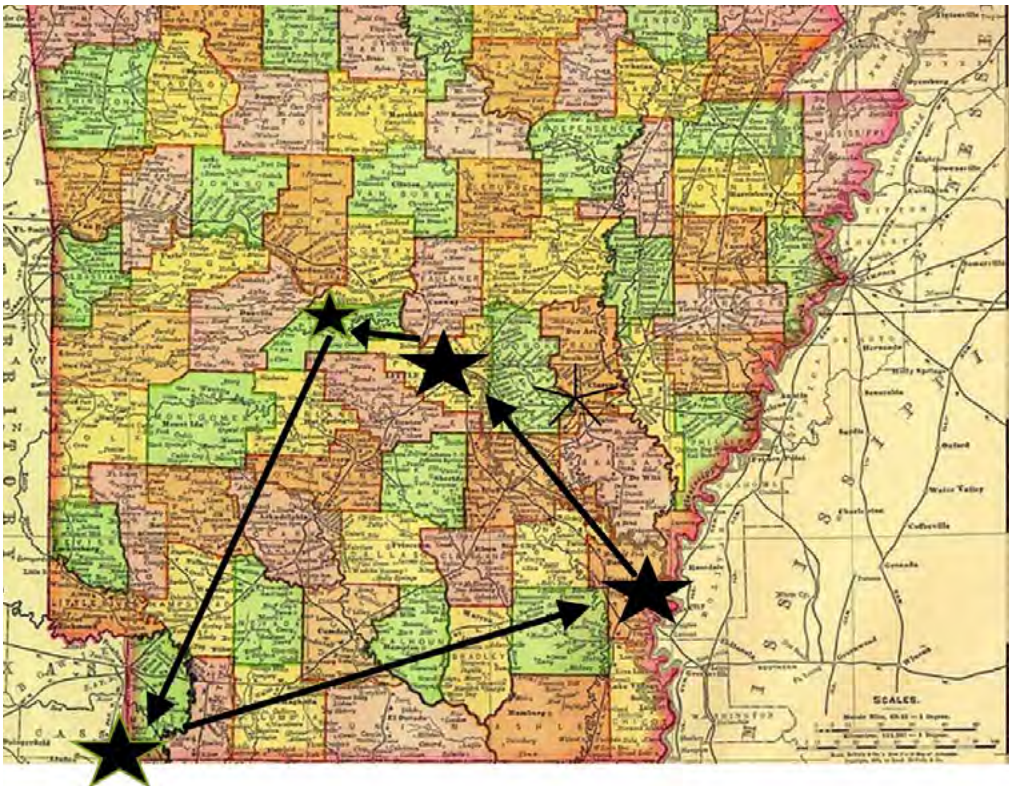
internment camps and the experiences of the Japanese Americans during World War II.

The next stop was the capital city of Little Rock where we visited the Clinton Presidential Library to participate in a leadership simulation based on a decision-making exercise around the crisis in Kosovo. Both the Clinton Library and the Heifer International Headquarters building next door have Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) designations. The Heifer building tour included a thorough explanation of the sustainability principles employed in the construction of the building. Each evening, the cohort met with faculty to debrief key learnings and reflections from the day and to prepare for the next day's experiences. One student journaled about the impact of reflecting on the buildings that were seen and the inner-reflection that followed:

I believe this sums up our trip as we saw the actual buildings and images, we all had varying perspectives of what we witnessed, and we all had to look inward to how this experience affected us and hopefully will guide us as leaders.

Before leaving Little Rock, the cohort visited Little Rock Central High School campus. The school was closed for spring break, but the students were able to walk in the footsteps of the brave Little Rock Nine who integrated the school in 1957. The National Park docents provided a presentation that expounded upon the information students had already studied. An African American doctoral student recorded the following in her journal: "I am overwhelmed with emotions knowing that I, too, am a beneficiary of their struggle, pain, determination, and perseverance." After climbing the steps up to the doors of Little Rock Central High School, one student remembered the video of the Little Rock Nine entering the school and recorded these thoughts: "Step by step these individuals became more enclosed and unable to turn back. Placing myself in those same pathways, I could feel the weight and resistance of the society present in 1957."

Following the National Park presentation, we traveled to the mountains in Perryville to experience the lessons available at Heifer's Global Village. Here we learned how climate and societal issues



Arkansas  
Provided  
The  
Backdrop  
For  
Exploring  
Social  
Justice  
Issues.

**Figure 1**

*Exploring Inquiry, Equity, and Social Justice Through Arkansas Sites*

impact multiple regions around the world. At Heifer Global Village, students participated in simulations allowing them to internalize how poverty and sustainability issues both locally and far away affect us all. The impact of the Heifer Village simulations of representative living experiences from around the world was evident in both the late-night discussions and later in journaling work. One student commented, “Before I went on this trip, I did not know that roughly half of the world’s population cooks food by a campfire. This was very eye-opening.” Another student captured the experience as follows:

Even though I have taught World Geography and understand the resources of the world are distributed inequitably, unfortunately I did not realize how little other people do not realize this and how we completely lose sight of what we have in comparison to others across the globe. The exercise was completely eye opening and led to an intense discussion the following morning.

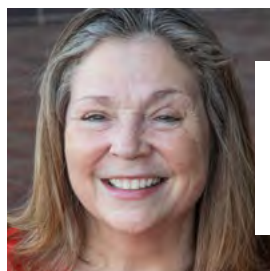
## Summary

We are seeing the byproducts of this travel experience in the inquiry of doctoral students focused on issues of diversity, inequity, and sustainability intended to improve educational outcomes in our nation. The evidence from the current study involving place-based learning at the doctoral level—aligning to a theoretical framework based on experiential and social learning—shows higher education can be equity-minded and focused on the needs of today’s learners without sacrificing the depth and quality required of scholar-practitioners. At the Clinton Presidential Library, Heifer International Headquarters, and Heifer Global Village, students faced real-world problems that leaders have addressed, and the cohort discussed

the outcomes and consequences of these decisions. The experience of traveling from the sacred ground of the Japanese internment camps to the sacred ground of Little Rock Central High School allowed students

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Sara Lawrence is Associate Professor of Educational Psychology in the Education Leadership doctoral program at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She is an Experiential Education academy member of National Society for Experiential Education and was the university’s quality enhancement project director focusing on experiential education for several years.

to hear the voices of historical leaders speaking to them personally as today's leaders in education, entreating them to learn lessons of the past. While the potential for inequity and disparity to divide the cohort was real,

providing the opportunity for all to participate with minimum economic and time struggles allowed the cohort to form a bond that has provided a greater level of peer support through the dissertation process. ■

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*Kathy Lease is an associate professor of Education Leadership at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She designed this doctoral program experiential learning journey from a need for equitable, low-cost, impactful learning in a compact timeframe.*

