

Centering the Scholarly Practitioner Within the EdD:

Lessons Learned

Lee D. Flood 
Texas Christian University
l.d.flood@tcu.edu

ABSTRACT

The Educational Doctorate (EdD) is designed to meet the needs of current practitioners who aim to expand their professional expertise by leveraging deep knowledge and research methods to address specific and contextualized problems of practice. This approach centers on developing scholarly practitioners that are equipped with the skills necessary to bridge the knowledge-to-doing gap and contribute meaningfully to school improvement (CPED, 2020; Donovan, 2013; Hochbein & Perry, 2013; Jackson & Sun, 2022; Lewis et al., 2020; Perry, Zambo, & Crow, 2020). To achieve this goal, program faculty and their respective thinking must be concerned with and oriented to the scholarly practitioner and their unique positionality. This paper explores two considerations related to centering scholarly practitioners and their impact to illustrate the possibilities inherent within EdD programs.

KEYWORDS

scholarly practitioner, program development, informed consumer of research

The Educational Doctorate (EdD) is designed to meet the needs of current practitioners who aim to expand their professional expertise by leveraging deep knowledge and research methods to address specific and contextualized problems of practice. This approach centers on developing scholarly practitioners that are equipped with the skills necessary to bridge the knowledge-to-doing gap and contribute meaningfully to school improvement (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], 2020; Donovan, 2013; Hochbein & Perry, 2013; Jackson & Sun, 2022; Lewis et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2020). However, to achieve this goal, program faculty and their respective thinking must be concerned with the unique positionality of the EdD student as knowledge-seeker, change agent, activist, and applied researcher (Buss et al., 2014; Firestone et al., 2021; Perry & Abruzzo, 2020). This paper explores two ways which faculty can do so in relation to research courses.

The first is to consciously forefront the lived reality of the scholarly practitioner when developing course content and throughout course sequences. Course content and sequencing should center the scholarly practitioner and carefully consider the types of knowledge and skills that are needed within applied contexts (Firestone et al., 2021). Faculty should demonstrate a willingness to prioritize the funds of knowledge that students bring from their professional contexts and find ways to support their practice within courses. Theory and practice should work in concert with the reality of scholarly practitioners from day one of their program by carefully constructing course content, experiences, and assignments to be useful and meaningful. The second is to emphasize the creation of informed consumers and users of research. This includes ensuring that the types of research skills and knowledge that are delivered over the course of a program are directly relevant to students in their professional contexts. Additionally, programs have an obligation to

foster a relationship of utility between practitioners and the extant research literature that goes beyond crafting a literature review for the purpose of completing a dissertation. Research courses within EdD programs should be designed with the needs of current practitioners who aim to utilize these methodological skills to address specific and contextualized problems of practice at the forefront (Kerrigan & Hayes, 2016; Wergin, 2011).

This paper serves to share some of the paradigm shifts that occurred in my thinking as a new faculty member at a CPED institution and the importance of reframing/reorienting for faculty. Additionally, I hope to encourage dialogue among CPED colleagues regarding their own programmatic perspectives and innovations. Some of the greatest growth in my thinking about our program has come through candid discussions with fellow faculty members on similar journeys and the reflection that follows. The ideas that will be explored include: the importance of prioritizing the lived realities of scholarly practitioners within course design and curricular decisions and reorienting research course perspectives to better serve and align with these realities.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

Augusta University's (AU) Doctor of Education in Educational Innovation (2023) program is 10 semesters in length and utilizes a hybrid delivery format that "prepares educators to lead effectively in the teaching and learning environment, to advocate for solutions to problems, to foster innovation, and to be responsive to the evolving expectations placed upon educational systems." Students meet on six Fridays and Saturdays during each semester. The Friday sessions are held online during the evening, and the Saturday



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sessions are held in-person and on-campus from 9 am to 5 pm. The program has two concentration areas: Teaching and Curriculum and Educational Leadership. The degree requirements for each concentration are similar except for 9 hours of concentration-specific coursework. Students take 12 hours of research courses and the remaining coursework is dedicated to the core curriculum. The degree culminates with a group Dissertation in Practice (DiP).

CONSIDERING THE LIVED REALITIES OF SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONERS

Faculty should strive to understand what it means to be a scholarly practitioner situated within a given time and space (Honig & Walsh, 2019). While the idea of the scholarly practitioner is a fundamental design-concept of the CPED framework (Jackson & Sun, 2022), it truly references a dynamic state of existence and being-ness that is in need of ongoing evaluation and consideration rather than a static role. The realities of scholarly practitioners today are undoubtedly different than the realities of scholarly practitioners even five years ago. There have been significant changes related to the shifting political landscape, the impact of Covid-19, and advances in technology.

Faculty must posit the reality of the scholarly practitioner at the forefront of their work and (re)frame their curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction to reflect and best inform the multifaceted and fluid nature of the work of the educational professional. To that end, three considerations for faculty to ponder as it relates to the realities of the scholarly practitioner are: drawing connections to their current/future work, displaying an openness to step outside of the ivory tower, and acknowledging that the problem of scholarly practitioner research may look different than the problems that they are accustomed to seeing in more traditional scholarly pursuits.

Faculty can prioritize scholarly practitioners' current/future work and demonstrate a willingness to move outside of the ivory tower through all courses and curricular design, not just in courses that seem to be natural fits. For example, quantitative methods courses can be taught in creative ways that mirror the types of problems that they might encounter within their professional settings including the use of relevant data, logical scenarios, familiar language, and the opportunity to present results in practical ways. Coursework and content should draw connections to the lived realities and roles of the scholarly practitioners within the program.

Similarly, the dissertation problem may arise through a very different mechanism than the practice of identifying a gap in the literature (gap-spotting) that is standard practice in PhD programs. Faculty have to be willing to step outside of the common conception that the literature is the sole support for the existence of a problem and lean into and trust that their students are tapped into and sensitive to problems that exist within their own context. This does not free the scholarly practitioner from engaging with the literature, but forces them to use "multiple modes of evidence" in concert with the literature to help "identify, define, and frame" the problem of practice (Leach et al., 2021, p. 2). This requires a great deal of trust between faculty and students as well as a willingness to step outside of the comfort of the literature, and perhaps, the familiarity of their own academic training.

Furthermore, faculty have to display the same willingness to step outside of their own methodological comfort zones to support scholarly practitioners. CPED has a number of examples of

institutions that are leveraging specific types of applied and signature methodologies (e.g., action research, improvement science, implementation science, etc.) to investigate complex problems of practice. Some of these approaches may be novel to faculty members, but provide creative and nuanced ways for scholarly practitioners to engage in inquiry. Faculty must be willing to, at a minimum, pursue training and development in applied methodological traditions that are becoming increasingly popular in EdD programs, and in an ideal world, try some of these approaches out within their own research. This would allow faculty to mentor and assist from a place of experience and expertise.

CREATING INFORMED CONSUMERS AND USERS OF RESEARCH

Research faculty should also consider crafting a research course sequence that adopts a pragmatic perspective and focuses on building a deep, rather than broad, skill-set in applied research skills that are commonly being used in DiP. When research faculty approached the redesign of the research sequence at AU, they made one idea central: scholarly practitioners will utilize their research skills in applied contexts. This shift in approach ensures research is at the forefront of the curriculum rather than treated as an afterthought. In this model, students are not left to sort out and sift through research strategies by themselves during the dissertation phase.

To make this change, research faculty utilized a backwards design process to focus in on the knowledge and skills that scholarly practitioners need in their professional roles and to successfully navigate the dissertation. Once research faculty had an idea of that knowledge and skill profile, they critiqued the research sequence to see if it was set up to successfully scaffold and imbue those characteristics. Unfortunately, there were a series of research courses that were not aligned with this goal nor were they vertically aligned with each other.

The initial course on research design was sprawling and covered a vast array of elements: research in educational contexts, diverse methodologies employed in these contexts (e.g., narrative, ethnographic, case study, ex post facto, correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental), ethics, design, conduct, analysis, and interpretation of educational research. After reviewing the course description and course, research faculty felt that this course would better serve the vision of developing scholarly practitioners if it was narrow and focused on the foundational elements of designing a research study. The revamped course emphasized the following elements: alignment between research elements, including identifying a research problem, reviewing the literature, specifying a purpose, and writing research questions. Refocusing the course led to more specific methodological elements being moved to later in the research course sequence, where they would be more relevant to students.

For example, the quantitative course that followed built off of the students' abilities to write elements typically found in chapters one and two of a traditional five-chapter dissertation. By scaffolding learning, the course could emphasize methodological components while sharpening students' skills to craft arguments, write research questions, and survey the literature. However, the course description of the introductory statistics course emphasized multivariate data analysis, including a variety of regression techniques, which seemed



out of step with this aim and student needs. This was especially true when the students were entering the program with little to no statistical background from which to build upon. After conducting research on the most popular statistical approaches used in DiPs, research faculty redesigned the course to emphasize statistical literacy/efficacy and mastery of the most popular analyses.

The student response and subsequent outcomes have been positive and validating. Students do not feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data that the course purports to cover. Additionally, students have articulated that they are more comfortable with reading and utilizing articles that utilize quantitative methods within their scholarly work. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the use and proposed use of quantitative designs in their DiPs. As a whole, the reorientation has helped the program avoid creating a chasm between our research design and methodology courses and the problems of practice of scholarly practitioners.

SUMMARY

This essay has provided two examples of considerations that faculty should ponder when critically examining course or programmatic elements. Hopefully, these specific examples prompt further thought and conversation related to how EdD programs orient themselves to their students. By taking the lived realities of the scholarly practitioners that they serve into account, programs can ensure that they are giving their students authentic, meaningful, and relevant experiences. This includes crafting courses that are designed with the specific needs of the scholarly practitioner and linking those learning experiences towards the DiP. In particular, thoughtful attention should be paid to the content, flow, sequence, and perspective of the research course sequence to ensure that students are prepared to create an impact with their DiPs and in their professional role following graduation.

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