

Reframing the Problem of Practice: Transitions in Baylor University's Ed.D. in Learning and Organizational Change Program

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the program changes that emerged from the Baylor University Ed.D. in Learning and Organizational Change program development team as we engaged as a community of practice in the organizational change process to reframe our conceptualization of the Problem of Practice dissertation. This process led to logical implications for the program course offerings and student support systems. The following article, therefore, traces these changes as they emanate out from the Problem of Practice dissertation reconfiguration, into the course sequence, and finally the student support systems. This article concludes by offering the perspective gained about this work as we engaged in the same organizational change process through which we guide our students.

KEYWORDS

dissertation in practice, problem of practice, education doctorate, organizational change, professional doctorate

INTRODUCTION

Scholars continue to discuss and debate the nuances concerning how to distinguish between the Ed.D. and Ph.D. degree goals, values, and outcomes (e.g., Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993; Brennan, 1998; Andrews & Grogan, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006; Anderson, 2011; Jill A. Perry, 2012; Killham et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2018; Gillham et al., 2019). One may type the phrase “difference

between an Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs” into the widely used Academic Search Complete database to discover hundreds of results. Variations of these search terms only multiply the findings, uncovering numerous academic and professional publications offering a particular definition of or distinction between these terms and their corresponding degrees.

Amidst these epistemological and axiological discussions populating the research literature contrasting the Ed.D. and Ph.D.



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degrees, there is a binding element to the DNA of the doctoral degree whether it be an Ed.D. or Ph.D. For generations, the dissertation in its traditional five- or six-chapter form has characterized the capstone experience of persons earning a Ph.D. (Bell et al., 2019). Although multiple studies note variations in dissertation formats and structures (e.g., Paltridge, 2002; Thompson, 2005), Hyland concludes that the dissertation genre as a whole remains fairly “conservative” (Hyland, 2009, pp. 140–143). Not surprisingly, earlier theoretical discussions surrounding the emerging Dissertation in Practice, often begin with, reflect upon, or become contextualized by the traditional Ph.D. dissertation (Neumann, 2005). The traditional Ph.D. dissertation genre is what many dissertation advisors personally experienced, whether they find themselves advising Ph.D. or Ed.D. students.

Following this trajectory, when beginning the task of constructing the Baylor University Ed.D. in Learning and Organizational Change program (Ed.D.-LOC) as well as its capstone thesis project (the Problem of Practice dissertation), we as the program developers often found ourselves beginning with and operating under assumptions shaped by our own experiences with traditional Ph.D. dissertations. In many respects, we came to embody the 2007 observation made by the Council of Graduate Schools report that professional degree programs operating at Ph.D. granting institutions tend to operate from a preexisting culture oriented around Ph.D. doctoral assumptions (see particularly p. 22). To address this problem, we as a community of practice embarked on a journey of research, reading, and self-reflection to reframe our prior assumptions and redesign the envisioned Problem of Practice dissertation. However, because of our commitment to providing a holistic and cohesive educational experience, we soon found that the process of reframing our approach to the Problem of Practice dissertation required us to reconsider the implications that these adjustments had for the course sequence and student support systems. Reframing the Problem of Practice dissertation, therefore, led to a process that impacted nearly every aspect of the Baylor University Ed.D.-LOC program in some way.

The following article, therefore, reports on the changes we have made as a program seeking to produce scholarly practitioners following the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate framework and principles (Buss & Zambo, 2014; Perry, 2016; Perry & Imig, 2008; Schuster, 2017). Just as the process of reframing the Problem of Practice dissertation led to logical implications for the program course offerings and student support systems, the following article traces these changes as they emanate out from the Problem of Practice dissertation reconfiguration. This article, therefore, proceeds in five parts. First, we introduce the design and structure of our program to contextualize the community in which these changes took place. Second, we describe the development of our conceptualization of the Problem of Practice dissertation. Third, we discuss how these changes echoed into the broader curriculum and course sequence. Fourth, we present the implications that these adjustments had on our student support systems. Finally, this article concludes by offering the perspective gained about this work as a result of revisiting these transformations as we engaged in the same organizational change process through which we guide our students.

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY ED.D.-LOC PROGRAM AND CONTEXT

In the Fall of 2018, the Baylor University School of Education enrolled the first cohort of students in the online Ed.D. focused on Learning and Organizational Change in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. This program follows The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) model by attempting a comprehensive effort to critically examine doctoral degrees leading to careers in professional practice (Buss & Zambo, 2014; Perry, 2016; Perry & Imig, 2008; Schuster, 2017). Although 2021 marks the 100th anniversary of the Ed.D. degree, recent innovations in Ed.D. program design have pioneered new curricular strategies to better incorporate connections between education and other fields such as public health, business, and humanities because of professional practice influences.

The Baylor University Ed.D.-LOC program serves professionals from varied fields beyond those connected to traditional education. Currently, about 45% of students are K-12 educators, 25% are in higher education, 7% serve in non-profit and entrepreneurship sectors, 5% are in social services, 5% serve in the military, 5% serve in human resources, 4% serve in hospital administration, and 4% serve in other industries. With the most diverse program at Baylor University, the student population currently includes 32% Black or African American students, 15% Hispanic students, 4% Native American students, 38% White students, and 11% who identify with two or more races. Many students in this program are full-time professionals with responsibilities related to educating others, either in formal or informal contexts.

This Ed.D.-LOC program aims to graduate emerging leaders who utilize a professional knowledge base that integrates practical and research-based knowledge to cultivate systemic change; address problems of practice by exploring multiple perspectives that lead to the development of meaningful and creative solutions; and develop local, national, and global partnerships through collaboration and communication. Designed to be completed in three years, this 54-credit program includes 18 courses, strategically organized to support the development of a Problem of Practice dissertation study during this period. The course sequence follows a trimester format and includes five courses focused on learning, five courses focused on organizational change, four research courses, and four “Problem of Practice” research and writing courses.

The program offers students an opportunity to enhance their careers by acquiring a deeper understanding of teaching and learning in general but also the opportunity to identify a critical issue or innovative practice, which they further explore through their research. This critical issue or innovative practice is based on the students’ practical experience and goals within the context of their current or projected future professional settings. This critical issue, therefore, becomes the focal point for their Problem of Practice dissertation.

The Ed.D.-LOC courses combine synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences for students. Each week, students engage in scholarly work through asynchronous assignments such as reading, reflecting, synthesizing, and evaluating. Then students also attend weekly live class sessions using Zoom where they collaborate with their instructor and classmates to delve deeper into course topics by examining and critically thinking through various modes of creativity. During the live class sessions, students from across the country participate in small

breakout rooms to share personal stories and perspectives, as well as learn from others.

The Ed.D.-LOC program is committed to community building as a central value. Our program vision to engage all learners in a community of reciprocal mentoring and accountability buoys the recruitment and retention of students through innovative and rigorous academic development. Based on research literature, we designed this online program to have high-quality interaction among our students and faculty. We recognized the importance of regular and genuine student-to-faculty interaction. Although all courses occur online, Ed.D.-LOC students participate in two on-campus Immersion experiences during their program. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, required us to temporarily move this Immersion experience online.

The Ed.D.-LOC program admits students, then groups and moves them through the course sequence in cohorts to build an intentional learning community among students at similar stages in the program. The Ed.D.-LOC program supports a maximum of nine cohorts of 45–80 students at a time. Because students in a cohort are on a set course sequence together, they can encourage, uplift, and interact with one another. Faculty Advisors are assigned to each cohort and teach the Problem of Practice courses. Within these cohorts, students participate in Peer Working Groups to collaborate and communicate with others as they write their Problem of Practice dissertations (Aitchison, 2019; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014).

Cohort members benefit from psychological support from other members, stronger affiliations among members, and an overall reduced level of loneliness (Hill, 1995). In addition, Norris and Barnett (1994) found greater cohesiveness in a cohort model than a non-cohort approach. With a common purpose and a common goal, students involved in these cohort models are in a better position to form a community of practice, which leads to greater student persistence and success (Lei et al., 2011; Maher, 2004, 2005).

Current metrics indicate high degrees of program success and student satisfaction that reinforce the benefits of utilizing a cohort model. Research findings suggest that Ed.D. programs typically experience 50–70% attrition rates (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). In contrast, the Baylor University Ed.D.-LOC program has maintained a comparatively lower attrition rate at only 17%. In addition to supporting students through their placement into cohorts with assigned advisors, our commitment to learning from them as they journey through the program has allowed for the form and function of the Problem of Practice dissertation to evolve as each cohort of students moves further into the program.

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE DISSERTATION

Recognizing that the goals of the Ed.D.-LOC students who are already leaders in their respective professions are different than those of students pursuing doctoral degrees to become career academics required us to reframe the Problem of Practice dissertation to better suit the needs of the Ed.D.-LOC students. This process of reframing the Problem of Practice dissertation took into account the fact that most students pursued this degree while working full-time, striving to finish the program in three years, and balancing their personal lives—all while trying to develop the skills, knowledge, and insight needed to affect concrete change in their local organizations and broader industry practice. This process of

reframing the Problem of Practice dissertation led us to redesign our approach to two central parts of any traditional dissertation: the literature review and the research design and methodology.

Reframing the Literature Review and Background Research

As with most Ph.D. dissertations, we originally conceptualized the literature review as an exhaustive review of the literature in the field through which the student articulates a gap in the literature that their research aims to fill. Following a traditional five-chapter dissertation format, the literature review occurred in chapter two after the introductory chapter and before the methodology chapter. We envisioned that our students would compose a 25–35-page literature review section. This section would provide the historical background for their study, explore previous research related to their study, uncover major scholars or theories in their field of study, identify key variables or concepts related to their study, incorporate theoretical or conceptual frameworks relevant for their study, and explain the relationships between previous research and their study to create a compelling argument for the need for and significance of their Problem of Practice dissertation study. This literature review design followed Creswell (2018), who suggested that the literature review is “a written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents that describe the past and current state of information; organizes the literature into topics and documents a need for a proposed study” (p. 89). During this process, we viewed the literature review as an important academic endeavor that helped students demonstrate their prowess as researchers and writers. Advisors encouraged students to refrain from including their voice throughout the literature review and to support their claims with research-based evidence.

The Literature Review chapter proved to be the most daunting chapter for many of our students as it involved a great deal of reading, analyzing, and synthesizing literature in fields that were often foreign to them. This exhaustive review of the literature was not always relevant or meaningful to our students as they viewed this process as tangential and even perfunctory to completing their Problem of Practice dissertation. This chapter also became repetitive with their Introduction in Chapter One, which included the problem and purpose statement, theoretical or conceptual framework, research design overview, and key terms. Students often found themselves repeating much of the same information in both chapters particularly as it related to the problem statement and frameworks.

While much of the original intent for the literature review remains intact, we have begun to conceptualize the literature review in a slightly different fashion based on our reading around the purposes and practices of the Ed.D. Ed.D. dissertations often differ from traditional Ph.D. dissertations in the origin of the research questions, foci of the study, end goal, and role of the researcher. Ed.D. studies are designed to have pragmatic importance with outcomes that improve practice and have a community impact (Archbald, 2008; Belzer & Ryan, 2013). Most Ed.D. students are working professionals who want to remain in the field after obtaining their degree (Perry et al., 2020). Thus, Ed.D. research should take place “at the intersection of an individual’s work as a practitioner and researcher, wherein a practitioner focuses on understanding localized problems of practice through in-depth inquiry” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 3). Engaging in such proximate and relevant research trains students to apply data-informed solutions to industry problems and to “to think, to perform, and to act with integrity”



(Shulman, 2005, p. 52). As such, the literature review in an Ed.D. dissertation should look different than it would in a traditional Ph.D. dissertation.

Rather than seeking to fill a gap in the literature, Ed.D. dissertations explore a localized problem that is of immediate and pragmatic concern (Belzer & Ryan, 2013). Therefore, the literature review is not used to demonstrate that the project is unique or fills a gap in the literature, but rather to demonstrate how the problem is conceptualized within other contexts to “bring the problem into sharper focus, identify root causes of the problem, and help etch out appropriate entry points for investigation that truly have the potential to help solve the problem” (Belzer & Ryan, 2013, p. 204). The gap in the literature is not the rationale for the Ed.D. study, but rather the literature serves as a launching point for students to consider how to address issues of concern in their localized contexts and find research-based solutions. Perry et al. (2020) argued that Ed.D. literature reviews should be conceptualized as “Review of Scholarly and Professional Knowledge” that involve “a concise review blending professional, practical knowledge with scholarly knowledge to understand the problem, find solutions, and develop measures that will provide evidence of change (or not)” (p. 38). While Ph.D. literature reviews often situate the study within the larger academic dialogue and demonstrate a student’s grasp of broader conceptual literature, the Ed.D. literature review may be more pragmatic, examining root causes and solutions that are highly contextual in nature (Archbald, 2008; Belzer & Ryan, 2013).

Belzer and Ryan (2013) highlight the unique role that theory plays in an Ed.D. dissertation as practitioners draw from their personal and practical knowledge or theories of action. As scholarly practitioners, Ed.D. students generally possess a wealth of practical knowledge about their chosen topic and care deeply about creating meaningful change around these issues. In traditional Ph.D. programs, this practical and professional knowledge are often dismissed, as such “academic” research is often given more credence and seen as more valid. However, because the goal of the Ed.D. is to prepare practitioners who will remain in the field and work to create meaningful solutions to organizational problems, this practical and professional knowledge can be of great value for the Ed.D. dissertation. Practitioners often utilize frameworks in their thinking, but these are often informed by their own knowledge and experiences that have been tried and tested over time and, as such, may differ from the way academic researchers utilize theoretical frameworks (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). These practically derived theories and ideas, however, should also be informed by and complement academically derived theories and research findings. Thus, Ed.D. students need the skills and expertise to access, understand, and use the literature to help make sense of their own experiences and develop reasonable theories and solutions to their problems of practice. Perry et al. (2020) suggested that faculty can help to “expand EdD students’ thinking about a problem and potential solutions by teaching them to use literature and theories and preparing them to use research methods and tools to solve or improve problems” (p.71). Practitioners and industry leaders must be active learners who use research and theory to engage in analysis of and reform within their organizations. This dialectical relationship between theory and practice or praxis is even more important for Ed.D. dissertations (Andrews & Grogan, 2005).

As we have begun to reconceptualize the purpose and goals of the Ed.D. dissertation, our approach to the literature review has shifted to reflect the ideas discussed above. Most notably, we

combined Chapters One and Two to allow for the more seamless integration of the problem statement, literature review, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and purpose statement. The combined chapters reduced repetition and allowed for students to contextualize their research problem throughout the literature review as well as identify theories or frameworks that would inform the purpose of their investigation. We also encouraged students to weave their voices into the literature review and to acknowledge their professional and practical expertise. As we reframed the purpose of the literature review as an opportunity to contextualize the problem rather than a historical lineage of research, we reduced the target length of the literature review to about 20 pages.

Reframing the Research Design and Method

The second component of the Problem of Practice dissertation that we reframed throughout rethinking the Problem of Practice dissertation is the research design and methodology. While these discussions on the distinctive form and function of the Ed.D. versus the Ph.D. dissertation are certainly important, a remaining shared ontological denominator blurs such distinctions. Simply put, those who wish to earn the doctoral degree must acquire the knowledge and skills that facilitate the design, development, and dissemination of a unique research project that distinguishes the person as a scholarly-practitioner among their peers. The reality is that all persons earning a doctoral degree must engage in the study of research design and method to operationalize the research agenda. Moreover, if the emerging scholarly-practitioner is to impact their field of study or community of practice, the ability to communicate the research design with clarity and technical congruence is essential, regardless of whether one pursues an Ed.D. or a Ph.D. The confluence of the epistemological and axiological form and function debate allows for blurred distinctions between the Ed.D. and the Ph.D. when it comes to the depth and breadth of research methodology and methods knowledge and skills. The rigor and dedication needed to earn each degree parallel even when the ultimate vocational goals of the students differ. While we aimed to clearly distinguish the purpose of the Ed.D.-LOC program from that of the Ph.D., we wanted to ensure that there was no perceptible distinction in the quality of research methodology and methods knowledge. The Ed.D.-LOC program’s design team integrated the distinctive purpose of the Ed.D. with the deliberate inclusion of rigorous research methodology and methods curriculum that ensures all students can demonstrate a wide proficiency of research design knowledge and skills.

The Ed.D.-LOC program’s design team distinguished the Ed.D.-LOC research courses from comparable Ph.D. counter-parts by including the continuous presence of the Problem of Practice dissertation as the conduit for integrating the theoretical and applied knowledge of four research paradigms’ methodology and methods. Embedded within each stage of the Ed.D.-LOC program, is an intense focus on the student’s practitioner-based research project. From the program’s application and admission protocols, throughout each course taken in the program, to the final defense of the Problem of Practice dissertation, the student’s practitioner-based research focus is not simply a capstone but a cornerstone for earning the Ed.D.

The original scope and sequence of research courses making up the Baylor University Ed.D.-LOC program resembled a traditional Ph.D. degree plan where the curricula of the courses focused

exclusively on either the quantitative or qualitative research paradigms with little curricular overlap. Although the development of the Problem of Practice dissertation was an integral component of the original research courses, instructors taught each course from a traditional approach within quantitative and qualitative paradigms and design silos. After continued evaluation of student product development and feedback, the program's design team reconfigured the traditional methods course sequence better align them with the practitioner-inquiry-based Problem of Practice dissertation. In addition, the faculty design team and research faculty engaged in a deliberative dialogue that identified quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, and evaluation as "signature methodologies and methods" that would comprise the core of research courses and that would be fully integrated and embedded within a Problem of Practice dissertation framework.

On the surface, the research courses in the Ed.D. LOC program may appear to be similar to those within any rigorous doctoral program. However, the research courses' faculty decided to adhere to signature research methodologies that are best suited for the Ed.D.-LOC students' skill development that is the distinction. This distinction includes a heavy emphasis on the practical application of each set of skills to the individual student's research area of interest.

During the first term of the Ed.D.-LOC program, students enroll in their first research course: Qualitative Research Analysis. While they are immersed in the technical aspects of qualitative research design specifically related to the five main design approaches (ethnography, narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study), the application of each design is tethered to each student's Problem of Practice focus. The culminating assignment for the course requires students to design, develop and write an in-depth and detailed qualitative research mini-proposal that serves two purposes. First, students can deeply explore existing research related to their Problem of Practice topic. Second, students begin to develop the research agenda that may inform their dissertation.

In the third term of the program, students take both Statistical Methods and Educational Evaluation. The Statistical Methods course builds upon the research framework identified in the Qualitative Research Analysis course (writing research questions, collecting data, analyzing data), but within the quantitative paradigm. The content of this course revolves around an overarching course question that highlights a possible difference between this course and others: "How can quantitative research and statistics make a scholarly-practitioner a better leader and agent of change in their professional or personal life?" Students' understanding of statistics is scaffolded from an introduction to levels of measurement up to regression and analysis of variance, with an emphasis on logic and a conceptual understanding of each statistical procedure.

In Educational Evaluation, students learn how needs assessment and evaluation are critical components in determining if and why programs achieve their intended results and then design a study around these components as they relate to their Problems of Practice and their professions. By constructing a logic model and thinking about research design from a program evaluation perspective, students encounter the practical implications of their newfound research skills. The final traditional research methods course, Mixed Methods Research, occurs in the fourth term of the Ed.D.-LOC program. In this course, students follow two parallel paths simultaneously. On the first path, they learn the tenets of mixed methods research, particularly as these methods apply to the

three core designs (convergent, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential). The course reviews signature research methodologies but within the mixed methods research paradigm. On the second path, students apply these methodologies to their research, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. However, whereas in previous courses they applied their new understandings in an exploratory context, in this course, students compose a first draft of their methods for their Problem of Practice dissertations. This focus creates an energizing and practical environment for students to apply their research knowledge.

Along with the innovative integration and alignment of the quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, and evaluation research curricula with the Problem of Practice dissertation framework, students also complete courses designed to support them as they write their dissertations. Program leadership recognized the need to reconfigure how faculty advisory teams provide students with a comprehensive team of scholars to guide them through their doctoral program and the design, development, and dissemination of their Problem of Practice research projects. In these courses, the students work closely with their faculty advisors to design, conduct, and report on the results of their Problems of Practice dissertations. In term five, they take Problem of Practice Phase 1 and Problem of Practice Phase 2, which is when they write their reviews of the literature and their methods drafts. In term eight, students analyze the results of their studies in Problem of Practice Phase 3. In their final term, students polish, defend, and disseminate their results in the Problem of Practice Capstone course.

In moving to an integrated approach to research methods, the students in the Ed.D.-LOC program emerge with a Problem of Practice dissertation that has both scholarly and practical impacts. The program faculty's commitment to these impacts is a major distinguishing factor between this degree and a traditional Ph.D. The resulting dissertation, and ultimate degree conferral, is not a "Ph.D.-light" (a concern noted by others regarding practitioner-based or professional doctorates; e.g., Edwardson, 2001; Neumann, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006). Rather, the program design team aimed to reorient the same doctoral level of methodological intentionality and rigor around practitioner-oriented concerns and inquiries.

Summary: Reframing the Problem of Practice Dissertation

The most significant changes introduced through continuous review of the Ed.D.-LOC program include streamlining the format and purpose of the literature review chapter to allow students to craft a focused entryway into their Problems of Practice dissertation. Tailoring the research courses to establish a strong foundational methodological and theoretical base while simultaneously facilitating activities with direct application to the unique research goals of the students, and thoughtfully assigning advisors to the student cohorts, made it possible to restructure the Problem of Practice dissertation through the careful scaffolding of research instruction and practice. Because the Ed.D.-LOC program leadership designed the research and methodology courses to guide students on their Problem of Practice dissertation research, adjustments to the Problem of Practice dissertation required adjustments to select aspects of the program curriculum. Thus, the journey of reframing the Problem of Practice dissertation led program leadership to reconsider the horizontal and vertical alignment of program curriculum goals and support systems across the course sequence.



REFRAMING COURSEWORK TO PREPARE FOR THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The Ed.D.-LOC development team designed the course sequence to both facilitate collaboration and broad critical thinking as well as to prepare students for writing their Problem of Practice dissertation. Our goal is to develop a course sequence where students blend theory with practice while also learning and applying the necessary research skills to prepare them to be change-agents through the research and writing process. Guided by professional literature (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Olson & Clark, 2009; Shulman et al., 2006) and using both synchronous and asynchronous learning formats, the Ed.D.-LOC development team designed the cohort-based model to encourage scholarly-practitioners to work as a learning community to embrace issues within their professional fields and engage in critical discussions around both new and future learning opportunities. Working this way, our students use their professional roles as contexts to engage in systematic inquiry.

From the beginning of the program, we embraced our course sequence design as an ongoing process. As we learn from our students about their needs and scholarly development, we engage in constant iterations of specific courses and the course sequence as a whole to meet better our students' learning needs. Our program consists of three years of coursework, which includes four phases of Problem of Practice development courses. The initial course sequence (see Figure 1), included Problem of Practice Phase 1 in Term 3, Problem of Practice Phase 2 in Term 6 Problem of Practice Phase 3 in Term 8, and the Problem of Practice Capstone in term 9. The initial design also included only the Qualitative Research Analysis course to be taken before students began Problem of Practice Phase 1, and the other research courses to be taken either in conjunction with or after the initial Problem of Practice Phase 1 course in Term 3.

Figure 1. Initial Course Sequence

Year	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
Year One	EDC 5392 Issues in Diversity	EDC 5303 Models of Teaching	EDP 5334 Statistical Methods
	EDC 6336 Qualitative Research Analysis	EDC 5391 Social Foundations in Education	EDC 6391 Problem of Practice Phase 1*
Year Two	EDC 5350 Teaching for Understanding	EDC 6360 Instructional Design	EDC 6359 Mixed Methods Research
	EDP 5327 Educational Evaluation	EDP 5333 Psychology of Learning	EDC 6392 Problem of Practice Phase 2*
Year Three	EDC 6361 Leadership and Organizational Change	EDC 6333 Problem of Practice Phase 3	EDC 6365 Philosophy and Ethics in Leadership
	EDC 6362 Community Based Engagement	EDC 6364 Mentoring and Supervision	EDC 6393 Problem of Practice Capstone

After two cohorts matriculated through the first Problem of Practice course, we conducted our own action research as students expressed a need to know more about formal research methods before taking their Problem of Practice courses. Consequently, we realized a shift in the sequence was essential to ensure our students

had both in-depth knowledge of necessary research skills and a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and pedagogical skills necessary to advance as scholarly practitioners. We realigned the course sequence with these concerns in mind (see Figure 2). The new alignment contains two notable differences: the realignment of the Problem of Practice courses and the realignment of the research courses.

Realigning Problem of Practice Courses within the Course Sequence

First, we now offer both Problem of Practice Phase 1 and Problem of Practice Phase 2 courses simultaneously in term 5. Given that students have approximately three years to complete their culminating research projects, faculty recognized the need for students to engage in the literature review process while simultaneously taking courses. Moving Problem of Practice Phase 1 from term 3 to term 5 allowed students more time to explore the research literature on their topics before writing their literature review.

To support students through this process faculty developed a literature review guide and embedded it into courses that precede the Problem of Practice Phase 1 course. This guide is a living document that moves with the student from trimester to trimester. Across four courses, students identify, read, and annotate ten to fifteen articles related to their topic of study. Working this way, the literature review guide ensures that students consistently explore the existing literature on their Problem of Practice research topics. Ideally, students arrive at the Problem of Practice Phase 1 course in Term 5 with a wealth of knowledge on their topics and with a collection of annotated and analyzed literature that will form the foundation for their literature review.

Figure 2. Current Course Sequence

Year	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
Year One	EDC 5392 Issues in Diversity	EDP 5333 Psychology of Learning	EDP 5334 Statistical Methods*
	EDC 6336 Qualitative Research Analysis	EDC 5391 Social Foundations in Education	EDP 5327 Educational Evaluation*
Year Two	EDC 5350 Teaching for Understanding	EDC 6391 Problem of Practice Phase 1*	EDC 6361 Leadership and Organizational Change
	EDC 6359 Mixed Methods Research	EDC 6392 Problem of Practice Phase 2	EDC 6360 Instructional Design
Year Three	EDC 6376 Organizational Change in a Technological Society or EDC 6368 Future Trends in Leadership	EDC 6364 Mentoring and Supervision	EDC 6365 Philosophy and Ethics in Leadership
	EDC 6362 Community Leadership and Collaboration	EDC 6333 Problem of Practice Phase 3	EDC 6393 Problem of Practice Final Phase

Realigning Research Courses within the Course Sequence

The second major change to the course sequence involved moving the research courses before term 5 (Qualitative Research, Statistical Methods, Educational Evaluation, and Mixed Methods Research as described above), thereby allowing students more flexibility to explore and test a variety of methodological designs before committing to one when they write their methodology chapter in Problem of Practice Phase 2. This adjustment ideally allows students to approach the process of developing their research methodology with greater awareness of methodological breadth.

As evidenced by earlier discussions, our faculty engage in individual and collaborative reflection leading to both macro- and micro-level program adjustments. This reflective practice is “an essential part of a circular process that motivates and drives decision-making processes, action planning, and professional learning” and encourages further program development (Feucht et al., 2017, p. 237). At the macro-level, this collaborative reflection led to shifts in how faculty now view the literature review and research methodologies. Likewise, this reflection resulted in the establishment of robust support systems and the modification of the course sequence. These macro-level program improvements created a ripple effect on faculty-designed courses and triggered changes at the micro-level through individual faculty reflection and course revisions. Faculty purposefully integrated student supports into their courses thereby assisting students in the successful completion of the Problem of Practice dissertation. Specifically, faculty now include a literature review guide and content specific experiences, which equip students with skills and knowledge needed to complete the Problem of Practice dissertation.

Summary: Reframing the Course Sequence

Ultimately, continued engagement by faculty in reflective practice leads to further refinement of both the course sequence and individual courses. Given that the program is in its infancy, faculty fully expect to “identify problems, select a strategy to address the issue, implement the strategy, evaluate the results,” and cycle through the problem-solving process until issues are resolved (Feucht et al., 2017, p. 237). Through this practice, faculty hope to create the best possible learning experiences for the Ed.D.-LOC students in which they not only engage in rigorous preparation but also feel guided and supported throughout. To support students through this process, the Ed.D.-LOC program design team create a robust student support system to guide students through this process. As a result, the process of reframing the Problem of Practice dissertation led to the need to realign the course sequence, and to readjust the corresponding student support systems.

REFRAMING STUDENT SUPPORT FOR THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE DISSERTATION

With the stressors and challenges of doctoral work well-recognized, the Ed.D.-LOC design team constructed a student support system to help ensure a positive doctoral experience for students. Lovitts (2001) noted that a sense of community and mentorship are two significant factors in matriculation. These factors are compounded by the fact that our program is completely online,

which complicates the means of developing a community of learners (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Noting these concerns, we established support structures to build community, focus mentorship, and thereby increase student completion rates.

One key element of supporting students is the establishment of processes to ensure that the students know about the various supports available to them, such as library support, the Office of Access and Learning Accommodation, Veteran support, writing center support, the counseling center, and much more. In evaluations, students regularly note the depth of support provided in our Ed.D.-LOC program, making comments such as, “I’ve never attended a school that has done so well in setting their students up for success. Our Baylor University family takes meticulous care in facilitating our growth and development as we transition from professionals to scholarly practitioners.”

Toward this goal of community development, we targeted both academic support as well as emotional and psychological support elements. We designed these elements to accomplish three tasks: to build a community that extends beyond a single course or professor, to provide programmatic structures to promote continuous success, and to provide opportunities for students to display how they apply their scholarly endeavors to lead change in professional practice. We developed these efforts based upon scholarship on the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Task One: Build Community

To accomplish the first task of building community beyond a single course or professor, each cohort receives a fixed set of dedicated faculty advisors who travel with the cohort as they journey through the course sequence and develop their Problem of Practice dissertations beginning in term 5. These faculty advisors serve as the chairs for the Problem of Practice dissertations within the cohort, teach the cohort’s Problem of Practice Phase courses, and serve as the student’s “go-to” person for support, questions, and advice. Though the faculty advisors differ from one cohort to another, they work closely with each other to ensure continuity across the program and to provide the students with program-wide collaborative support and expertise (Swan et al., 2000).

In addition to traveling through the program with dedicated faculty advisors, students are assigned to peer working groups within their cohort, which bring together students who have somewhat similar topics. Initially, the peer working groups receive structured topics for discussion to build cohesion within the groups. As they grow and become more connected and invested in one another’s work, the discussion agenda is set by the group itself. These peer working groups come to function much like Problem of Practice dissertation writing groups and support networks for students. These peer working groups have been a key in creating community among our students. We have found that the students often exceed the required meeting expectation for their peer working groups.

Another strategy for creating a community of learners in our online program is through the Immersion Experiences mentioned earlier. On two occasions during their program, students come to Baylor University’s campus with their cohort to familiarize themselves with the brick-and-mortar university of which they are a part and to experience some of the university’s traditions. During these Immersion Experiences, students meet their faculty advisors and peers face-to-face and attend seminars to educate and inspire. The



benefits of these Immersion Experiences are academic as well as social and have strengthened the networks of support integrated throughout the program.

One final way that program leadership builds a sense of community is through providing periodic, celebratory university swag. When students receive t-shirts, cups, caps, phone covers, and other items displaying the university's insignia, they can openly represent the university and their membership to the community. Students take pride in being associated with a university that has a strong academic reputation and values its students' successes through generous support systems.

Task Two: Build Systems for Academic Support

The second task we undertook was to build programmatic structures to promote continuous success. The most obvious source of programmatic support stems from the corps of people who make up the Ed.D.-LOC program staff. This group includes a Graduate Program Director (full-time, tenured faculty member), Assistant Program Director, Student Services Program Manager, and Director of the Ed.D. Writing Center. Faculty who teach and serve as Faculty Advisors in this program include full-time faculty in the department of Curriculum and Instruction, full-time Lecturers (with a 4/4/4 load on a 12-month contract), full-time faculty from other departments on the university campus, and adjunct faculty.

One essential member of this student support team is the Student Support Advisor. Each student receives a Student Support Advisor who regularly reaches out to students to check on their progress, field any questions they may have about navigating the program, and connect them to available resources. The support advisors assist students in navigating the academic components of the doctoral program (course schedules) as well as the emotional and psychological challenges inherent in a rigorous doctoral program. Support advisors check in with their assigned students bi-weekly or monthly, depending on the need. The support advisors also serve as an intermediary with professors if needed.

One unique source of support is the Ed.D. Writing Center, solely dedicated to helping the Ed.D.-LOC students. The Ed.D. Writing Center staff includes two full-time writing coordinators and three graduate student writing consultants, who are ABD or have defended but not graduated. This team assists students with major writing assignments throughout the program and supports the work of the Faculty Advisors as they facilitate chapter-by-chapter feedback on the development of the Problem of Practice dissertation. Ed.D. Writing Center staff track student progress and develop individualized writing development strategies that help meet the unique needs of each student. One unique aspect of this departmental writing center, however, is that the full-time writing coordinators each qualify to serve as the third reader on students' Problem of Practice dissertation defense committees.

Students can sign up for individual writing consultations once every three weeks. In addition to these individual writing consultations, the Ed.D. Writing Center offers an optional writing course and supplies students with templates and planning documents. The Ed.D. Writing Center closely collaborates with University Librarians to host group writing webinars where students can develop their skills as scholarly researchers and writers. Librarians and Writing Center staff regularly engage in professional development classes covering tips and strategies for effective writers. Intentionality in support systems for students increases the

chance of retention and certainly decreases the chances of attrition caused by feelings of isolation or lack of support. Combined, these programmatic support resources work in conjunction with the community building aspects of the Ed.D.-LOC program to create a network of helpers to which the students may turn with questions or concerns during all stages of their work.

Task Three: Build a System to Recognize Student Achievement

The third task that program leadership undertook when designing the student support systems for the Ed.D.-LOC program was to provide opportunities for students to display how they apply their scholarly endeavors to lead change in professional practice. Engaging, motivating, and rewarding individuals, whether they are employees, students, or leaders, is essential to maintaining a positive professional environment. One way the Ed.D.-LOC program recognizes student success is by inviting students to present their scholarly work (individually, with peers, or faculty). The faculty and staff keep students apprised of opportunities to present at various conferences and to write articles for journals appropriate for their topics. As students share their research ideas and findings, they not only increase the awareness about their research topic, but they also gain valuable insights and feedback from others as they share their work.

Program staff also create social media recognition through platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to highlight student achievements within the program as well as honors and achievements professionally outside of the program. Students in our program have published books, contributed to numerous peer-reviewed journals and edited collections, received significant promotions, won awards, and have presented at a multitude of conferences. These recognitions affirm to the students that the university sees and values their contributions. Additionally, social media recognition encourages a platform where other students in the program can observe and cheer on their peers' achievements.

Three times a year, the Ed.D.-LOC program leaders compose and distribute a newsletter that communicates to students important program information and highlights student work. These newsletters provide academic advice to students, highlight faculty members (helping students get to know them better), recognize students' achievements, and offer announcements about upcoming opportunities, events, and activities. The newsletter is distributed electronically through a variety of methods, and its colorful and professional presentation demonstrates the program's commitment to excellence and care.

Summary: Supporting Students Along the Problem of Practice Journey

In summary, successfully undertaking and completing an online doctorate requires dedication from students and extensive support from program faculty and staff. It is a false assumption to think a well-designed program can be put on autopilot and left alone. Our program's success is attributable to reflexivity, research, trial-and-error learning, design, redesign, and an enduring commitment to building a welcoming community and a comprehensive network of student support. By creating a program that encourages open communication and provides diverse opportunities for students to be heard and recognized we have fashioned an ongoing cycle of



improvement that strengthens each component of the program with every turn. These changes have not only improved the Problem of Practice dissertation, but they have also improved the entire program.

CONCLUSION: FROM PROBLEM OF PRACTICE TO PROGRAM DESIGN

Our commitment to ourselves as faculty, and most importantly to our students, is to continue our responsive efforts to iterate our program goals, outcomes, and design, as needed. Collectively, we feel that this reflective practice not only makes our program more responsive to students' needs but also challenges us as faculty to reflect on our own practices. Furthermore, all of us, in our endeavors as scholars, engage in praxis to act on systems to impact change.

When we set out as a community of practice to draw distinctions between the dissertation process of the traditional Ph.D. and the Ed.D. we knew that changes within our program would follow. We embarked on this journey, in many respects, as participants in the same change process that we seek to equip our students to carry out: we saw a problem in professional practice; we engaged in a careful process of reading, reflection, and assessment; and then we designed a change plan to address the problem under consideration. This journey ultimately led us to reframe not simply the Problem of Practice dissertation, but also our approach to the program course sequence and the student support systems that shepherd students through their research and writing endeavors. Finding answers to the questions we posed about the dissertation process underscores the importance of the relationship between program design, student support systems, and the Problem of Practice dissertation. Alterations to one had logical implications for the others. Yet understanding the complex interrelationships between institutional systems, practices, procedures, and the people that engage them is a foundational element for leading organizational change.

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