

# Reimagining Research Courses for Scholar Practitioners: Rejecting Methodological Binaries

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## ABSTRACT

This essay shares the ongoing efforts of faculty in one EdD program to embrace applied research methodologies and the shifts made in research coursework to support our doctoral candidates as they explore problems of practice. Framed by third space theory, our redesign work is positioned as the lived experience through which we were able to reflect on and change the traditional space of our advanced qualitative and quantitative method courses. We share our journey from conceptualization to teaching what began, but did not conclude, as two distinct courses including the challenges, successes, and subsequent strategies used in our teaching and development. We reflect on the tensions that arose from our preexisting beliefs about research and the needs articulated by our candidates as well as our navigation of those needs.

## KEYWORDS

*dissertation support, research methods, third space theory*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Shulman and colleagues argued for a redesigned EdD to prepare educational leaders able to use academic knowledge to solve educational problems. This proposal was followed in 2007 by the formation of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), which brought together institutions across the nation to begin collaborative cross-context work to redesign the education doctorate and build the capacity of educational leaders as scholar practitioners (Perry & Imig, 2010). Scholar practitioners are educators who use academic, theoretical, and research knowledge to name, frame, and address problems in their local contexts (Adams et al., 2014). With this idea of the scholar practitioner in mind, an intentional part of this redesign is honoring the expertise of doctoral candidates while simultaneously developing their capacities to use knowledge and engage in inquiry (CPED, 2019). Thus, an important part of the work of a CPED influenced EdD program is shifting the ways that research is critically read, used, and put into practice by candidates. This work presents dilemmas for faculty and candidates, as they attempt to engage in innovative and applied research within the confines of traditional methods courses that often position qualitative and quantitative as distinct and separate forms of knowledge and actions. It is our contention that many programs have undoubtedly faced similar challenges between traditional

research methods courses and the innovation needed to support their doctoral candidates as scholar practitioners.

## OUR LOCAL CONTEXT: AN EDD PROGRAM FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

The Assessment Learning and School Improvement (ALSI) EdD program began nearly a decade ago. Its origins drew from conversations between Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) leadership and educational leaders in the region. In particular, many felt that there were many options for doctoral programs but most seemed built more for the purposes of preparing future faculty. In those conversations and with guidance by educational scholars such as Robert Eaker, co-author of *Learning by Doing*, the idea emerged for creation of an EdD aimed primarily for the purpose of educating school staff in broad settings to leverage resources and scholarship to improve practice in K-12 contexts. In other words, the origin of the ALSI EdD is rooted in an attempt to disrupt the traditional EdD with a focus on preparing real world educators in real time to lead change in K-12 educational contexts. This disruption aligns with scholarly arguments presented to reimagine the EdD as a distinct degree from the PhD. However, even origins rooted in a somewhat disruptive nature proved to be insufficient as we engaged with enacting our



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program with candidates. As the program evolved, some of the original program assumptions, namely the use of traditional methodology coursework to support educators to leverage resources and scholarship in K-12 contexts, were challenged.

The addition of new faculty to the team led to a reconsideration of the original program purpose. This resulted in the clarification of collective commitments, a shared mission and vision, and a renewed intent to help candidates become scholar practitioners who are change agents for improving learning for all. This renewed intent has led to continued discourse among our faculty about what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and in what ways our program can best realize program goals for our candidates. One topic of continued debate is the role of methods coursework for scholar practitioners with a concerted focus on the utility of positioning quantitative and qualitative research as distinct. In this essay, we articulate the most recent iteration of seeking to disrupt these oppositional ideas with the aim of reimagining research design experiences for candidates in ways that honor the complexity of educational research in real-world contexts.

To share and reflect on our redesign of the advanced methods courses, we center third space theory as a conceptual framework to consider and make sense of the utility of our continued positioning of qualitative and quantitative methods courses as distinct and oppositional. We then share the journey from conceptualization to teaching what began, but did not conclude, as two distinct courses including the challenges, successes, and subsequent strategies used in our teaching and development. We reflect on the tensions that arose from our preexisting beliefs about research and the needs articulated by our candidates as well as our response to those needs. Finally, we share the ways navigating the advanced methods courses as complementary versus oppositional led to unexpected successes and new ideas for program improvement.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THIRD SPACE THEORY

One way to make sense of our redesign and ultimate rejection of qualitative and quantitative research courses as methodological binaries is through third space theory. Defined by Soja (1996) third space is a “lived space as a strategic location from which to encompass, understand, and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously” (p.68). Soja (1996) further positioned the third space as “the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious – and unconsciously spatial—effort to improve the world in some significant way” (p. 22). Flessner (2014) added the notion of a third space as opening the possibility of developing new and important meaning of the initial binary spaces, such as our understanding as faculty of teaching qualitative and quantitative research.

To capitalize on this possibility, remaining open to reinterpretation and reconstructed meanings in context is of vital importance. With this open stance, we collaborated to support the research of our candidates and opened a starting point to re-imagine methodological binaries while simultaneously changing the literal and conceptual space of our methods courses. Our journey began as we struggled with the binary of qualitative and quantitative methodologies as historically understood.

## THE BINARY OF QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODS COURSES

The research sequence at the time directly preceding the advanced methods redesign was structured much like a PhD program in which learning to conduct research was delineated by oppositional traditions. As such, doctoral candidates took three research methods courses that included Introduction to Qualitative Research, Introduction to Quantitative Research and either Advanced Qualitative or Advanced Quantitative Research. The idea was one from a traditionalist mindset: namely, that candidates at this latter point would choose one approach - either quantitative or qualitative - that would drive their thinking on the culminating work of their dissertation. The three credit advanced methods courses are taught over three weekends with readings and tasks between meetings. While the three credit courses were defined in traditional ways, it is important to note that as a program we began to reject these binaries within three one-credit research seminars. These seminars are more fluid spaces and currently included an introduction to action research, writing strategies, and former candidate examples related to all dissertations regardless of methodology.

The ALSI program director led most research design courses in the past but two new members were identified to take the lead, initially in distinct areas of qualitative or quantitative research. This stemmed in part from the program director's past experience which adopted the paradigm of these modes of inquiry as largely distinct, however, his research has often utilized mixed methods. In doing so, these binary paradigms were not as engrained into how things need to be. Dr. Hooser, has a history of teaching Action Research, Introduction to Qualitative and Advanced Qualitative Research. Both her personal epistemology and the positioning of these courses align mostly with qualitative traditions. For the newly created Advanced Methods course, her goal was for candidates to understand the elements of research design as parts of an interconnected whole and to provide opportunities for candidates to experience and deepen their understandings of research design to explore problems of practice. While Dr. Evert has a history of teaching quantitative methods courses (Introduction to Statistics and Advanced Quantitative Methods), her research tends to engage in mixed methods research. Her goal for this course was for doctoral candidates to understand how quantitative and qualitative methods can be complementary tools for approaching the study of problems of practice.

As two educators who taught in the opposite introductory courses, we saw that our candidates were resisting making a declaration of their work as either qualitative or quantitative and were hesitant to register for courses as they were not certain which to choose. Thus, we removed the barrier for our candidates and merged the two distinct courses into one crossover course. This decision was met with unanimous agreement and outright relief from our candidates. Moving into a new semester, with a new course in play, we drew on our distinct areas of expertise as we planned ways to support our candidates in reaching a common end goal – a draft of their dissertation methods chapter- regardless of the tradition they chose. As we planned for this merged space, we embraced a new logic drawn from our previous understandings of research while reimagining what research could be for our candidates.

## TENSIONS IN BEGINNING THE RE-DESIGN: PLANNING AND ENACTING WEEKEND ONE

To prepare for the upcoming combined methods course, the lead faculty sent a pre-class template to the doctoral candidates, which was adapted from Bhattacharya (2019). This template asked the candidates to identify their topics of study, to situate the topics within both their local contexts and the broader literature base, and also to share their thinking around the collection and analysis of data including descriptions of the purpose of their proposed work. The final questions on the template asked candidates to choose verbs often aligned with different traditions (e.g., evaluate, explain, interrogate) and to choose a preferred way of thinking (messy or linear). From the responses that the candidates provided to this pre-class template, it became immediately apparent that our doctoral candidates were not ready to declare a methodological binary. In addition, while problems of practice were clearly named, although as expected were not yet fully developed, there was an overall inconsistency in responses designed to elicit ways of knowing that did not fall cleanly within one tradition, and at times, outright rejected our attempts in favor of more practical uses of research.

These rejections of our attempts to probe for methodological alignment took varied forms. For example, three candidates chose all data collection strategies named. Another candidate declared her preferred way of thinking was “messy and structured” versus choosing either messy and contradictory or linear and structured while over half of the candidates choose both. Another way our candidates chose to align their research plans with their daily lives as practitioners was in describing the purposes of the studies. For example, one candidate shared her purpose as “to evaluate, understand and attempt to replicate.” While we had hoped this might provide us clues on methodological leanings, instead we were reminded about the ways she saw her research as a part of her practice as a data-driven leader. Finally, one candidate blatantly declared her data collection as “wide open. I don’t really have a preference. I’m willing to do any of these for my study to be successful and for me to gather the information I need to gather.” She further stated that, “I am definitely drawn to more linear and structured thinking (very type A, I know this is shocking to everyone ha!), but I know that my topic can be very messy, ambiguous, and contradictory.” Across their responses, our candidates clearly signaled the purpose of their research as grounded in practical ways of knowing that were embedded in the messy nature of schools and the routines of their lives as leaders for change.

Thus, we set out to help our candidates consider ways of knowing (both epistemologically and methodologically) that felt right for their work as scholar practitioners. We created a folder that included four empirical studies related to the candidate’s problem of practice that spanned qualitative and quantitative ways of knowing and an assignment that was part reflection on elements that resonated with their thinking and part annotated bibliography chart. As we planned for weekend one, the intended goal was for candidates to be able to name a specific methodology, within a mostly qualitative or quantitative space. At that point, faculty could lean into their expertise to support and help narrow candidate work moving forward with this selection of either/or as a hinge point in the process.

In addition, despite creating the combined class as a literal third space, our organization remained aligned around somewhat traditional ideas of research and what we thought were the

methodological interests of our candidates. We planned during the first weekend to share different research designs with candidates from more qualitative to quantitative ways of knowing. For each design, we shared an overview of the purpose of the method, data sources, analysis, and the role of the researcher. The designs we shared included, in this order, arts-based research, critical theory, action research, ethnography, narrative, phenomenology, phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2019), grounded theory, improvement science, case study (Yin, 2017), mixed methods, and survey methods. Although many of these methodologies can be framed across the continuum of qualitative and quantitative research, we shared in this way based on our areas of our expertise as well as attempting to not overwhelm students with too many choices.

## NAVIGATING THE RE-DESIGN PROCESS: CREATING A FLUID LEARNING SPACE

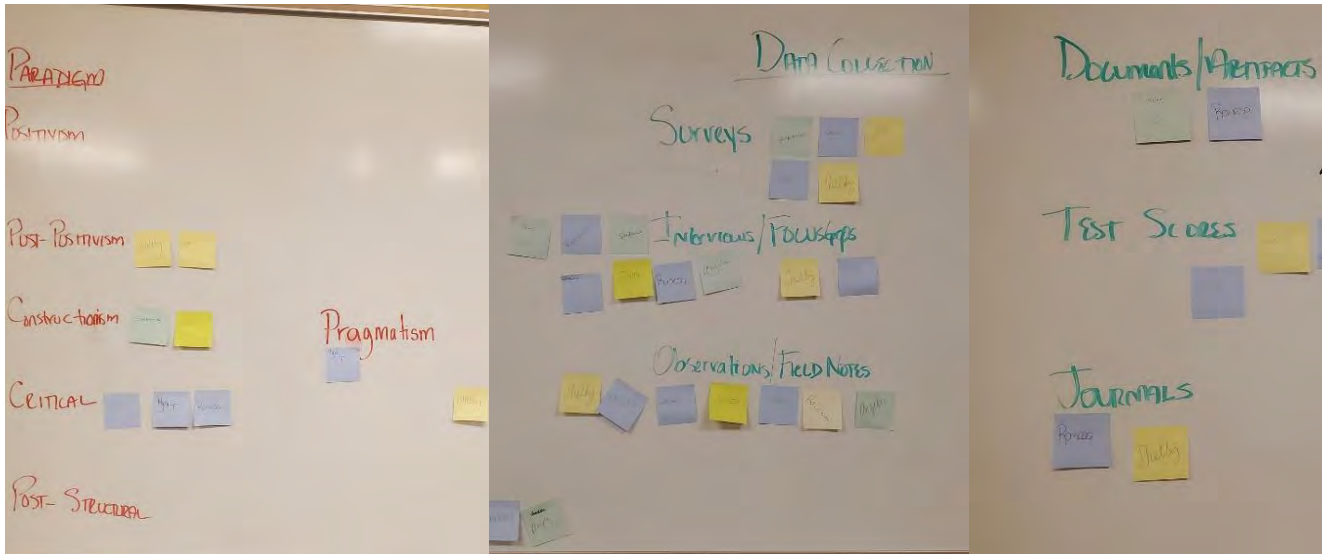
As described above, ALSI courses are taught in three weekends across the semester. In this course, we organized each weekend around general topics which were then individualized for each candidate. Weekend one centered around the research design that candidates planned to use for their dissertations. Common designs chosen by candidates included: action research, improvement science, case study, self-study, and arts-based. In this weekend, after reviewing the topics that they had learned in their introductory-level courses, candidates began to align themselves with different epistemologies, research designs, and data collection tools based on how they were envisioning their dissertations, of which an example can be seen in Figure 1.

This board became a roadmap for us as we planned how to meet the needs of each candidate. Across weekend one, this occurred through individual conferences with candidates in which the instructors’ helped candidates think through multiple research design and determine which best fit their problems of practice and vision for exploration. After deciding on a research design, candidates were then assigned customized methodological readings to examine during work time in class and before the next weekend meeting. For example, if a candidate had chosen case study, they were then assigned to read Yazan (2015) which described three approaches to case study and then the book by either Merriam (1998), Stake (2020), or Yin (2017). A second methodological reading was assigned if a candidate was unsure of an approach that met their needs.

As we engaged in this individualized structure, we did not seek to require research that was either quantitative or qualitative. Instead, conferences and candidate readings centered around different strategies candidates could use to understand their problems of practice. Through taking this individualized approach, we had begun, but did not yet fully realize, to push back on the distinct methodological spaces. In their reflections after weekend one, candidates universally expressed an appreciation for the individual conferences that focused on their problems of practice first, while exploring multiple possible methodologies and ways of knowing. For example, in her post-weekend reflections, one candidate shared that in her conference:

I appreciated the ‘guardrails’ that Dr. E and Dr. H invoked to give me freedom of thought, but within reason. I didn’t feel pigeonholed or stuck; I truly felt like my ideas were heard and respected which makes it possible for me to move forward with confidence.

Figure 1. Board of Candidate Designs



Another candidate shared similar praise for the conferences reflecting that “the one-on-one conferences yielded great conversations and valuable insight for strategizing how to tackle my research. There are many methodologies to choose. Selecting the right method to apply to your research yielded me a clearer vision for my topic.”

Furthermore, in these post-weekend reflections, we saw some evidence that through teaching this course together and focusing candidates on individual conferences around their problems of practice, that while problems of practice became more narrowed in focus, they continued to think about research in ways that both embraced qualitative and quantitative methods while resisting an alignment that was solely one space. For example, one candidate shared:

What stands out to me about quantitative/qualitative research embedded in my thoughts on the dissertation design is how concepts work in tandem to match what we want to study. I'm also seeing there isn't one way [to research] but one way that seems to fit best based on the research question and how we believe to make sense of answering it.

In effect, our students were teaching us ways of making sense of qualitative and quantitative methodologies that centered their problems of practice and beliefs as educators as an entry point for understanding research.

As instructors, we had similar thoughts at the end of weekend one. We wanted to make sure that candidates saw the research strategies and tools of each discipline as potential options to explore their research topics that they could use fluidly. This goal was reflected in how we structured weekends two and three as we leaned into conferences and presented multiple options for data collection and analysis strategies that celebrated the strengths of each tradition and honored the beliefs and sense-making of our candidates.

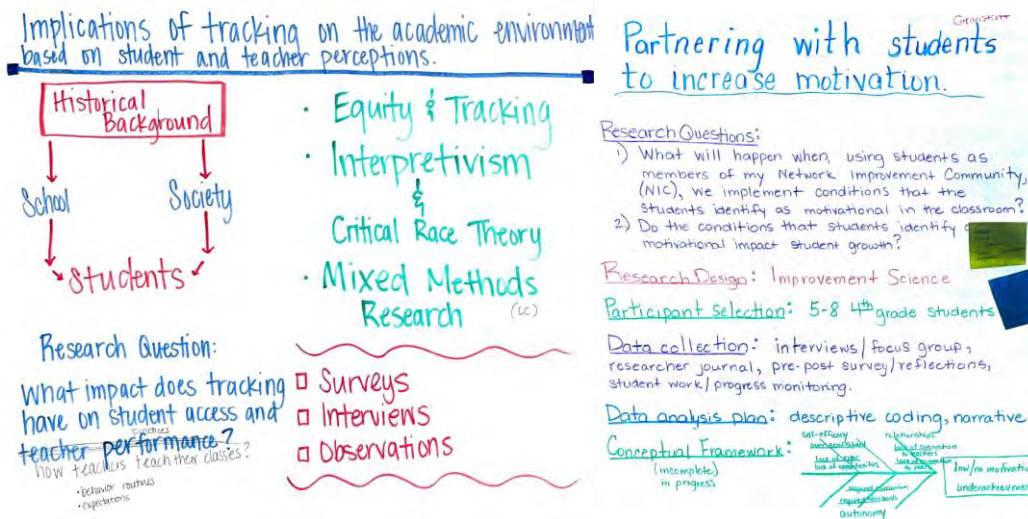
## TEACHING IN THE THIRD SPACE: EXPERIENCES FROM COURSEWORK IN WEEKENDS TWO AND THREE

In weekend two, we focused on data collection tools centered within different approaches to seeking knowledge and perspectives on their work. Based on how candidates sorted themselves on the board in weekend one (see Figure 1), we reviewed epistemologies and paradigms and then planned for different modules that candidates could attend based on their dissertation plans. For example, all 13 candidates planned to use interviews in their studies, so the two instructors co-taught the module regarding how to construct interview protocols. The quantitative researcher shared a more positivist approach to interview design, while the qualitative researcher shared a more interpretivist approach. In the second module, candidates chose one of three options: (1) they could attend a session on observation protocols led by the qualitative researcher, (2) they could attend a session on survey design led by the quantitative researcher, or (3) if they did not plan to use either method in their dissertations, they could remain in the original classroom and work on writing their interview protocols or methods draft.

Weekend three centered around data analysis and was constructed similarly to weekend two. The entire class was together for a conversation regarding terminology and strategies for analyzing their interview transcripts. The quantitative and qualitative researchers described different approaches and coding strategies based on their epistemologies. In the latter half of the weekend, candidates had the opportunity to attend a session on either: (1) observation analysis, (2) survey analysis, or (3) work on analyzing the transcript they came to class with or their methods chapter draft.

The course culminated in a gallery walk of candidates' final research plans (see Figure 2 for examples). These posters demonstrate candidate understanding of how to align a problem of practice, research questions, methodology and data collection, and

Figure 2. Sample Candidate Posters



analysis plans into strong working drafts to move forward in thinking about their dissertations.

In our work across this course, we focused on building candidates' research toolboxes by resisting the traditional qualitative and quantitative binary and embracing both as needed to be a potentially powerful way to connect research to our candidates' experiences as practitioners. In their lives in schools, the teachers, coaches, and administrators in our program are very accustomed to finding ways to solve problems that arise in their contexts. We taught this advanced methods course by beginning with their problems of practice and honoring their ways of knowing. In addition, we presented a survey of data tools and analytic strategies as possibilities with consistent conferencing to negotiate ways knowing that could be applied to candidates' problems of practice. In this way, candidates began to understand distinct aspects of their problems of practice and learned to approach research in manners similar to their practitioner lives. And we learned how to better support them as they engaged in this work.

## REFLECTION ON RE-DESIGN AND MOVING FORWARD

Through engaging in this course, we found that creating a literal third space by combining courses and being open to a conceptual third space led by our candidates, allowed us to support their exploration of problems of practice at a deeper and more nuanced level. In this course, enacted as a literal and conceptual third space, advanced research methods learning was individualized through conversations across multiple epistemologies, paradigms, tools, terms, and examples. Instead of building experts in one research methodology or the other, we began to build scholar practitioners who are able to align problems of practices with their epistemologies and preferred paradigms and then matched research tools and analytic strategies to their ways of knowing. In their final course evaluation forms, candidates shared that this more individualized structure helped them better prepare for the dissertation process. For example, one candidate shared "Dr. H and Dr. E provided opportunities that were intentional and unique to the needs of their

candidates. I am very thankful to have had this course." We feel that this intentional customization of the course allowed candidates to individually construct their research toolboxes with their contexts and sense-making at the core.

As instructors, situating the work of our scholar practitioners as grounded in epistemologies and paradigms rather than methodological traditions gave us the opportunity to collaborate in ways previously not possible. We became thought partners with each other and the candidates who explored different approaches to study problems of practice of importance to their contexts while supporting each other as colleagues. In addition, we met their practical needs as educators, using methodologies as practitioners, while helping them see themselves as scholars able to position themselves within epistemologies and paradigms of research. Through teaching this course, we were able to think with and beyond traditional binaries to promote dissertation designs meaningful to our candidates that reflected this third space.

For the program, this course presented an opportunity to consider what it means to prepare scholar practitioners outside of the traditional inherited structures. Initially for both us and the candidates, the traditional constructs of having advanced qualitative and advanced quantitative candidates were a difficult binary to think beyond. Both the instructors and the candidates strived to classify the dissertations as either quantitative or qualitative. While we pride ourselves as faculty in being open-minded and critical about improving our program, unintentional assumptions about research were still present. We came to realize that the structures of the program and paradigms that had been embedded since its origin tacitly – and overtly – pushed candidates and ourselves to try to frame topics within these binaries but that in their local contexts our candidates were seeking to make meaning in more nuanced ways. We feel that this individualized approach to planning for investigations of problems of practice will better support our scholar practitioners to continue research in their space, and on their terms, beyond their time enrolled in the program.



## CONCLUSION

Rejecting rigid structures inherited in traditional research design opened a space that allowed for the full exploration of candidates' problems of practice. This combined advanced methods course permitted a more thorough exploration of research design possibilities and promoted a space that honored personal epistemologies and paradigms as ways of knowing. In this third space, doctoral candidates were able to understand research in ways beyond qualitative versus quantitative. Instead, they were able to learn from two collaborative faculty members how the tools in each domain can complement each other to fully explore problems of practice in their contexts. Thus, as faculty members, we are now thinking about what it means to situate candidates' problems of practice and beliefs about knowing as the starting point engaging in research that resists the traditional binaries of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

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