
The Dissertation in Practice Experience

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In the fall of 2011, the University of Hawai‘i College of Education initiated its Doctorate in Professional Educational Practice (EdD) program with the first cohort of thirty students. These students, representing diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, began a three-year voyage of coursework and collaborative inquiry in applying research in practice. The program design included rigorous coursework and two major projects focused on the resolution of specific problems of practice. The first, a consultancy project, aimed at working with clients in the local community to utilize the application of research in solving problems arising from the educational practice of clients. The program culminated with each student conducting an independent research study of their choice and publishing their findings in a dissertation. The EdD program distinguishes itself from the PhD program in that it provides an opportunity for students to explore a problem of practice and allows practical applications of the findings in the dissertation. The two authors of this chapter are graduates of the first cohort of the EdD program (2011–2014) and share their perspectives on the dissertation experience.

Making Meaning of School closure - Joshua C. Watson

Dissertation Summary

Although it is a rare occurrence, independent schools do close occasionally. When this happens, the people in the school may find themselves at a loss as to how to make sense of it all. This dissertation examined the effect that school closure had on the employees of an independent school in the state of Hawai‘i; it was written during the last year of operation and after the closure of the school where the author was employed. Through an investigation of the literature, records of the participant-researcher’s own experience, and a series of interviews with school employees who experienced closure or near-closure, this

study addressed the research question, “How do school employees personally experience the closure of their employing school?”

Reflections on the Dissertation Process

Given that the dissertation is an invention of nineteenth century Europe, with roots that stretch even further back in the historical tradition of scholarship, one might wonder whether it even has a place in a modern day graduate program. This may be particularly true when one considers that the field of education emerged somewhat later as a separate and distinct academic discipline, a goal of inquiry in itself, rather than only the method of transmission of knowledge from other disciplines. Yet, even now in the twenty-first century, on the other side of the planet, in a field previously undefined, the dissertation is a crucial ligament binding together the threads of scholarship, reflection, and practice that any graduate program in education seeks to strengthen. Indeed, in producing my own dissertation, I observed that my life began to resemble what I had imagined as the ascetic, even monastic, flavor of the life of a budding European scholar from hundreds of years ago. Whether carefully hand writing page after page by candlelight surrounded by stacks of books and notes, or carefully composing a single sentence at a time by the light of a laptop (although still surrounded by stacks of books and notes), the dissertation process channels one’s scholarly insights and anneals one’s intellectual personality into a disciplined, organized, and therefore meaningful, format.

As a student in the first-ever EdD program offered by the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I spent three years learning more deeply about, and reflecting on, the profession of education as practiced by myself and others. The capstone of this sequence was the writing of a dissertation, a first foray into the production of serious scholarly work. I chose as my topic the closing of an independent school, and as it happened, the data I needed for my research were everywhere around me—I was living through exactly that scenario. Thus, my research was

not abstract or theoretical; it was a real examination of the lived experience of educators. For me, it served as a fitting culmination to a program aimed at producing a generation of reflective practitioners in education; a program that deliberately eschews ivory tower academia in favor of developing the practice of those who actually do the work.

Our program was academically rigorous. Indeed, I was challenged to stretch my understanding in every cohort class meeting. In the process of researching and writing a dissertation, I was stuck, stymied, stalled, and ultimately spurred to growth in a way that can only occur when presenting an intellectually serious argument through clear writing. Make no mistake, it was difficult. But it was meant to be difficult. In many ways, writing a dissertation is the ultimate reflective practice. In so doing, I evolved as a reflective practitioner in ways I could not have foreseen at the outset of the program. Thus, I was able to make my own small contribution to a tradition that stretches around the world and across the centuries.

Key Factors Attributing to the Development of Successful Women Leaders in the Hawai'i Department of Education - Lynn T. Mochizuki

Dissertation Summary

Although more women are now in leadership positions in Hawai'i, the number of women in leadership roles does not equally represent the percentage of women in the teacher population. The data on women in leadership is sparse and inconsistently collected in general, but especially in Hawai'i. In addition, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) provides various tables that have varying data reported in previous and subsequent years (USDE and NCES 2004, 2008). The problem is not easily identified or acknowledged without a formal and consistent data reporting system. As a result, there are few programs or research in Hawai'i addressing the development of leadership in women. My research involved a qualitative case study of five women leaders who work or have previously worked in administrative positions in the Hawai'i State Department of Education. Through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, my study explored factors that influenced the development of women leaders in Hawai'i and empowered them to enter into leadership positions.

Unexpected Impact

I began my dissertation journey by stumbling through the initial stages of deciding upon what to study. What did I want to study that could sustain my interest throughout the life of the EdD program? Incredulously I also wondered, what contribution could I possibly add to the existing body of knowledge by well-established researchers? How could I, as a mere doctoral candidate, make an impact in any way?

Little did I realize how much could happen in such a short amount of time. Although there were definite moments of anxiety and stress that naturally come with writing a dissertation, the collective moments of the EdD journey would unfold in a way that transformed my frame of reference. It changed the way I saw the world, in the way I made meaning of my experiences, and ultimately, in the way I saw myself. While focusing on what I could honestly contribute to the existing knowledge, little did I realize how my study would profoundly transform myself.

I was extremely fortunate to be able to study five amazing women leaders who took time out of their busy lives to share with me their leadership journeys. All of the women shared with me intimate stories of their life that helped shape their development into a leader. It is an understatement to say that it was an honor and a privilege to be able to hear their stories and insights of how they developed and became well-established and respected leaders. As I engulfed myself in the data of interview transcriptions, I began to realize how the beginnings of their journeys were similar to one another, and surprisingly, similar to my own.

When I started the EdD program, I did not see myself as a leader, and I marveled at my colleagues who were well-established leaders as principals and heads of schools. I felt out of place, often wondering how I had been admitted into the program and whether I should really be in the program. Then, as I sifted through the transcripts filled with stories of these women who began their leadership journeys not feeling or seeing themselves as leaders, I began to identify with them. And as I continued to immerse myself in the data—while coding and analyzing all of it—I began to internalize the lessons they learned.

At the time, I did not realize what was happening. When writing a dissertation, there is very little you notice outside of your study. In hindsight, however, I can see how, incrementally, I began to change the view of myself, gain

courage through the women's stories, and change how I see my impact as a leader. It felt as if I lived through all of their experiences and developed into a leader as they shared their journeys. As I wrote in my dissertation:

In discussing the findings and implications of this study, I could not help but reflect on the impact of this research on my personal growth as a future woman leader. Conducting this research provided me with an outside perspective when listening to their stories and traveling with them as they reminisced about their leadership journeys. Unconsciously, however, I also held an insider perspective as I internalized the lessons from their experiences and gained more confidence with each story they shared. Upon reflection, I realized that I began to identify with these women leaders. I was surprised that they shared my sentiments about leadership—that they did not see themselves as leaders in the beginning, and they lacked confidence in their abilities. Perhaps it was that echoing of my personal fears that created a connection to these women leaders and I began to grow along with their stories. (Mochizuki 2014, 149–150)

Writing a dissertation is a daunting and rigorous process that stretches you beyond what you thought possible. If you love what you study, it becomes a passion that sustains you through the stringent requirements. And, as dubious as this may sound, there is a part of you that will miss it after the completion of your project. All of the work and time spent tirelessly putting it together creates a fierce sense of ownership and pride when you finally complete it. In some ways the saying “Ignorance is bliss” is true. You cannot help but be transformed by the dissertation process itself—it changes the way you see the world and forces you to realize that with that understanding comes the responsibility of doing something about it.

Closing

Though the two authors pose different perspectives on their dissertation experience, both views provide a glimpse into the process of writing a dissertation in practice. The experience provided an opportunity for reflective inquiry with impacts that resonated on professional and personal levels.

For Lynn, the dissertation experience transformed the way she viewed herself as a leader. As she reflected in the final chapter of her dissertation:

As mentioned before, my own story resonated with the beginning stories of the women leaders. Unconsciously, I began to hear and trust my own voice in making decisions or taking initiatives for things I believed to be right. Outwardly, my actions showed a larger confidence in taking the lead and advocating for the benefit of the educational system. By identifying with the women leaders, I began to see the possibility of one day becoming a woman leader. It was a thought I had fleetingly dismissed before, but now could see it as a viable option. With the right people around to offer guidance and encouragement and the right experiences and opportunities to grow and evolve, leadership is now a part of my future. (Mochizuki 2014, 150–151)

Even after graduates receive their doctoral degrees, the EdD dissertation in practice continues to impact the everyday life of its newly transformed leaders. The way in which they see and navigate the world around them is forever changed. The manner in which they interpret, process, and address problems-in-practice becomes the new norm as they apply the knowledge and skills gained through the experience. The dissertation process is meant to be difficult in order to allow individuals to explore and grow beyond what they ever thought possible. It is the beauty of the experience that creates transformational changes in the individuals who persevere through it.

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