Mentoring the Consultancy Project: Lessons in Collaboration and Research

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The *consultancy project* is the first of two key projects that candidates in the EdD program are required to complete. It provides students opportunities to apply research and leadership skills to a real-world problem of practice in a collaborative venture with schools and community organizations. The goal of the consultancy is to provide clients with a set of advisory recommendations based on a doctoral level inquiry into an agreed upon problem of practice.

The idea of professional practitioners and graduate faculty collaborating to support student consultancy groups emerged at an early point in the planning of the EdD degree in Professional Educational Practices at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa. The collaboration was natural. The program founder, Professor Hunter McEwan of the Department of Educational Foundations, put together a planning committee that comprised professors, independent school leaders, and Hawai'i Department of Education personnel. The unique combination of established leaders (community mentors) and university faculty supported a program design that embedded this kind of collaboration.

The *dissertation in practice,* the second major project in the program, also includes practitioner mentors who sit on students' dissertation committees. The experience of the mentors for cohort I consultancies helped to refine the role for cohort II mentors.

Students in cohort I included school principals and academic division deans, teachers with some administrative duties, university and college program directors, and independent school heads. Cohort I students came from, in roughly equal proportion, public and charter schools, independent schools, universities and community colleges, and the Kamehameha Schools. A few had consulting experience already. The twenty-six cohort members were drawn from an applicant pool of nearly eighty. The ability to write well, demonstrated in several assignments in the application process, was a major factor in admission. Those

doing the selection, then, were choosing people with experience and a track record of success in communicating with others.

The Origins of the Consultancy Requirement

The idea of requiring the consultancy as one of two major projects of the degree program gained currency when the University of Hawai'i program director, Professor McEwan, and his colleagues attended *convenings* (a CPED term) of the Carnegie Project in the Education Doctorate (CPED), a consortium of graduate programs across the nation of which the UH program is a part. The UH EdD planning committee learned about how other CPED members used consultancy as a teaching method. The UH program planning committee had also looked at other graduate programs at UH Mānoa that focused on developing practitioners, like medicine and business, and found variations on the consultancy experience.

The planning committee expected that the consultancy projects would provide students with many learning opportunities: how to work with a team; how to help others; how to frame the question the clients really meant to ask; how to put together a meaningful review of the literature; how to collect and analyze data specific to a situation to provide clients with "value added;" and how to communicate their findings effectively.

The planning committee recognized that the students, in their professional careers, might well be in the position of hiring consultants for projects. By having the experience of engaging with a client to work on a significant problem of practice, the students would come to understand what is involved from the consultant perspective. That knowledge could prove useful to emerging institutional leaders.

The corps of mentors for cohort I included school heads and principals who had hired consultants and others who had experience as professional consultants. With their backgrounds in both public and private education, K–12 and collegiate settings, and instructional and administrative

roles, the mentors were well-positioned to advise consultant groups regarding processes, assumptions, and understandings unique to particular segments of education. A challenge for the mentors came in an early meeting of the mentors with the program director that focused on developing rubrics for the assessments. The goal was to create consistency with the evaluation of work done in other graduate degree programs when assessing the students' literature reviews, methodologies, findings, etc.

Several of the mentors had attended CPED convenings. This proved quite helpful to the UH group as it was initiating its professional practitioner program. One bit of wisdom to emerge from a conversation at a convening at the University of Vermont alerted mentors to the notion that clients seeking the help of consultants frequently were not able to state precisely what they needed.

The Experiences of the Consultant Groups

Refining the scope of the research for the consultancy project proved to be challenging. Several consultancy projects spent "their first month of meetings with clients helping the people proposing projects to figure out what they really wanted," said one of the mentors, Dr. D. Rodney Chamberlain, formerly Kamehameha Schools vice president. In a survey of advisors and mentors for students in cohort I conducted by the program chair, achieving clarity about the purposes of the consultancy was a major recommendation for cohort II. Likewise, achieving consistency in the frequency of access consultants had with clients was noted as an area for improvement.

Dr. Chamberlain, a previous EdD mentor expressed, "a few of the external groups were not happy with the results, not because of the poor quality of the projects but because of the conclusions that were not as flattering as these groups wanted." Of course, this lesson was useful for students to learn and for people hiring consultants to anticipate. Similarly, the student-consultants came to understand that the consultancy process, if it were successful, might well shatter assumptions they might have brought to the work.

The actual experience of students as consultants helped to shape the program, perhaps a bit of designing the plane while flying. Another mentor, Catherine Payne, a retired principal from the Hawai'i Department of Education and chairperson of the Hawai'i State Commission on Charter Schools noted, "The first cohort of EdD students set off

on a journey that did not have clear pathways as we worked to create an experience that would strengthen them as education leaders in Hawai'i. They helped us build a strong program and left a legacy for those in the second cohort who are moving forward on much clearer paths."

"I was touched by their resiliency and support for one another through the challenges," she continued, "and by their dedication to our important profession. The rich diversity of personal experiences and educational settings meant that these first Professional Educational Practice students are now working and making a difference for students throughout the state…and beyond. It was an honor to have been part of this experience connecting leaders to deeper thinking about the meanings inherent in the work of educators and schools."

Still another mentor, Dr. Robert Peters, retired head of Hanahauoli School, an independent JK–6 school, focused on the intended outcome for the students, noting that the consultancy "resonated with what I believe to be important in education, which encourages students and requires them to get into the real world and deal with the dynamics of that world. Much of education does not have that context and is very sterile as a result."

The Role of Mentors

Cohort I mentors also noted the importance to the planning of cohort II of achieving clarity about the role of the mentor and the importance of building good relationships between the mentors and the student/consultants. The mentors noted, too, how helpful it was for a mentor to have experience in something related to the project in order to optimize his or her capacity to offer useful guidance.

Gauging the right amount of guidance that mentors should be providing was also an important area of learning in cohort I. In many instances, mentors were well-positioned to insure that consultancy groups got on the calendars of the busy clients they sought to serve, given the mentors' own professional contacts. Because the mentors were leading or had led their own institutions, they had life experience that could be tapped by students as they prepared their proposals for work to be performed or possible interpretations of specific situations. Mentors, as well as faculty advisors, proved helpful to students as they conducted literature reviews, framed research questions, and prepared for their interaction with clients.

But the work, of course, was the students' to do. As a mentor of the program, I adopted the position of "speaking when spoken to," responding to the queries of my students more than volunteering new information. So did the other mentors. This, too, added verisimilitude to the experience of the students as consultants. The students needed to determine when they needed the counsel mentors could provide. Knowing what to ask, when, and of whom had been a valuable lesson for this mentor in his career as both consultant and institutional leader and he now passed that lesson on to the students. Without question, if the consultancy experience was to be successful, conclusions and recommended courses of actions needed to be the work of the students alone, however tempting it might have been for the mentor to offer advice.

Advisors and mentors grappled with other decisions for cohort I that would optimize the learning experience for the students. Again, the experience of other CPED schools was helpful, but it was also clear that each CPED program had made its own set of decisions. For example, mentors set the number of students to be engaged as a team of consultants. The size of group varied from three to five in cohort I; three seemed too few and five was too many for some of the projects. In cohort I, advisors and the program chair assigned students to consultancy groups with some degree of student agency. For cohort II, all students were able to participate in their first choice of consultancy group.

Another critical question was what graduate coursework would make sense to occur before or coincident with the consultancy project. Methods classes? Statistics/data analysis? Leadership workshops? The experience of cohort I has informed the decisions for cohort II on these questions.

There were four objectives identified in the rubric for assessment of consultancy projects developed by the faculty and mentors:

1. working collaboratively to solve problems and implement plans of actions,

2. applying research to bring about improvements in practice,

3. reflecting critically and ethically on matters of educational importance, and

4. developing a broad interdisciplinary perspective on the project.

Mentors were involved in assessing each of these areas, first independently, and then in concert with the UH faculty advisor. Generally speaking, the performance of the students was first-rate.

Student response to the work of the mentors was positive as well. The depth and breadth of mentor experience proved helpful to many consultancy groups, both in terms of the subject matter of the project and in developing a sense of the 'lay of the land" for various clients. Students noted that the experience of conducting a literature review for the consultancy, with mentors available to offer guidance, was helpful when they approached the literature review for their dissertations in practice.

Looking Forward

A welcome benefit of the experience of cohort I has been the availability of some graduates to serve cohort II as mentors. They have been involved since the beginning of the consultancy process for cohort II, offering feedback regarding proposals from consultancy clients, and advising regarding the process by which cohort II students selected the consultancies they were to undertake. This group of experienced cohort I participants has provided a perspective on the consultancy process that helped to refine what was already a good program and make it into a better one.

Several cohort I mentors continued to work with the students as mentors for their dissertations in practice. In this research and writing process the students noted the benefit to having someone who had been through a related professional experience as a voice in the guidance of the dissertation. All of the mentors for cohort II consultancies have remained involved in dissertation committees related to their respective fields of practice. Once more, the virtue of weaving together expertise and experience in support of student learning proved valuable.

Learning by doing is hardly a new philosophy of education. Neither are the ideas of apprenticeship or tutorials novel. The inclusion of professional practitioners as part of the instructional team for doctoral students engaged in a professional practitioner degree program taps into these time-tested ways of teaching and learning to produce a learning experience for the students possibly like none other they have encountered. The success of program graduates will prove the ultimate measure.