

Taking Action: The Dissertation in Practice at Northeastern University


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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the development and implementation of the redesigned Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. In our new model, students implement and evaluate the effectiveness of their change work while enrolled in our program. Our intent in moving from a traditional model to our alternative model was to focus on providing students the opportunity to create systemic, justice-oriented change guided by our faculty. The program now uses action research as its signature pedagogy and an alternative format for the Dissertation in Practice. We developed the alternative format for the Dissertation in Practice to privilege participants' voices and to focus on the results of our students' initiatives. This essay discusses the challenges and successes experienced in the creation and implementation of an alternative model for the Doctor of Education degree.

KEYWORDS

dissertation in practice, social justice, action research

Ideas about what an alternative approach to the Doctor of Education might look like had been percolating at Northeastern University since the program joined the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) in 2014. After years of discussion, we launched our redesigned EdD program, including an alternative format for the Dissertation in Practice, in Fall 2018. At the heart of the shift away from a traditional five-chapter dissertation, was our recognition that students had the expertise, skills, and ability to create meaningful social justice-oriented change in their professional fields. A traditional dissertation was not supporting this work.

In Winter 2017, we started redesigning the dissertation and the entire curriculum to support social justice-oriented change work. There were many pieces to consider and account for in the initial phases of planning. The first was the size, scope, and modality of the program. Our program is online with two in-person residency requirements. We have approximately 1400 students, 15 full time faculty members, 15 half time faculty members, and 30 part-time faculty members. All students complete seven core courses, four concentration courses, five elective courses and 12 hours of dissertation credits. The concentrations offered are: Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership; Organizational Leadership; and Higher Education Administration.

It was important to consider lessons learned from supporting students in traditional dissertation work over the past ten years since

the program began. One of the most significant and continuous pieces of feedback we heard from students was their desire to work with dissertation chairs earlier in their studies. In the traditional five-chapter model, students completed coursework and were then assigned a dissertation chair. We knew this created feelings of panic and overwhelmed many students, and we wanted to ensure the new program addressed this issue.

As we considered possibilities for shifting the curriculum, we found it critical to refocus on the goal of providing opportunities for students to create social justice-oriented change. It frustrated us that students only identified and researched a problem of practice in their professional settings. In the new program, students go a step further than investigating a problem of practice. They create change. By implementing change, students become change agents to create better systems. We also examined and reconsidered how we threaded social justice throughout the curriculum to ensure continuous opportunities for reflection and growth.

We found it imperative to put our students at the forefront and consider their professional goals. The average age of our students is 45. They hold mid- to high-level positions within their organization. The doctorate of education provides students with the skill set and mind set to move into higher-level positions and into professional leadership positions. To best serve students, our faculty, who had



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earned their PhD or EdD in traditional programs, had to set aside our assumptions about doctoral work and ensure the program best met the needs of the students. We are now about to see our first group of students in the redesigned curriculum graduate in the next six months.

This essay is a reflection on the challenges and successes of our program over the last three years. It is not exhaustive, but our goal is to provide insight into Northeastern University's program so that other programs have a greater understanding of the road ahead as they consider moving away from a traditional dissertation. We organized this essay around three central themes. The first section explains the alternative format for the Dissertation in Practice. The second section focuses on scaffolding our curriculum through the development of the core courses. The third section examines challenges and successes of designing and implementing a Dissertation in Practice curriculum.

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY EDD PROGRAM TIMELINE

Table 1. EdD Progression

Fall 2008	Program Inception with Traditional Five-Chapter Dissertation
Spring 2011	First Graduates from Program with Traditional Five-Chapter Dissertation
Fall 2018	First group of students admitted to redesigned action research curriculum, including Dissertation in Practice
Summer 2021	First group of students graduated from redesigned action research curriculum, including Dissertation in Practice

DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Our program has four learning outcomes we adapted from the work of the Denecke & McCarthy (2017) on articulating outcomes of doctoral education. The four learning outcomes are: (1) students develop, adapt, and implement research methodologies to redefine, clarify, or resolve local problems of practice; (2) students generate local and particular knowledge, framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to contribute substantially to an area of professional practice; (3) students disseminate and promote insights to peers and their communities of practice; and (4) students critically reflect on work in the program, scholar-practitioner identity, and next steps in change work.

The Dissertation in Practice final representation requires three components, an Action Research Report, a Dissemination Plan, and a Critical Reflection. This format is distinct from the traditional five-chapter model. It gives students multiple ways to examine their work. The three components are intended to: (1) demonstrate the students' ability to generate local and particular knowledge that contributes substantially to an area of professional practice; (2) disseminate and help promote new insights based on this work; and (3) engage in critical reflection and evaluation. This is a distinct and different model from the traditional five-chapter dissertation. We designed the model so that our students would intentionally privilege participants' voices, and so that our students would focus on action and evaluation of their initiatives.

The Action Research Report has four sections which include an introduction, a results section, a literature review that represents a synthesis of current knowledge relating to the students' problems of

practice, and a contextualization section that situates the results of their initiative within their organization and within the broader, professional community. It is important to note that the literature review is situated after the results section. This placement enables the literature to be understood and reviewed in light of perspectives emerging from the students' research. Also, this placement "concedes the limitations of expert knowledge and emphasizes the importance of the participants' experience" (Stringer, 2021, p. 263). The relevance of contextualizing their results helps them prepare for the dissemination work they will do after writing the report. The Dissemination Plan can be a presentation to a specific target audience, a poster session following guidelines for a professional association, a multi-modal presentation for a broader audience, or a publishable article for a professional journal. Creating a formal dissemination requirement allows students to get their first formal presentation or article done with faculty support. The Critical Reflection can be demonstrated in one of several ways and will encompass their work throughout the program, including their plans for next steps as scholar-practitioners.

OVERVIEW OF CURRICULUM

Curriculum in its broadest sense is used to denote the teaching and learning experiences that occur in the doctoral program. Our conceptualization of curriculum as more expansive than a listing of skills or competencies taught in a course traces to the philosophies of scholars like Dewey, Freire, and Horton and their understandings of curriculum as a means to address educational problems, as contextualized and embedded in a conversation about the influence of social, cultural, and political systems, and as a means to prepare learners to work for greater justice and equity (Horton & Freire, 1990; Thayer-Bacon, 2004; Wergin, 2011). In our program, curriculum consists of an interactive network of teaching and learning in which students engage in "rigorous and systematic inquiry into practice, engaging in critical reflection with others in a manner that informs practice and model social action for the profession" (Wergin, 2011, p. 130). To this end, the EdD curriculum includes learning that occurs in coursework, residency experiences, and supplemental programming. Within the program, students learn, practice, then bring to life new skills, dispositions, competencies, and ways of being that center inquiry and justice.

Action research emerged as the methodology well-positioned and driven to transform. It responded to our aim of preparing scholar practitioners who acknowledge and understand the role of equity, ethics, and social justice in enacting lasting change in an array of organizations. It became the core of our EdD program and the sole methodology used in our Dissertation in Practice. We built coursework around expectations for solution-oriented action that honors diverse perspectives, different ways of knowing, and authentically evidences the dismantling of traditional systems in education. Through an action research-based curriculum, students learn to build knowledge networks, engage in experiential learning, and promote collaboration, inclusivity, and change. A foundational tenet of the action research-based curriculum is the desire to create a better understanding of social processes to improve practice and fostering social justice (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As doctoral students engage in cycles of inquiry and action that occur collaboratively with partners, they promote new learning and break down existing hierarchies as knowledge is shared and co-created.

We also introduce our learners to the skills and dispositions of scholar practitioners. Their work as scholars includes a role as partner with academics, practitioners, and community (Short & Shindell, 2009). Their work as scholar practitioners seeks to address individual accountability and social responsibility. This is accomplished through guided and deliberate reflection on positionality as an individual, professional, and researcher and exploration of the relational aspects linked to action research. Learners approach their research with a lens that guides how they navigate power, privilege, and communications during their research and work toward solutions.

Action research requires scholars to engage in ongoing, systematic inquiry and to develop resolutions for addressing challenges that plague their organizations (Stringer and Ortiz Aragón, 2020). This high level of interaction underscores the values of a democratic process in action research demonstrated through stakeholder involvement. Action research is done in collaboration “with” stakeholders versus “on” stakeholders (Herr & Anderson, 20105). This interactive process is reliant upon continual cycles of observation, action, and reflection—all hallmarks of our Dissertation in Practice grounded in ideas of expertise, skills, and ability to create meaningful, social justice-oriented change (Stringer and Ortiz Aragón, 2020).

The core courses in the EdD program develop action researchers and scholar practitioners who are prepared to meet complex challenges in organizations, schools, universities, and community contexts. The program comprises seven core foundation and research courses besides five elective and concentration courses. We structure foundation courses to provide dialogic spaces for scholar practitioners to discuss, challenge, and navigate multifaceted dynamics of enacting change in their unique context and organization.

We designed coursework to support student progress through continual development of their problem of practice, purpose statement, and relationships in action research. Exploration of positionality, power and privilege, systems thinking and change agency and its connection to social justice is central to this series. The relation between these elements and stakeholder engagement, collaborative leadership, and the continual reflexivity characteristic of the work of qualitative research occurs during the coursework.

The world of action research is broad, varied, and can include both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research. In our program, students use an action research methodological approach that is contextualized and focused on a local and specific problem of practice at the research site. Therefore, our research curriculum is qualitative dominant and focuses on privileging the voices of research participants and centering the stories of those most affected by educational problems. In learning research methods, students first learn about the theory and philosophy of qualitative research, then about the foundations of action research. Then, threaded throughout all the courses, students learn the skills associated with collecting, examining, and analyzing qualitative data that supports systemic change. Students learn to design an action research study, collect, and analyze data, write about findings, reflect on the research process, and promote evidence-based changes in a research site. As students learn about qualitative action research, they engage in fieldwork projects to practice and hone these skills, first in a general setting, and then in their IRB-approved dissertation in practice research site.

The core foundation and research courses represent a spiral curriculum or an “iterative revisiting of topics, subjects or themes...not simply the repetition of a topic taught...[but] also the deepening of it, with each successive encounter building on the previous one” (Harden, 1999, p. 141). Rather than being exposed to a skill one time in a single course, students have multiple opportunities to hone and deepen their development throughout several courses. For example, an important doctoral skill, writing a literature review, begins in the first foundation course when students create an annotated bibliography. Then, in subsequent courses, they develop individual strands of the literature that will become the foundation for their future dissertation literature review. Similarly, making meaning of data through coding and theming are important skills in qualitative data analysis. Students build their understandings of data analysis through fieldwork projects in 3 of the required research courses—first by learning analytic memoing, then first and second cycle coding.

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES OF DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

An action research-based curriculum necessitates the building of relational skills not always emphasized in doctoral education: collaboration, networking, embracing multiple perspectives, managing complex projects, negotiating action with stakeholders, managing scale and scope of a project, and navigating multiple roles as they move back and forth between researcher, participant observer, facilitator, and thought partner. This relational skill building, as well as a layer of navigating negotiations, begins at the onset of the program.

Challenges

In contrast to the previous model in which students finished all coursework before beginning the dissertation, in the redesigned model, students begin work on their dissertation in the first year of the program. Very early in their journey as doctoral students, they confront issues of securing site support for research, navigating the IRB process, and adjusting their expectations to meet the needs of a potential research site. From a developmental perspective, some students enter the program more prepared for the intricacies of an action research dissertation; while for others, it has been a more arduous process. We have addressed these challenges by embedding research in coursework, matching students with a dissertation chair early in the process and creating more student-facing resources and synchronous connections to orient and support students in their research endeavors.

Regarding chairing, this meant dissertation chairs would have to be matched early with students and take part in 3 cycles of research, rather than matching with the student at the proposal stage and supervising traditional research. Professional development was critical to get all faculty proficient working with a

Action research and the new curriculum. As we implemented the program, it became clear that professional development was also needed to keep faculty up to date on changes to the curriculum and chairing process as we changed and improved.

The chairing model was designed with a goal of connecting students with their chairs earlier in the program and to give the



students choice in selecting their chair. As the Dissertation in Practice was launched, we decided that the faculty member who taught the second research course in the second quarter of the student's program would become the dissertation chair for the student and remain with them through the program. This coupling of a course (R2) and the chair would set the student up for consistent supervision through all three cycles of research. The chair would also serve as the faculty member for the final research course taken just before the independent research year. Students and chairs would work through the program together, and there would be continuity to the advice students received on their research area.

One benefit of coupling R2 with dissertation chairs was that students had several instructors to choose from, to facilitate this choice each faculty member posted a video introducing themselves. An additional benefit of coupling R2 was that students designed their baseline research with the guidance of their chair. Students had ample time to work through the data collection process and analyze their baseline data. Also, within the course students applied for IRB for their cycle 1 research. As this process unfolded, the biggest obstacle for both students and faculty was the quantity of work that needed to be completed in a 12-week course; baseline data collection and analysis, development of a plan for cycle 1 and submit IRB paperwork.

After two cycles of coupling R2 and chairing, it became clear we needed a change to the model of chairing coupled with teaching. Most students could not get everything done during the quarter, and faculty were creating individual learning plans for students to clarify what was left to be done. Besides the struggle to complete required assignments, it became difficult to manage faculty workload. As a program with 1400 students, it became impossible for chairs to teach the same students in research 2 and 4 because of inconsistency in the pace at which students work. We decided to de-couple chairs and the faculty teaching research 2 and 4. To facilitate this change the curriculum of research 2 has been updated, registration process for dissertation chairs has been created and chairs working in this new model have been given professional development.

The professional development to support the de-coupled chairing model has amplified the need for continued professional development on the curriculum. As with any new program minor changes are made each quarter a class runs to make it better, this requires faculty to be updated every few months on changes. With 15 full time, 15 half time and 30 part time faculty, it has been difficult to keep everyone up to speed on the changes as we continue to grow and improve. Even a small change such as an additional form to collect research outside of a class or a change to an IRB form requires a professional development session to give everyone the same understanding. One way that we are tackling this is with a standing bimonthly professional development schedule. Faculty run the hour and a half session. They are recorded for half time and part time faculty who cannot attend.

Successes

We have structured the program to support our students' ability to engage in ongoing cycles of action research and to implement and evaluate a research-informed initiative during their last year of the program. During the last year of the program, students complete each of three components of the Dissertation in Practice which include the Action Research Report, a plan for the dissemination of their results, and a critical reflection on their work throughout the

program. At this stage, our first group of students are enrolled in their first Dissertation in Practice module, which includes implementing an initiative within their organization and beginning an evaluation process to determine the effectiveness of their initiative.

Our experience this year, with the first group of students, underscores the importance of, and the distinction between a professional research doctorate and the traditional model for doctoral education. Rather than preparing a proposal following all coursework, this group of students completed two cycles of research prior to designing their proposal. They completed the draft of their proposal in the Dissertation in Practice Seminar (R4) prior to entering the last year of the program. It is important to underscore the scaffolding of cycles of inquiry to appreciate the manner in which our students were able to implement an initiative in their own organization in the last year of the program. In Research 2, during their first year in the program, students conducted Cycle 0 of their action research study. Cycle 0 included learning about, and then conducting participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as systematic approaches to data collection. Following this, students prepared a fieldwork report that provided the foundation for a comprehensive data collection plan.

Throughout this program, students engaged collaborators and stakeholders and kept them apprised of their preliminary research activities. As an example, in the third foundation course in the first year of the program, an assignment requires our students to present their research interest to a group of stakeholders and to discuss with them potential areas of investigation within their organization. In Research 3, during year two, and following authorization by Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), our students conducted Cycle 1 data collection and analysis. The findings from Cycle 1 provided the foundation from which students began planning for the implementation of their initiative.

Their proposal development began in R4 in the last term of their second year in the program. Students designed an initiative that they would implement, under guidance of faculty. Based on the deliberate scaffolding of concepts and cycles of inquiry, specifically, Cycle 0 and Cycle 1, this group of students were well prepared to enter R4 and to begin developing their initiative's action steps and evaluation plan. COVID-19 restrictions on face-to-face interaction were mitigated, in the development stage by early IRB notifications on conducting normal research and business operations remotely. When students entered R4, all COVID-19 restrictions had taken hold and were part of the students' normal daily activities in their work settings. All plans for implementation of their initiative had taken COVID-19 workplace restrictions into consideration.

In year three, students enrolled in the first of two Dissertation in Practice modules. We designed the first module to support Cycle 2, specifically, the implementation and evaluation of their initiative. The first module has two benchmarks that need to be successfully passed to move onto the final Dissertation in Practice module. The first benchmark in the first module is having their final proposal approved by their chair and second reader and includes conducting a successful proposal defense. The second benchmark is providing a draft of Section 2 of their Action Research Report which includes a description of how their participants, collaborators, and stakeholders were engaged in implementing the initiative, and a preliminary draft of their evaluation work examining the effectiveness of their initiative. Since students are currently enrolled in this module, our data is limited to the implementation of their initiative and initial aspects of their evaluation of its effectiveness. While R4 provided guidance on



development of their proposal, one aspect of the first Dissertation in Practice module focused on finalizing and defending the proposal. Students moved through this aspect of the module within two to six weeks. In their proposal defense, students demonstrated a clear understanding of how their Cycle 1 findings were situated within the literature and had written out a clear set of activities associated with specific tasks involved in implementing their initiative. They all identified individuals who would be engaged in aspects of implementing their initiative and provided a clear timeframe for starting and finishing each task.

In all instances, our students identified any additional resources that they needed to implement their initiative and identified plans for securing those resources. This attention to detail grounded their work and provided our students with a strong sense of motivation to succeed. To date, students have been able to implement their initiative within their respective organizations. Faculty members have reviewed drafts of Section 2 of the Action Research Report and have reported that students have demonstrated ability to successfully implement their initiatives, and to begin the evaluation process. Examples of our students' initiatives include establishment of a mentoring program for Black female students in a Northeastern, private, research university; implementing an in-house coaching model to onboard and integrate new employees with managers as coaches in a Northwestern, for-profit company; and designing and implementing a Professional Development series to improve the delivery of teaching and learning for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a Northeastern, urban, public, K-8 school.

CONCLUSION

Our learners are addressing current, pressing issues in the problems of practice they have chosen as the focus for their Dissertation in Practice research. Action research takes place in the present and our EdD program offers a direct invitation for this immediate, intentional change to occur in their organizations (Coghlan, 2011). Northeastern University is known for delivery of experiential education, the action research based EdD situates our learners in the field, within their professional setting throughout their time in the program, running three cycles of exploratory, data collection, action step and evaluation processes. Through tightly aligned coursework, students explore their problem of practice beginning with the very first course and culminating with their final Dissertation in Practice product.

As we reflect on lessons learned over the past three years, we are constantly reminded of the importance of staying focused on our students. Redesigning the program was not without challenges and it would have been easy to give up when we faced resistance from our some of our faculty members and the University. By continually prioritizing the needs of our students as change agents in their professional fields we were able to successfully design and implement a program that equips them to serve as leaders in their fields.

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