Chapter 9
Guiding Principles for Quality Professional Practice Dissertations

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors share the guiding principles for professional practice dissertations developed and studied within their online EdD in Educational Technology at the University of Florida. While these guiding principles were developed approximately four years before the call for chapters for this book was released, they align nicely with at least three pertinent themes that frame this book (i.e. the importance of addressing critical problems of practice, applying research rigor involving real theory and inquiry and demonstrating impact of research). The authors make explicit connections between their guiding principles and these themes and provide examples of how the themes have played out in dissertations completed in their program. The authors then provide implications for others seeking to structure (or restructure) the way dissertations are conceptualized in their professional practice problems.

INTRODUCTION

The online Ed.D. in Educational Technology at the University of Florida is a professional practice doctorate (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel & Garabedian, 2006) designed to prepare professionals who have foundational knowledge in Educational Technology, deep knowledge in areas of specialization relevant to their professional contexts and the ability to solve contextual problems by conducting research in practice. Students in the online Ed.D. program complete two years of required online coursework as a cohort and take their qualifying exams at the end of the two years. Once students pass qualifying exams, they begin work on their dissertations with faculty mentors (Dawson, Cavanaugh, Sessums, Black & Kumar, 2011; Kumar, 2014).

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We began conceptualizing this Ed.D. in 2006 and admitted our first cohort in 2008. Since that time we have conducted a wealth of research on the program including on topics such as teaching and learning within the online medium (Dawson et. al., 2011), student and faculty satisfaction (Kumar & Dawson, 2012a), administrative, technical, and social support for online students (Kumar, Dawson, Black, Cavanaugh & Sessums, 2011), online mentoring (Kumar, Johnson & Hardemon, 2013), library support for online students (Kumar & Ochoa, 2012), dissertations (Dawson & Kumar, 2014) and the impact and value of the program for students (Kumar & Dawson, 2014; Kumar & Dawson, 2012b).

In this chapter we share the guiding principles for professional practice dissertations we developed and studied to guide students and support faculty in their mentoring efforts during the dissertation phase of our doctoral program. Then, in keeping with the pertinent themes of this book we share how the guideline principles support students in conducting professional practice dissertations that (1) address critical problems of practice, (2) apply research rigor involving real theory and inquiry and (3) demonstrate impact of research. We conclude with implications for others striving to incorporate quality professional practice dissertations in their programs.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE DISSERTATIONS

To our knowledge there were no other online professional practice doctoral programs in Educational Technology at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions when we began our program in 2008. At that time our university was part of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) so we began exploring how other CPED programs structured the dissertation component. Most of these programs were focused on Educational Leadership and we quickly noticed important differences between this discipline and ours. In particular, the field of Educational Technology tends to attract a more diverse student population. Our program enrolls students from different contexts and with different goals who are working in K-12 education, higher education, virtual schools, not-for-profits organizations, business, industry and the military. In contrast, most students in Educational Leadership have somewhat similar goals of administration in K-12 or higher education. Thus, the dissertations conceptualized for Educational Leadership programs often did not align with our needs. For example, some programs emphasized a particular stance toward the dissertation such as social justice (ProDEL, 2012), promoted a particular research genre such as action research (Wetzel & Ewbanks, 2013) or revolved around a common theme explored by most of the students (Marsh & Dembo, 2009). In some cases the dissertations completed in these programs resembled traditional dissertations (Auerbach, 2011), which also did not work for us because we make clear distinctions between the purposes of goals of our online Ed.D. and campus-based Ph.D. programs (See Dawson et. al., 2011 for more details about these distinctions).

Without relevant models to emulate for our discipline, we used what we learned from reviewing the dissertation approaches in other programs, literature on professional practice program and the goals for our program to develop guiding principles for quality professional practice dissertations in our program with the goal of articulating expectations while leaving room for students to conduct dissertations relevant to them and their professional practice. Recently, we analyzed the first 23 dissertations completed in our program using these guiding principles and modified them based on our findings (Dawson & Kumar, 2014). According to what we learned in this study and through conversations with individuals working in professional practice doctoral programs in other disciplines, we believe our guiding principles may...