Chapter 24
An Adaptive Model for a Rigorous Professional Practice Doctorate:
The Disquisition

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ABSTRACT

As part of the current re-envisioning movement in professional practice doctoral education, the culminating activity and subsequent product have received heightened scrutiny. This chapter responds to the mandate that, in order to differentiate herself from her sister, the research-based PhD dissertation, the EdD's capstone exercise and culminating product arise through a practice-based, pedagogically appropriate application reflecting the philosophy and principles established for a problem-based dissertation in practice. Inexorably bound to context, and therefore unique in purpose, practice-driven models reflect a range of purposes and formats. This chapter presents a model that engages improvement science methods, the four dimensions characterizing a problem-based thesis, and the lens of contemporary thinking on the professional practice degree. The disquisition is an alternative capstone framework that affords doctoral candidates the opportunity to develop the qualitatively distinct 'empirically-grounded knowhow' of practitioner-scholar thinking.

INTRODUCTION

The question inherent to EdD program reform is "What does better look like?" In response, programs offering the EdD have begun the process of reconsidering the institutional and professional expectations distinguishing the EdD degree. To begin the chapter, the authors provide a brief historical overview of the degree and provide a background on the decades-old issues (Deering & Whitworth, 1982) surrounding EdD characterization in its critique as being PhD-lite. Next presented are challenges to and calls for operationalizing alternative models reflecting the (re)conceptualization of a practice-based degree with a distinctive dissertation in practice. Finally, the authors describe the culminating activity in their university's EdD program--a problem-based disquisition. Essential background on the concept of a disquisition as a formal discourse or treatise in which a complex problem of practice is identified, analyzed, and addressed in depth is provided, as the authors demonstrate how the form and function of the disquisition is a more suitable framework for fostering concrete good for the larger community, through the dissemination and application of new, practice-oriented knowledge. Perhaps most important is how, within the disquisition, issues of social justice, equity, and ethics are brought to the forefront of the discourse. The disquisition experience produces a new breed of graduates who have developed a qualitatively new type of scholar-practitioner thinking--empirically-grounded know-how.

The main focus of the chapter is to provide a description of how the alternate form of the capstone exercise, the disquisition, balances employing rigorous research skills, including improvement science approaches, with leadership savvy for tackling critical problems of practice. The following frameworks are used throughout the chapter to orient and validate the discussion: working principles from the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), four dimensions called for by Archbald (2008) characterizing the inherent qualities of a practice-based capstone composition, and two thematic questions framing this volume:

1. Is the program graduating scholarly practitioners with research rigor skills involving real theory and inquiry not only able to address critical problems of practice but also to demonstrate the impact of their research?, and
2. Is the program graduating and producing new kinds of doctoral level practitioners who engage with practice-oriented knowledge and seek to undertake doctorate level awards by creating valued purposes and products related to professional work?

A primary goal in this chapter is to illustrate how creating the disquisition was one of the immediate responses to arise from the redesigned professional practice doctoral degree program. Through illustrative examples drawn from current practice, readers will gain a sense of the elements unique to the disquisition. Pedagogical process and product are aimed at developing educational leaders who employ qualitatively distinct scholar-practitioner thinking, characterized by a problem- and improvement-focus, and whose work is informed through the employment of both traditional research and improvement science approaches.

The latter sections of the chapter are organized around the four-dimensioned framework characterizing a dissertation in practice (Archbald, 2008). The dimensions of developmental efficacy, intellectual stewardship, distinctive form, and community benefit are used to frame the distinguishing features of a viable archetype for the problem-based thesis: the disquisition. In the narrative, the authors emphasize how the various elements, through focused synchronization, produce an experience that fuses a practice-

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