


Chapter 4

Navigating the Doctoral Labyrinth: Reflexivity as Transformative Catalyst for Practitioner Doctorate Persistence and Completion

Debra D. Burrington
Colorado Technical University, USA

Robin Throne
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3015-9587>
Independent Researcher, USA

ABSTRACT

The journey through a practitioner doctorate program to earn the terminal degree has been likened to a labyrinth with its complex maze or a mountain climb with its inherent obstacles and challenges the doctoral scholar must surpass to be successful. Reflexive positionality is a concomitant process which can be used throughout the practitioner doctorate to facilitate the iterative and recursive journey of the scholar-practitioner. Reflexivity facilitates an introspective process to elevate professional practitioners to scholar-practitioners and incorporate a reflexive view to transcend doctoral hurdles, attain the terminal degree, and return to practice to solve societal problems and problems within the discipline. Practitioner doctorate leadership may also be well served to incorporate reflexivity in the pedagogical redesign of the practitioner doctorate to strengthen the development and preparation of these scholar-practitioners.

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INTRODUCTION

*All that is gold does not glitter
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.*
~ J. R. R. Tolkien

There is a quandary within the world of the practitioner doctorate: many people who come to graduate school in a nontraditional educational institution hope to impact a festering problem within their professional domain, or because they yearn to make life better for disadvantaged communities, or for a host of other reasons that call for ‘practice-oriented’ or ‘applied’ research. They chose not to enter a graduate program to acquire a research doctorate; these are practical people who have a passion to “fix” something. Yet, they all too often enter an academic environment that sends them a mixed message. On the one hand, they begin a doctoral program assured they will be supported in developing a research project that will quench their thirst for a practical approach to a gnarly problem in their work or community environment. Once there, however, they are at times met by faculty who have been steeped in a brew of neo-positivist expectations about what counts as research, aligned with a worldview that prizes objectivity and value neutrality, thus starkly biased against – “bias.” Instead, reflexive positionality during the research process becomes an asset in the practitioner doctorate.

Resistance to the embrace of researcher positionality may emanate in large part from the neo-positivist bias in determining and defending what counts as credible research. A side effect of this is that the traditional foundations that prop up the notion that research must be “bias free” reflect an inability and/or a resistance to consider the idea that situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and intersubjectivity (Kuper, 2007) bring strength to what is discovered/emerges from our research. Knowledge is a group effort; it is an embodied construction. Bodies are not discrete entities – our being is shared, our knowing is a shared construction made as we act, together. Certainly, there are research traditions and projects that require a level of objectivity. At this writing, in the thick of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, the authors welcome the ‘hard’ science of rigorous clinical trials being deployed to craft antivirals and a vaccine to protect our shared embodiment from sure demise thanks to novel coronaviruses that are smart enough to destroy us. So, yes, there is a role to play for the values of ‘objective science’ expressed through the activities engaged in by neo-positivists searching for some kind of ‘truth,’ but the question must be asked: how does this serve practitioner research, particularly in domains where acknowledgement of researcher positionality is an asset?

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