

# The grounded professional doctorate: making real world differences in education

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*This paper describes three facets of the design philosophy underlying a five year-old professional doctoral program in Education. The three facets of the design philosophy examined are: authenticity, community, and grounded practice. To illustrate the influence of each design feature, we use the narrative account of one graduate student and her experiences during her first year in the doctoral program. Each illustrative segment is a biographical account of what it was like for her to ‘walk the walk’ of an innovatively designed professional doctoral program as a beginning doctoral student. We hope that, as the descriptions intertwine, you will develop an enriched sense of how a grounded professional doctorate can support and inspire transformational learning and leadership that our national systems of education so desperately need.*

**Keywords:** professional doctorate, community, authenticity, grounded practice, cohort, action research.

## **Introduction**

An important theme in the debate about doctoral education explores the ‘habits of mind’ (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006) that educational leaders should have—what they should know and be able to do to improve their practice. Shulman, et al. (2006) proposed the expression ‘stewards of practice’ to describe an educational leader who is both

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knowledgeable and reflective about his/her work and has a 'critical eye toward the future' to make the changes necessary for improvement (Shulman, et al., 2006: 27).

This description of the optimal educational leader is helpful in understanding what type of persons professional doctoral programs should be designed to produce. But program designers need additional help to understand *how* to cultivate leaders who manifest these habits of mind in the field of education. In other words, faculty members who design, teach, advise and interact with doctoral students must organize the program in a way that helps both students and faculty to uncover, reflect upon, and examine their theories in use in order to practice the behaviors and actions that inspire true change (Argyris, 1991).

This paper describes three facets of the design philosophy underlying a pragmatic professional doctoral program in Education. The three facets of the design philosophy examined are: authenticity, community, and grounded practice. To illustrate the influence of each design feature, we use the narrative account of one graduate student and her experiences during her first year in the doctoral program. Each illustrative segment is a biographical account of what it was like for her to navigate in an innovatively designed professional doctoral program as a beginning doctoral student. We hope that, as our theoretical and empirical descriptions intertwine, you will develop an enriched sense of how a grounded professional doctorate can support and inspire the kinds of transformational learning and leadership that our national systems of education so desperately need.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework that grounds the doctoral program is the construct of community of practice, which is rooted in sociocultural theories of learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Community of practice theory contends that people develop and transform their thinking through their active participation and engagement with others in cultural practices that are situated in social communities (Wenger, 1998). Doctoral faculty and students who participate in a course together, if supported for doing so, can become members of a

community of practice as they interact, share, and participate in courses and throughout the program. It is through engagement in multiple communities of practice that students and faculty can transform their individual competencies into shared understandings and capacities in the service of innovative leadership in education.

Rogoff's (1995) notion of guided participation and Wenger's (1998) concept of legitimate peripheral participation are most relevant here. Both constructs help us understand how people co-construct their involvement in situated, cultural activities and how this participation leads to development of the practice and the participants. Through apprenticeship and collaboration in communities of practice, participants' roles in the practice change and develop as they move from novice to expert in their understanding of the tools, concepts, and processes that co-construct and cultivate the practice (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). As the students participate in the various activities throughout the courses in the doctoral program, community of practice theory predicts that they will be socialized into new understandings and habits of mind about what it means to become leaders and scholars in education who make real differences for children in schools.

### **Authenticity**

In professional doctoral studies at their best, the learning and performance activities and the habits of mind practiced during the program match the learning and performance activities and habits of mind required for success in the relevant profession. We argue that new dispositions and identities are cultivated through multiple opportunities for doctoral students to reflect upon, reify, and transform their understanding as leader-scholars in the profession (Wenger, 1998). This type of double-loop learning (Argyris, 1991) begins and ends with purposeful interaction and collaboration in *authentic* activity, and also with doctoral study that is useful immediately in the professional contexts in which the doctoral students work.

Authenticity is not easily achieved in doctoral study when students come to the program from various backgrounds, experiences, and understanding of doctoral research and its uses for

practical improvement. A fundamental aspect of our design philosophy that promotes authenticity is to engage students in multiple action research studies in the contexts of the doctoral students' workplaces. The students' doctoral work and learning matches what they need to accomplish and to improve professionally in their daily lives outside of the doctoral program, blurring the boundary between academic study and locally situated professional development. The narrative below describes the experience one graduate student had when first meeting the cohort and how the community of practice began to take shape to maximize mutual support of professional learning and development.

### ***Forming the cohort community of practice***

The first day of class was finally here, and I wanted to show up prepared, but wasn't sure what being prepared consisted of. I put on my outer shell of confidence to embark on my new adventure. The professors were warm and friendly. They seemed to have more interest in us as people than in what we had accomplished academically. The first class meetings moved at an uncomfortably slow pace. Much of our time was spent just getting to know one another through ice breakers and group activities. Community building was given higher priority than direct instruction in academic subject matter.

This was a very different experience than what many of us remembered from previous graduate classes. Strangely, getting to know one another seemed more uncomfortable than just moving forward with a traditional lecture. Introductions started very simply with names and a few interesting facts about each of us. We talked about our professional experiences, our families, and our life accomplishments and did some light bragging about our self-perceived areas of expertise. We began to find connections and overlap in areas of personal and professional interest. Our conversations evolved into discussions outlining what we hoped to gain during the next three years. We discussed our goals and reasons for choosing this program over others and all of a sudden, we were more than acquaintances, we were the beginnings of a community with shared interests, skills and knowledge. I came to appreciate the much-emphasized value placed on being able to make personal connections within our cohort, and with feeling comfortable telling our personal stories. The professional and the personal overlapped much more than I thought they would. As our conversations and relationships evolved

so did my understanding of the reasoning and importance behind all of the time spent getting to know one another.

## **Community**

Community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et. al, 2002) is an abstract ideal that we aspire to bring to life in a pragmatic doctoral program. A focus on building a cooperative community can support students in their emotional growth in doctoral study, and also amplify and accelerate learning and development (Wenger, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). We have written previously about one important aspect of community building and learning in doctoral education called the Leader-Scholar Community (LSC) (Olson & Clark, 2009). Our concern here is with a different, yet equally important, aspect of community cultivation and practice that animates the structural entity of the LSC. We do this to show the importance of the relational dimension of learning, since we believe that these interactions benefit students personally and professionally throughout their doctoral work and, possibly, long afterward.

Developing communities of practice to aid learning and development in adults is not easily done. Sometimes it has to be deliberately nurtured, especially among highly successful (often competitive) adult learners. By explicitly discussing and cultivating cooperative relationships in the doctoral program, we help the candidates begin to understand their commitment to working effectively in communities of practice for their individual benefit, for the benefit of all of their classmates, and for children and adults throughout the education system. This design feature is essential in building support structures throughout the doctoral program so that students are able to master the demands of program completion and also to provide a model for professional collaboration for the remainder of their careers. In the following description, one graduate student describes her remembered experiences in classroom activities that encouraged and assisted the students in becoming a community of practice:

Becoming a community involved more than just getting to know one another; it was about finding commonalities, establishing and maintaining trust, and participating in shared experiences. The funds of experience and expertise that we brought to the table

as beginning doctoral students and as veteran professionals were gradually revealed, inventoried, and made available to the whole community.

Another important aspect about building a sense of community is having explicit discussions about the goals and purposes of the community of practice model. Because all students and faculty members have preconceptions about graduate work, this type of explicit dialogue allowed the students to begin to understand that the faculty are not just talking the talk but also walking the walk.

My preconceptions about the social culture of graduate programs made me cautious about opening up and becoming vulnerable with members of my cohort. My previous experience of a graduate program led me to expect a highly competitive environment. I pictured a parade of opportunities to boast, showing off one's accomplishments, in an arena where one-upping and being the shining star is a prerequisite for publication or becoming a research assistant. I felt great relief when members of the faculty said to relax, take a deep breath; you've already made it. You are here. You bring value. Look around the room; these are not people you will be competing with. These people will help you during the next 36 months. These are the people who will be awake at all hours of the night, contemplating their project, trying to balance their life, work, and action research. These are the people with whom you will share and discuss your research findings. These are the people who will help you evolve. Begin to view them not as your competition, but rather as your network of support; a cohort of people who are all moving through similar changes and encountering a similar set of challenges to reach a common goal.

As this graduate student recalls, explicitly organized group activities and outings were essential in helping the cohort build trust in one another and friendship through engaging in whole group social-intellectual experiences. These experiences would later become the basis of their future cooperation and support in accomplishing each academic milestone in the doctoral program. The following description illustrates the power of an unconventional group activity to form new understandings of graduate work and graduate study.

Early in our first semester we had a fun and unexpected outing. Feeling like first-graders all over again we took a class field trip to visit Frank Lloyd Wright's school of architecture called Taliesin West, in Scottsdale, Arizona. For some the field trip announcement did not spark an obvious intellectual connection to the program or to our relevant field of education but, as with a good story, the metaphors evolved and gradually revealed themselves.

Wright and his students designed Taliesin West in the late 1930s as a winter retreat where he and his students could escape the cold weather of Wisconsin, where the original Taliesin served as his home and studio. As we toured the site we were encouraged to experience the space and all that encompassed it, as that was Frank Lloyd Wright's intention with design. Our tour let us see Frank Lloyd Wright's personal living quarters, office and workspace, as well as several entertainment spaces. We enjoyed the natural landscape and urban desert view from his living room while sitting in ergonomically elegant chairs designed by Wright himself. Every inch of the space encompassing Taliesin West was intentionally and deliberately designed. Much of it was literally constructed by the architecture students in residence, from locally available materials. They learned how to design for a real site by imagining, drawing, building and living in their creations and with the transformed landscape.

The concrete examples of Frank Lloyd Wright's students' creativity and innovation triggered connections with our doctoral program discussions about cooperative communities of practice. We had a symbolic and experiential representation of the definition of our program and for the journey we were beginning. Not only was our field trip an exciting and interesting way to learn about one of the world's most famous architects, but touring the site also offered a positive and insightful foreshadowing of our new journey as innovative practitioners. Equally important, this shared experience allowed our cohort to get to know one another outside the classroom and to strengthen personal connections. I remember the energy and enthusiasm that I felt after the field trip. We doctoral students were buzzing for weeks about the unique things we saw, learned, and discussed and about how our doctoral experiences were analogous to those of beginning architects.

### **Grounded practice**

An essential element in our design philosophy is cultivating the ability of doctoral students to be reflective and critical of their own professional practice and then work toward improvement (Shulman, et. al., 2006). This type of grounded practice is accomplished by having students conduct multiple action research studies in the contexts of their own workplaces. The students begin with a plan for taking a seemingly modest improvement-oriented action in their local setting. These ideas for possible improvement are then informed by scholarship, that is, the students search the extant literature to find support for their ideas and for ways to strengthen their nascent interventions. Then the students begin, before they feel fully ready, to implement small scale, short-term studies, aiming for local improvement. This cycle of critical attention, drawing on scholarship, small-scale action, and evaluation is then repeated multiple times with evolving questions and designs. The applied research cycle that the doctoral students engage in is grounded in local issues, contexts, and challenges. Further, this spiraling cycle of action research can have a reflexive effect: it is designed to encourage the students to continuously reflect upon both their doctoral work and on their work in education. The process of double-loop learning (Argyris, 1991) in a community of practice enables professionals to evaluate their own current performance, then to act upon it to make an immediate practical difference in the profession.

The following description illustrates how working in community on real issues in education through action research can provide students with rich learning opportunities and make real differences in their local workplaces. The doctoral work each student performs throughout the program is real and important and has immediate impact in schools and communities while their learning and development as researchers is supported by the knowledge and experience of others.

#### ***Grounded practice in community***

I began to look forward to hearing about what my peers were experiencing in their workplaces, and became less fearful of sharing the ups and downs of my professional life. The more we shared the easier it was to share. The easier it was to share, the more

we could see our individual research issues from a broader and less personal perspective. The experience of sharing began to normalize the personal discomfort each of us felt with our rookie research experience. In each conversation we would reduce something that seemed unattainable into smaller more manageable parts that each of us felt we would be able to accomplish by our next meeting.

Shared experiences in class and the stories told by my peers contributed to my growth as a novice action researcher. Sharing our experiences enriched our perspectives on our individual research projects and helped us to view specific areas of our research through the different perspectives that each of our LSC members held. Seeing the challenges I faced in my action research project through the supportive eyes of members in my LSC helped me feel less like an island and more like a team member and professional colleague. Though each of us had different subject matters for our projects, the general action research process we experienced was similar. Because we were all new to research, the unfamiliar process was often the distressing part. The self-doubt that once felt all consuming lifted with each LSC conversation, until finally it was gone. Members of our LSC were sharing progress and seeking advice daily, mostly through Internet connections. Even through e-mail the spirit of mutual care was evident.

The genuine experiences of learning in community quickly began to influence my ways of thinking and acting. It was as though I could not turn off all the thoughts and connections being made. My perception of my work environment and of the role I could take as a leader quickly began to evolve. Before the end of my first year of doctoral study I found myself seeing differently, thinking differently, and deeply connected to a team of novice practical scholars.

## **Discussion**

A professional doctoral program can be described in many ways, each of them incomplete. Through this reflective study we authors learned that new doctoral students encounter interference from their preconceptions, find it challenging to do something new and complex for the first time, and can take risks when supported by a safe, cooperative community of practice. As three professionals who shared and later re-constructed the lived experience of a year in the life of one professional doctoral program in education, we now have greater confidence in our claim that authenticity, community, and grounded practice were essential to

what made that year transformative. But we are also left with the humbling sense that the workings of three variables cannot begin to explain the highs and lows of an intense year in the lives of three, or thirty, or 200 or more people whose lives were touched in some way by this professional doctoral program and its activities.

This humbling realization suggests to us that a professional doctoral program might better be appreciated as an instance of a biological ecosystem rather than as an abstract system of interactions among independent and dependent variables. A healthy ecosystem is a dynamic, self-regulating system shaped by its boundary conditions and by the relationships among its members, from the microscopic to the macroscopic, the chemical to the social. Some essential features of a sustainable ecosystem are clear to see; many others are subtle and invisible. In our limited but intense experience, authenticity, community, and grounded practice are promising starting points for co-constructing and continuously improving a viable professional doctoral program in education.

We close with these reflections by one doctoral student on her transformative first year:

As a practitioner, combining my professional role with my academic pursuits initially complicated my life. After settling into action research, I was able to see the issue I was researching with greater clarity. I also began to recognize opportunities for immediate integration of what I was learning theoretically and practically. Action research became my new way of seeing my professional world. I began asking: How might I improve this situation? How can I measure the improvements? Who else has done work like this? What about unexpected outcomes? It was the best of all worlds. I had support and interaction from my LSC and academic cohort communities, I had access to periodical research sources, and I was working to improve a situation in my professional environment, all while earning academic credit for telling the story of my evolving journey.

I did not know it at the time, but what I was experiencing was hands-on involvement with double loop learning (Argyris, 1991). Double loop learning allows the learner/researcher to conduct a series of consecutive experiments by implementing one

small intervention after another until a congenial outcome has been reached. In action research, every small experiment, even those with inconclusive results, adds value. The experience and process of designing an intervention and then using the knowledge gained to reflect on and inform an intervention for the next cycle of research promotes continuous improvement. Each cycle of action and evaluation presents a new level of understanding and progress. Repetition of the action research cycle and my passion for innovative improvements cultivated new habits of mind and practice that became parts of my evolving professional identity. I was hooked.

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