Creating Knowledge Equity Through Accessible Dissertations for the Education Doctorates

Abstract

This presentation seeks to engage participants through an invitation to discuss how the format of traditional dissertations creates an intellectual firewall between scholarly practitioners and the communities and individuals they serve. The goal of the presentation is to evoke and provoke conversations to encourage alternatives to the traditional five-chapter dissertation for EdD scholars through the use of digital dissertations presented for consumption on the world wide web. The central question explored by the presentation and subsequent conversation is, How do we remove obstacles between the knowledge created through the EdD dissertation and the communities of practice which they serve?

Welcome

Hi there, and welcome to my presentation. My name is Otis Wilder and I am an EdD candidate in Program Development and Educational Innovation at the University of South Florida. I normally start off my presentations by asking everyone why they are here. When I submit presentation proposals I do my best to be clear about what will be discussed, but I don’t like to assume we are all on the same page. Plus, with the brevity of an abstract it’s almost impossible to cover everything. One interesting feature of just reading a presentation is you get the chance to stop and think about your ideas, which isn’t possible in a live presentation. In a live presentation we soak up as much as we can, but we have to stay in the moment so we don’t miss anything. I would encourage you to jot down questions, see if they get answered, and if they don’t let me know and I will be happy to reply (owilder@usf.edu).
Introduction

Before we get into the heart of the presentation, I would also like to take a moment to frame my approach. As I take the role of presenter, my goal is to invite you to a conversation. The presentation offers opinions, and ones in which I may believe very deeply, but I’m not trying to win. My goal isn’t to persuade, but to share and engage in a community of thought and discussion. This comes from the idea of invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995) where the fundamental principles are “rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (p. 5). Taken one step further, I also assume the position that this experience should be collaborative, cooperative, and all people possess untapped potential (Purkey & Novak, 2015).

The Dissertation Experience

Getting on with the idea of the dissertation, I’d like to ask you all to reflect on your experience with dissertations for a moment. How did you first feel about the dissertation process as a student? If you are an advisor, how have those feelings about the dissertation process evolved? If you are an administrator, how are dissertations valued at your institution and what is their purpose in scholarship? For me, I saw the dissertation as a bit of a hazing ritual. In order to gain acceptance as a scholar, I had to be able to convince a panel of scholars that I belonged. In general, the dissertation committee was putting their reputations on the line and telling their community of scholars that I was prepared and able to add knowledge and insight to my discipline. One thing that always stuck with me about the dissertation process was how it was constantly being devalued in a way. How many times have you heard phrases like, “the best dissertation is a done dissertation,” or “don’t worry so much about it, the only people to ever read it will be your committee.” I never quite understood how our prevailing method of
tempering student expectations for their dissertation is to diminish the potential excitement, and even joy, one might experience from the process of doing good research.

As I questioned how the dissertation process was characterized, I also began to question its purpose. How important was it to me personally? Should I dismiss it as just a steppingstone to a career and get it over with? Should it have value to my field? Who was my audience beyond the committee, and did it matter? Exploring these questions led me to investigate how the EdD was initially conceived and what the driving force was behind the ideas of a professional doctorate and the scholarship it produces.

**The Education Doctorate or EdD**

My particular program is based on the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate or CPED for short (The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2019). This year (2020) the CPED is 100 years old and has over 100 colleges and schools of education which use and support its framework. The framework itself is based on the concept of preparing EdD candidates to become scholarly practitioners. To paraphrase the framework; a scholarly practitioner is focused on solving complex problems of practice and generating new knowledge for the “stewardship of the profession,” in service to “individuals, families, organizations, and communities.”

The CPED framework sets the EdD apart from most PhD programs designed to create scholars that generate new knowledge for the sake of the knowledge itself. In general, the goal of a PhD program is to pursue topics that can be applied to broad populations. In contrast, the EdD is framed around the idea of the environment in which the scholar practices. Therefore, an EdD
dissertation is highly contextualized and specific to an environment, and the work of most PhD dissertations are meant to cut across all environments.

To me, this was an incredibly important distinction. Rather than produce scholarly knowledge for other academics, I was to produce knowledge that had a positive impact on my community of practice, in my case, instructional designers and curriculum developers. So, the audience for my dissertation is not really my committee, or other scholars in my field, but for everyday people producing work in instructional design and curriculum development.

**Cognitive Roadblocks**

This realization led me to question two distinct aspects of the dissertation, the language and style of writing employed, and the format and presentation of the knowledge. First, let’s tackle the language issue. I remember learning to read research papers and how daunting it was to distill information. Scholarly writing, especially for typical PhD studies take a very positivist position. Meaning that the writing is supposed to be as objective as possible and thereby removing the researcher from the equation to reduce bias. Objectivity is key in the language of science and the result of your study is supposed to speak for itself. You are just there to offer the facts.

The objective voice in dissertations is not just confined to positivist quantitative research that most PhDs produce, but also in the mixed methods and qualitative work that proliferates education research. Although doctoral students implementing these methods and frameworks are encouraged to show positionality and acknowledge their role in the research itself, the voice employed in writing these texts still comes across as stiff, jargon-filled, and not terribly inviting. Specifically, when practitioners in my field want to learn something, they don’t often consult
scholarly work. They Google it. If my job as a scholarly practitioner is to be a steward of knowledge to support my community of practice, then my job is not only to create the knowledge of scholarship, but to make it useful and accessible to my profession.

Knowledge Equity

This is what I mean by knowledge equity. The concept of equity in knowledge is not equal access to content, but to acknowledge how groups of people functionally operate and provide content that addresses their needs. In my observations, the way dissertations are typically written, they effectively create an intellectual firewall because of how we often write as scholars. When the way we communicate isn’t accessible to those who need the information, how is that serving the purpose of a scholarly practitioner?

It Happens to Everyone

A few years back, Carnegie Mellon University invited a researcher to investigate why the professorate at the university failed to implement its own leading research on how students learn best (Herckis, 2018). Despite having access to the best research in the world, fellow academics at Carnegie Mellon consistently resisted employing that knowledge. The author found faculty were generally enthusiastic when implementing their own ideas but balked at adopting what others tried and tested. Faculty also had personal views of what constituted good teaching that were often the product of their own experience as a student. This example speaks directly how important it is for practitioners to produce knowledge that is contextual and is designed for the audience it is intended to reach. In this case, even academics well versed in the idea of searching literature for new knowledge are resistant to applying theoretical knowledge in their practice.
Let me offer an example of how style in typical academic writing creates cognitive barriers for those looking for information to put into practice. In my research on the use of invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995), I found several articles on feminist pedagogy. Here is a passage from one article (Webb et al., 2002). In this example, you can see the actual text is basically unreadable because of the technical limitations of word processing software in handling citations in APA format. For those of you who may not be familiar with APA format, it requires parenthetical citations noting the authors.

“These innovative pedagogical notions have enjoyed broad application. Instructors have employed feminist pedagogy in the elementary school classroom (e.g., Christie, 1997), high school classroom (e.g., Brady, 1994; Roy & Schen, 1993), the college classroom (e.g., Blumenstyk, 1997; Bright, 1993; Chapman, 1997; Cummings, 1998; Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999; Motoyama, 1996; Novek, 1999; Robertson, 1994; Seering, 1997; Schniedewind, 1993; Shrewsbury, 1993; Wood & Lenze, 1991), the computer lab (Parry, 1996), and the professional conference (e.g., Bell, 1993)” (p. 67).

These sentences create a cognitive load in both the visual and linguistic domains. As a reader, you have to decide if what you see is valuable information or noise. If you are an academic interested in the bona fides of the author’s content, this is acceptable. But for people looking for practical information, this is simply a reason not to read it. I’m not advocating that we do away with citations, but why aren’t we leveraging simple available technology to address the issue?

The technology has existed for some time to “tag” each of these citations to allow for them to be toggled on or off as necessary. Practitioners and non-academic readers have little need for this style of writing. Having a simple button at the top of the page allowing the reader
the agency to toggle the citations on or off would produce a far more accessible statement that isn’t an impediment to the scholarship. Below is what the above paragraph would look like with citations hidden. As you can see, we go from a convoluted paragraph to two simple sentences.

“These innovative pedagogical notions have enjoyed broad application. Instructors have employed feminist pedagogy in the elementary school classroom, high school classroom the college classroom, the computer lab, and the professional conference.”

The Dissertation Format

Next, I’d like to explore how the format of dissertations further limits their practical use. By now, all of us in academia are familiar with the five-chapter dissertation. The formality imposed on the dissertation format is largely a relic of a technology that is hundreds of years old, the pen and paper (Barton, 2005). Even today, the very software that most dissertations are written on is still formatted as a standard sheet of paper. The ETD process requires all dissertations to be put in PDF format for archiving and presentation, which is effectively a slightly more secure version of the word processing software used to digitally produce the dissertation itself.

The internet is now ubiquitous, and it is the default point of information access to most of the developed world. A world in which the basic format of a piece of paper is no longer valid and serves no functional purpose. Why, if we as scholars are charged with producing knowledge to have a positive impact within individuals, groups, and communities, are we not discussing ways in which we can participate in democratizing our work? Why are we gating our knowledge creation behind firewalls that never see the first page of an internet search? Why are we beholden to a representative technology that is hundreds of years old?
The world consumes most of its knowledge in new ways through digital content. This includes the communities of practice in which scholarly practitioners live and work. I propose that we move forward and begin to explore formats that allow us to exploit current stable standards of information delivery that go beyond a sheet of paper. Word processing software based on the concept of the printed page does not create simple methods for readers to navigate the document. For example, the ETD formatting requirements at my university do not require the use of bookmarks, which is currently a common feature in PDF documents. When I download dissertations and theses, the table of contents does not create navigable links to those sections of the document.

**The Role of the ETD**

The ETD process should be focused on serving the community of scholars it supports, not limiting the way in which we present information. For EdD scholars, this is particularly problematic because in most cases our work is for our community of practice, not for academic scholars. I’m not suggesting that we remove the rigor of inquiry by removing the intellectual practice of producing scholarship. What I am suggesting is we leverage current, stable, replicable technologies to increase access to the audiences for our work. I also suggest that we should reexamine the basic role of the dissertation and its fundamental purpose.

If the dissertation is a first step on a lifelong journey of scholarship, then it should be the place in which we explore fertile ground and take intellectual chances. We are told that our dissertations are not an opus, but a launching pad. Yet, new scholars’ enthusiasm is effectively tempered by traditions that have no relevance today beyond the expedient disposition of a hazing ritual. Fifteen years ago, Michael Barton (2005) presented these sentiments in his five-chapter dissertation at my very university. The wheel of progress turns slow in higher education, but if
we are to lead the way and create a more equitable future for the knowledge we create through scholarship, then we must explore new ways to reach our audiences, even those within the halls of our own universities.
References


http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd


https://cped.memberclicks.net/the-framework
