MAKING A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE PROFESSIONAL:
Ideas for the future of the Doctor of Education
Dr. Peter Farrell EdD

Should a professional doctorate be a pale imitation of a PhD or something else, something more? What follows is a reflective piece of writing about my doctor of education course (EdD). I completed my course in just over five years of part-time study through La Trobe University's Faculty of Education; I graduated in May 2009. First, I describe my EdD process and compare it to a traditional PhD. Next I ask and answer the question, was I well-served by my EdD course? I then suggest how EdD research might be structured in a way that will embed it in professional practice.

Beginning in early 2004 my professional doctorate consisted of two years of coursework where I audited a mix of year long and semester-length subjects and then submitted two essays each of 12000 words. One essay was about taking on the principalship whilst the other essay was concerned with test-driving a research methodology (repertory grid technique). The two essays were personally relevant to my interests. Over the final three years of the course I wrote a 50000 word thesis. In the third year I completed the bulk of the reading and writing for the literature review while the main task for the fourth year was preparing and submitting an ethics application. The fifth year was concerned with gathering and analysing data and finalising the thesis. Early in the final year I made the editorial and authorial changes required by the examiners and submitted my completed thesis to the University.

In comparison to the long history associated with the PhD, a doctor of education is a fairly recent phenomena, which has come about to fulfil the needs of professions like education and nursing (among others) for advanced training in research. For my candidature, La Trobe University, through its Faculty of Education, had basically adapted the EdD from the PhD model. The EdD I completed could certainly be likened to a mini PhD with a couple of large essays thrown in for good measure. So was I well served by my experience? The short answer is maybe. Could it have been better? On reflection, I think so.
To my way of thinking a PhD is a form of apprenticeship whereby an academic master takes the student through a process where the ultimate goal is for the candidate to become an academic too. This is a worthy goal, but it should not be the desired outcome for students undertaking a professional doctorate. For these students the aim should be to bring about the development of the individual as a practitioner-researcher of his or her profession. I use the phrase ‘practitioner-researcher’ quite deliberately for any findings should have immediate practical benefit for the host organisation in particular and the profession more generally.

I would assume that many post-graduate students undertaking a PhD are graduates of undergraduate courses who may have spent very little time in a profession. In contrast, the professional doctoral candidate is likely to be already in the workforce and comes to his or her doctoral studies with an entirely different mindset. What is more, they most probably intend to remain in their professions during and after completing their doctoral studies. My suggestions for candidates undertaking professional doctorates in education, is to ensure they have appropriate skills as leading practitioner-researchers.

A major concern of mine about my EdD was the currency I had to give to my research paradigm. In other words, what theoretical framework was I going to adopt in order to conduct my research (what were its strengths and weaknesses); while this is of great importance to the academic researcher who is preparing for a theoretical existence, it is an issue of relatively little importance for the practitioner-researcher, who should be comfortable with using any convenient discipline or theory in order to get the job done. Under such circumstances being able to theoretically justify one’s research paradigm is not a good use of time. The second issue surrounding the EdD was the need to read the literature in order to define the research question. This is PhD thinking. For the practitioner-researcher this is the wrong way round; problems and their solution are contextual not theoretical and research questions usually arise from the organisation’s own recognition of a problem.

In my own study of management and leadership in education I identified 11 significant administrative responsibilities concerned with the operation of a school. They were, in alphabetical order; curriculum, data, finance, infrastructure, liaison with stakeholders,
planning, resources provision, safety, security and welfare, students, staff, and, teaching and instruction.

My suggestion for the EdD is to have each candidate do applied research around nine of these 11 significant responsibilities as data and planning would easily combine with the others. Each administrative responsibility could become the subject of practitioner-research through the identification of issues by schools, clusters, networks, or regional offices. Supervision could be shared between the university and either, regional offices or networks, or alternatively organisations representing the profession like the Victorian Principals Association. It is possible that an organization like the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership in Victoria Australia may see merit in being involved in EdDs because of the contribution that could be made to its own leadership programs.

Initially, receiving plenty of support from his or her supervisors, the candidate first defines the problem and adopts convenient methodology to measure the extent / impact of the problem. The aim here is to get an understanding of the issue in a concrete way. Theoretical approaches are to be adopted only for their convenience in enabling the sponsoring organisation to understand their issue; this is because for most organisations, the only ‘real’ data is that created by the organisation itself. Part of the skill-set of the practitioner-researcher is to make apparent to the organisation what it knows and does not know, in order to help it understand itself and the environment in which it operates. It is in the creation of a plan to address the problem that wider reading of the research literature might occur and it is in this respect that the university supervisor will be of use. It is just as likely that the practitioner-researcher will consult his or her profession for their input which is where the industry supervisor will provide assistance. What the practitioner-researcher is seeking is just enough evidence that his or her proposed ‘solution’ will be accepted by the organisation for whom the research is being done, and not that it is theoretically defensible. Measuring the impact of the implemented plan and reporting back to the organisation will be significant components of the work of our EdD students. A 65000-word portfolio could be made up of nine topics of approximately 6000 words each (a reasonable journal article) with an 11000 word reflective piece bringing it altogether at the end. This reflective writing could be highly theoretical in order to balance out the pragmatic nature of the applied research. The 10-part portfolio could be completed in three years. At best one project will
be taken on each term with the reflective component taking two terms. In the course of completing the projects the candidate could complete coursework on qualitative and quantitative research approaches.

Having investigated nine administrative responsibilities in turn, the EdD candidate has now developed a personal portfolio of authentic applied research. Presenting this work to the organisations that commissioned it will be an ongoing process however, making available these findings to the rest of the profession will be equally important to the spread of industry-generated knowledge. Participating in a ‘lecture’ circuit of regional networks and writing for professional journals like the VPAs ‘Leaders in Focus’ might provide a suitable vehicle this to happen.

In conclusion I suggest that the professional doctorate of education be centred on producing a graduate who can conduct practitioner-based research and not academic research. By this I mean the graduate can, on the identification of an issue by the host organisation, precisely define the problem, use inter-disciplinary approaches to gathering and analysing data, can develop a plan to go forward which is acceptable to the profession, can determine the success and failure of their implemented plan, reflect on the process to determine what went right and wrong and determine what the next level of work might be. The graduate will be well-versed in presenting to, and writing for, professional audiences. Finally the graduate will have discovered the theoretical underpinnings of their approach to research during their in-depth reflection on the entire process of creating of their research portfolio.

Postscript

In 2011 I completed a postgraduate certificate in primary mathematics teaching. The course was a mix of on-line and residential components. There was a research assessment but there was a lot of latitude as to how this might be done and I decided to write a ‘professional’ thesis as opposed to an academic one. The result was a professional reflection of 10,305 words based upon the template of Donald Schön. At the end of that thesis I wrote this conclusion: Donald Schön’s reflection on reflection-in-action has much to commend it as a template for the ‘professional’ thesis written by an experienced practitioner. A professional thesis is different to the academic thesis in that the problem is set by the organisation and not from gaps and conundrums in the literature; it privileges professional
knowing-in-action and accepts that the research problem may be messy. The rigor in the process of professional reflection comes from being prepared to accept that one may be right or wrong in one's initial thinking, and that by honest appraisal of one's practice against the appropriate literature, it is possible to add new content, ideas, values and skills to one's knowing-in-action; even if just incrementally.

Suggested reading


About the author

Dr. Peter Farrell is the teaching-principal at Zeerust Primary School a small rural primary school of 17 students; He has held this position for nearly a decade. For the past three years Peter has coordinated the leaders in the making program for the western sub-region. Peter’s doctorate was about determining the cultural and symbolic leadership demonstrated by teaching and non-teaching principals. His current practitioner-research project is about combining professional reflection, professional reading and personal constructs. Peter can be contacted on 58298282 (school) or by email at farrell.peter.pa@edumail.vic.gov.au.