

The Hitchhiker's Guide to Hybrid and Online Doctoral Programs

Abstract

The gap between theory and practice has long been a criticism of the research in the field of education (Bradley, 1999; Brown, 1966; Cremin, 1978; Levine, 2005, 2007; Spurr, 1970; Suppes, 1978). The long-standing notion of an “ivory tower” denotes how academia is often viewed as disconnected from the everyday life of classrooms and the real-world constraints of teaching in practice (Lovitts, 2001). At the same time, practitioners are often criticized for not employing the most effective research-based strategies or findings in learning contexts (Perry & Imig, 2005; Sullivan, 2005). One solution to bridging this gap is to begin developing practitioners as researchers. Educational practitioners pursuing a PhD are uniquely poised to overcome the theory-practice gap, using their hard-won expertise in classroom and school communities to inform academic research pursuits (Wesley, 1957). Developing practitioners as researchers also allows for research to translate into practical contexts. This approach of research and practice mutually informing each other can improve education and technology from kindergarten to higher education (Levine, 2005). In parallel, many full-time doctoral students in education face the dilemma of access to school and classroom sites in which to conduct their research (Damrosch, 1995). Meanwhile, expert practitioners are working in rich contexts, and noticing trends, issues, and questions within those contexts. They may only lack the methodological and theoretical tools with which to investigate and draw conclusions about those contexts (Perry & Imig, 2008).

That said, until recently, it has been extremely difficult for doctoral programs to meet the scheduling, distance, and other needs of practitioners with full-time jobs (Lovitts, 2001; Damrosch, 1995). However, with the evolution of technologies that break down the barriers of time and space, including improvements in video-conferencing, course management systems, and other online tools, new pathways can be envisioned for these expert practitioners to leverage their practical knowledge, empowering them to provide rigorous and methodologically sound investigations into questions that can inform the field (Levine, 2007). A few programs have begun experimenting with such fully online or hybrid models of doctoral education.

Presenters in this symposium will describe examples of current online or “hybrid” PhD programs recently developed in two different universities. The symposium will broadly describe the programs’ characteristics, successes, and challenges, giving detailed case-based examples of specific courses being taught in the hybrid or online environment. Classical issues of pedagogy are fore-fronted in new ways in these novel environments, where they further merge with issues of technology, bridging the barriers of time and distance for rigorous higher learning.

We see this presentation as being of great interest to faculty and students across the conference as it offers the first experience of two top-notch programs seeking to develop a new paradigm for doctoral education.

Organization of Symposium

Symposium Chair: Punya Mishra – punya@msu.edu

Discussant: Ann Thompson – eat@iastate.edu

First hour:

-*Introduction to the symposium: 5 minutes*

-*Contributions: 3*15 minutes*

-*Discussion with Audience 10 minutes*

Second hour:

-*Contributions: 3*15 minutes*

-*Discussant: 10 minutes*

-*Discussion with Audience & Wrapping up: 5 minutes*

Introduction

The gap between theory and practice is a common criticism of the field of education (Bradley, 1999; Brown, 1966; Cremin, 1978; Levine, 2005, 2007; Spurr, 1970; Suppes, 1978). Attempts to connect the research of academia with the practices of the real-world classroom have been an ongoing challenge for the field as a whole (Levine, 2005; 2007). One way to bridge the research-theory gap is to develop practitioners as researchers. Until recently, doctoral programs have often been unable to meet the scheduling, distance, and other needs of practitioners with full-time jobs (Lovitts, 2001; Damrosch, 1995). But new technologies that alter the barriers of time and distance, between real and virtual space, are promising to help with this challenge (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005). Improvements in video-conferencing, course management systems, and other online tools allow us to envision new pathways for online, and blended or “hybrid” PhD programs. In these programs capable practitioners from around the country and the world engage in traditionally rigorous doctoral studies in a non-traditional manner. This symposium presents two examples of current hybrid or online PhD programs from two different universities. Presenters will describe the programs broadly, as well as giving examples of specific courses and issues particular to a hybrid or online PhD program. Presenters discuss how they first considered the core components of any doctoral program, in the context of settings unbounded by location, and supported by technology. The unique challenges posed by the hybrid environment, paired with the traditional challenges of doctoral studies, are an integral part of presentations in this symposium.

Contributions

- 1. Bridging the Research-Practice Gap via the eDoctorate: An Overview*
Punya Mishra, Michigan State University

This introductory presentation will provide a framework for the impetus and inception of an online or hybrid type of Ph.D. program. This segment will introduce the issue of the “research-practice gap”, and discuss how this gap, along with the problems that have previously plagued working professionals wishing to pursue a Ph.D, can be surmounted through a hybrid/online program. Dr. Mishra will briefly review the issues that have spawned the need for a new and different kind of doctorate, as well as the technological and economic changes that now allow for

such programs to exist. Overall, this introduction presentation is intended to give a context for online doctoral studies, and also touch on broader issues of hybrid/online Ph.D. programs that are detailed in the segments to follow.

2. Designing a Hybrid PhD: What Have We Learned?

Matthew Koehler and Andrea Zellner, Michigan State University

In 2010 Michigan State University launched the first hybrid doctoral program in Educational Technology. This 5-year program blends face-to-face and online components to engage experienced, working education professionals in doctoral study. In facing a new type of student, using new kinds of technology, we have re-examined what we teach, how we teach, and where we teach it. In this presentation, we describe the program, as well as the challenges and opportunities in offering a hybrid doctoral program side by side with an existing face-to-face program. We describe how the program has evolved, how it has impacted applications and enrollment, and the experience of students who have joined the program. We conclude with examples of the hybrid doctoral program working in action in order to demonstrate how we addressed the opportunities and challenges of designing a hybrid doctoral program in educational technology.

3. Research Preparation of Doctoral Students Enrolled in an Online Program

Tandra Tyler Wood and Greg Jones, University of North Texas

Much has been written about the quality of online versus face-to-face doctoral delivery models (Ghezzi, 2007). Many for-profit online doctoral programs lack accreditation. However, quality aside, a question that must be addressed involves the possibility for students who complete an online degree to successfully compete with students who complete a face-to-face program. This presentation will review research on factors determined to be significant regarding the acceptability of the preparation programs for those seeking a job at a research institution. Issues include, face-to-face classroom experiences, mentored research, teaching, clinical or field experiences, opportunity to work with new technologies, and social experiences associated with residential programs. New technologies are making the virtual experience more similar to face-to-face interaction to address some of these concerns. However, because most online students have job commitments, it is difficult to work on field experiences, faculty grants and research projects. Clearly, research courses in online Ph.D. programs need to provide students with the skills necessary to successfully complete the dissertation and thrive in careers in higher education academia. There is clearly a need for an in-depth analysis to determine how the research skills of face-to-face doctoral students differ from online doctoral students. And it is important for research institutions providing doctoral degrees to be aware of the job market for which they are preparing their graduates. This presentation will detail the need for appropriate online coursework, and opportunities for research and writing, in order to help students with online doctoral degrees be competitive in the field.

4. Student Support in a Hybrid PhD Program

Patrick Dickson and Robin Dickson, Michigan State University

In this presentation we discuss the variety of human and technological resources deployed in support of one hybrid, substantially online, Ph.D. program. In order to ensure hybrid students

have a high quality connection with the program, a person (Robin Dickson) was employed to focus on the recruitment/admission of the first cohort of students in May 2010, then welcoming the students for the intensive two-week on campus session. This position has grown over time, with the admission of the second cohort of students, to include frequent Skype contact with hybrid students, and communicating needs, questions, and concerns to faculty for discussion of needed adjustments.

The program has continued to invest in a range of technological tools and contexts to support hybrid students' participation in doctoral courses, providing equipment and redesigning seminar rooms for ease of virtual participation. One fruitful consequence of efforts at creating supportive environments is that faculty and students, whether on campus or virtual, are engaged in an intensive discourse about a variety of tools, such as Skype, Google hangouts, FaceTime, GoToMeeting, and others. These explorations evoke fundamental discussions of the value of synchronous vs. asynchronous communication, balance of on-campus and hybrid students in seminars of different sizes, etc. Thus, offering of a hybrid pathway to a previously solely on-campus program has evoked thought-provoking discussions of teaching and learning, making the challenges of online learning an implicit syllabus of the program for all students and faculty.

5. A Design and Teaching Model for Online and Hybrid Learning Environments
Lin Lin, University of North Texas

This presentation shares a design and teaching model, and discusses how this model has been used for online and hybrid learning environments in the past four years. The model includes three inquiries: independent inquiry, collaborative inquiry, and formative inquiry towards expertise (Lin, 2008). This model was developed in a research project and was supported by literature in self-directed learning (Brookfield, 2000; Candy, 1991; Garrison, 2003; Knowles, 1975; Marriam, 2001; McClintock, 1971; Tough, 1979), literature in collaborative inquiry and dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Buber & Freidman, 1965; Freire, 1970; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gadamer, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978), and literature in cognitive sciences especially as it relates to building expert knowledge (Bransford, Pellegrino, & Donovan, 1999).

The pursuit of these three inquiries is actualized through three overlapping learning spaces designed for and by the students in their online and hybrid learning environments: the independent learning space, collaborative learning space, and the learning space where individuals develop their expertise through their independent and collaborative efforts. In the past six years, various technologies including blogs, wikis and games as well as different technology-embedded assignments have been used to facilitate these inquiries. Feedback from learners has also been collected over the years to improve the integration of the model. This presentation will share such designs and learners' experiences.

6. An Online Doctoral Seminar in Program Evaluation
Mike Spector, University of North Texas

This online doctoral seminar in program and project evaluation is an elective for graduate students at the University of North Texas. It is of primary interest to students in the colleges of education and information. Program evaluation is a natural bridge between research and practice as it focuses on determining the impact of interventions in their natural settings. Many

program evaluations involve professional practitioners as major contributors as they provide important insights with regard to the intervention in use, how well the intervention integrated into an existing environment, how it was perceived by users, as well as what effects it had. Topics covered included (a) conducting a needs assessment to frame a problem statement, (b) explaining what the intervention should accomplish based on prior research and practice (i.e., a theory of change), (c) developing a logic model to guide the effort, (d) planning a fidelity of implementation study, and (e) planning an impact study. Students were required to (i) develop their own logic model for an actual or planned intervention, (ii) critique an evaluation plan that included a logic model, a fidelity of implementation study and an impact study, (iii) develop an evaluation plan for an actual or planned intervention, (iv) complete CITI certification, and (v) participate in weekly discussions involving practical program evaluation problems and issues. This course was originally designed as a face-to-face graduate seminar but was transformed to an online, asynchronous environment. Student participation was consistently high and the quality of work developed by students exceeded expectations.

7. On Teaching and Design in a Hybrid Platform

Punya Mishra and Danah Henriksen, Michigan State University

There are innate challenges to moving course curricula into any new medium (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). In recent years, many educators have experienced the questions and quandaries that occur in moving a traditional course into an online medium. Yet the experience of designing or redesigning a course for a “hybrid” medium (with a mix of face-to-face and online students) is something new to most educators. In fall of 2012 we moved a doctoral course about design (previously taught in a traditional f2f setting) into this new hybrid setting. The course content focused on topics of design, media and knowledge, while providing a unique opportunity to think more deeply about these issues as we redesigned it for this new media. To successfully meet the needs of students in varying learning contexts, we implemented innovative approaches to bring the two groups of f2f and online students together into the same course meeting times. In this highly blended classroom, students from different settings met and worked together, synchronously and a-synchronously, in real-time and online. The class “met” synchronously throughout the semester, at regular evening times (to accommodate the working students), through a combination of video, online, cloud computing, and text-based tools. This presentation will elaborate on examples from this course that highlight the benefits and challenges of teaching in this new “in-between” medium. Presenters will discuss issues that arose in redesigning and implementing a hybrid course, as well as the ways that these issues of curriculum and technology were navigated successfully.

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